

# Power and collaboration in inter-organizational relationships: paradox or compromise?

Lessons learned for North-South partnerships between NGOs.

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## Abstract

Interorganizational relationships, such as partnerships, are very much part of today's economic agenda. Some authors have argued that they have become a new form of coordination of economic activity, alternative to hierarchy and competition (Hollingsworth et Boyer, 1997). In fact, from the early nineties, we assist to the emergence of public-private partnerships which have reinforced national corporations' presence in international markets (Petrella, 1989), have increased governments' capacity to implement social policy (Favreau et Fréchette, 2002; Vaillancourt; 1996), and have even supported community economic development (Loizides, 1995; Peter et Sundblad; 1994).

Recent research about this interorganizational phenomenon has focused on public-private partnerships (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Rodriguez, Langley, Béland and Denis, 2007), and on the role of trust in building the relationship (Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda, 2007; Ferrin, Bligh and Kohles, 2007). Drawing from institutional analysis and collaboration theory (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2000), we develop a theoretical model to understand power relationships within organisations that have often been neglected by management studies: non-government organisations (NGO), operating within North-South cooperation.

Partnerships within international cooperation have been encouraged by funding agencies as an attempt to reinforce local autonomy and ownership of development programmes. However, for the most critical observers, it is a paradox to talk about partnerships in international cooperation because it masks and denies the inequality between North and South exacerbated by globalization. We argue that, in spite of the growing gap between North and South, international development actors within NGOs have managed to construct partnerships, not by denying but by adopting mechanisms to negotiate power within cooperation.

By contextualizing the organizations in their own socio-political environment in the North and in the South, we were able to examine power relationships across three different levels: macro or institutional level, meso or interorganizational level, and micro or interpersonal level. In doing this, we provide greater precision on how power is acquired and used by actors in the North and the South, and a comprehensive view of how power is negotiated within the

relationship. We conclude with a new definition of partnership as a compromise which included power differences and the mechanisms to negotiate inequality.