

The Poverty Of “Partnerships”

by James Taylor

Community Development Resource Association
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The World Summit for Sustainable Development is in progress here in Johannesburg as I write. The world around me seems awash with words – words spoken in endless numbers of conference rooms, written on felled forests of glossy papers and brochures, and words chanted and carried on banners in the streets. But at the very pinnacle of the summit one word seems to rise above all others. The global word of the moment is “partnership”.

Seemingly everyone is doing it. The public and private sectors are forming partnerships as are the state and civil society, service providers and the recipients of their services. The Southern counterparts of Northern agencies are now all called “partners”.

As “Southern counterparts” we have had a number of years’ experience of being called “partner” by some of our Northern resource providers. As facilitators of development processes in organisations my colleagues and I have often been called upon to help “partners” work on their relationship. We have helped numerous organisations explore the word and what it means to both parties. We know how appealing the use of the word is to those who are trying to forge more inclusive and participatory relationships and delivery mechanisms.

We also know how sensitive people are to issues of relationship when they have been abused and exploited for generations. Our particular interest and purpose is to help organisations become genuinely effective in their role as facilitators of development. We are convinced that the well-intended but indiscriminating use of the word “partnership” (and other relationship terms) can undermine processes critical to meaningful and sustainable development.

This paper challenges those attempting to act as agents of development not to use relationship terms loosely. While celebrating all genuine attempts to shift relationships towards becoming more inclusive and equitable it suggests that the indiscriminate use of the word “partnership” is counter-productive. If partnerships are being promoted as the new, more effective vehicles through which development can be delivered we continue to miss the point of development altogether. We run the risk of having learned nothing from the last fifty years of conscious attempts to intervene positively into development processes. If we have learnt anything it is that development is not something that can be delivered. We have learned that “partnership” and other words like it are vitally important terms to serious development practitioners. They are important because they describe the nature and quality of relationships. And development is ultimately about relationships and how they evolve over time.

Relationship and development

It is important and encouraging to note that the fashionable words of the moment are inclusive or integrative in their common meaning. They contain within them the promise of some level of parity and equity in relationships that is vital for the interdependence required for sustainability. But these terms are being used in a world that continues to be shaped by a dominant global ethic of competition – of winners and losers. There are many other words that describe relationships. Words like dependent, independent, exploitative, oppressive, patronising and self-serving reflect the more self-assertive/exclusive end of the spectrum of human relationships. As the more inclusive language of relationship is becoming standard rhetoric amongst the “powerful” – the majority in the world continue to experience many relationships as unjust, abusive and exploitative. To achieve sustainable development the ultimate challenge is to shift the nature and quality of relationships over time.

Social development practitioners are generally in agreement that development is best measured in the extent to which people have control over the decisions and resources that directly affect their lives. Sustainable development can only be achieved when the decisions are made and control is exercised out of relationships that are fundamentally inclusive. Relationships that operate out of an understanding that humankind is but a part of the interrelated whole.

The real challenge of development, therefore, is not to deliver goods and services from the rich to the poor through partnership – but to change the most fundamental way of relating to each other as human beings, and to our environment. For people to increase their control over their lives and destinies they have to change the way they relate to themselves and to others in their horizontal and vertical relationships. Development is retarded if there is not a dynamically balanced set of relationships between the state, the economic sector and civil society within a country. Much of what is centre stage at the World Summit revolves around attempts to address the dysfunctional power relationships between countries that threaten the development of the whole. There is only one way to stop our headlong rush towards depleting the earth of the natural resources required to sustain life. Once again the challenge is to change the nature of the fundamental relationship that humankind has with its natural environment.

The centrality of relationship to all life processes should no longer need much explanation. Increasingly all fields of cutting edge disciplines (both scientific and intuitive) are recognising that the world is shaped primarily by the relationships between things rather than by the nature of the things themselves. The new physics expresses the need for understanding our universe in a much more organic way – the focus now is more towards holism, understanding the universe as a system where primary value is given to the relationships that exist between parts. Relationships become the key determiner of what is observed and of how particles manifest themselves. Particles are no longer seen as independent “things”, they come into being and are observed only in relationship to something else.

In studying development as an inherent process that exists in all living systems, many patterns emerge. When observing the relationships between the different elements of human systems one will detect phases of dependence, independence and interdependence. These changes in the nature of relationships contribute towards the

bigger repeating pattern of differentiation and integration. These patterns are found in all human systems from individuals, through organisations to societies and beyond to global relationships. What is, however, important to note is that the whole is held together by the interdependence of all the different elements that exist within it. The ultimate defining character of the cosmos is interdependence. The indigenous term used in Southern Africa to describe this principle is “Ubuntu”. It starts from the understanding that “I am only because you are – we are, only because the community is – the community exists because of us”.

Human development, whether individual or collective, therefore goes through different phases in the nature of the primary relationships that define it. While not linear, and never static, these phases – when progressing healthily – include phases of dependence, independence and ultimately a movement towards a dynamic interdependence which contains both. It is vital to understand that dependence and independence are absolutely critical phases of development on the way to dynamic interdependence. True partnership cannot be achieved unless all parties have achieved meaningful independence that has in turn been achieved through learning acquired during dependence.

However development can also get stuck, be undermined or disrupted by external forces and experiences. When the process gets fixed or fused in either dependence or independence it becomes dysfunctional. Interdependence, too, can result in those involved becoming less conscious, “falling asleep” and not performing their individual function creatively, or performing its function in disregard for those on which it depends. Again this results in pathology and crisis which fuels the ongoing process of development.

Relationships not only define the world as we see it, but also shape the processes that develop and change it. Understanding and working with and through relationship is the stuff of development practice. To measure goods and services we have delivered through partnership is only measuring one potential contribution to development, not development itself. The most meaningful and accurate way of measuring the impact of development demands the ability to describe the changes in relationships that have occurred as a result of our interventions.

Developing a practice

At the World Summit everyone seems to speak with such confidence on the subject of sustainable development – answers and solutions seem to abound. Promises of more money for development and more effective partnerships are being committed to paper. But those of us who work on the ground as practitioners in the development sector find it hard to celebrate. We have a good sense of how much money, concerted human endeavour and ingenuity has been invested in development in the past. We are all too conscious of how little progress has been made in the past 50 years. We are not reassured by more money and “loose relationship talk”. We know that there are no “quick fixes”. We know that as larger amounts of money are concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people they are struggling to find sufficient skill, ability or “capacity” to turn money into meaningful development. The naïvety of many of the

attempted solutions are a sad expression of the arrogance of the rich and powerful. If the world is in any way serious about sustainability it is going to have to move beyond development theory towards developing an effective body of development practice.

Relationships lie at the very heart of development practice. They are both the “means” through which the developmental practitioner intervenes, as well as the “end” that needs to be changed over time. But not all working relationships can be called partnerships. True partnership, or interdependent relationship, is a meaningful indicator that development has progressed – it is the “end” of the development rather than the “means”. To any committed development practitioner calling all relationships “partnerships” is either dishonest or grossly negligent and unprofessional. It serves the purpose of development practice better simply to start off by calling them relationships.

We then need to develop the language and the ability to make conscious and articulate the essential nature of the existing relationships as a part of the contracting process. We need to be open and honest about the power relations that exist. Both parties must recognise when dominance and dependency characterises the relationship. We must create situations where both parties can share how they “feel” in the relationship.

Once these relationship skills develop, parties entering into relationship can start to talk about how they would like to see the relationship change over time. They can start sharing their ideals of what they would like to experience in the relationship in the future. This then sets the stage for a truly developmental intervention. The real challenge of development is to deliver goods and services through relationships in such a way that the process changes the relationship over time. This is what developmental practice is all about. It is not easy to shift power relations towards becoming more equitable in a relationship where one party is cast as the provider and the other the recipient.

Practitioners who are attempting to work developmentally have to build a nuanced vocabulary of relationship terms. Once we have done this we will better understand our task, and be able to assess how successful we have been in our endeavours. Calling all manner of relationships partnerships simply does not help.

Or, as Wittgenstein said “the limits of my language are the limits of my world”.

About the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA)

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) was established in 1987 as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO) to build the capacity of organisations and individuals engaged in development and social transformation. We are based in Cape Town, South Africa and work mostly in Southern and East Africa.

Email: peta@cdra.org.za Webpage: <http://www.cdra.org.za>

P.O. Box 221, Woodstock, 7915, South Africa

Telephone: -27 -21 462 3902

Fax: -27 -21 462 3918