PARTNERSHIP
— JUST ANOTHER BUZZWORD?

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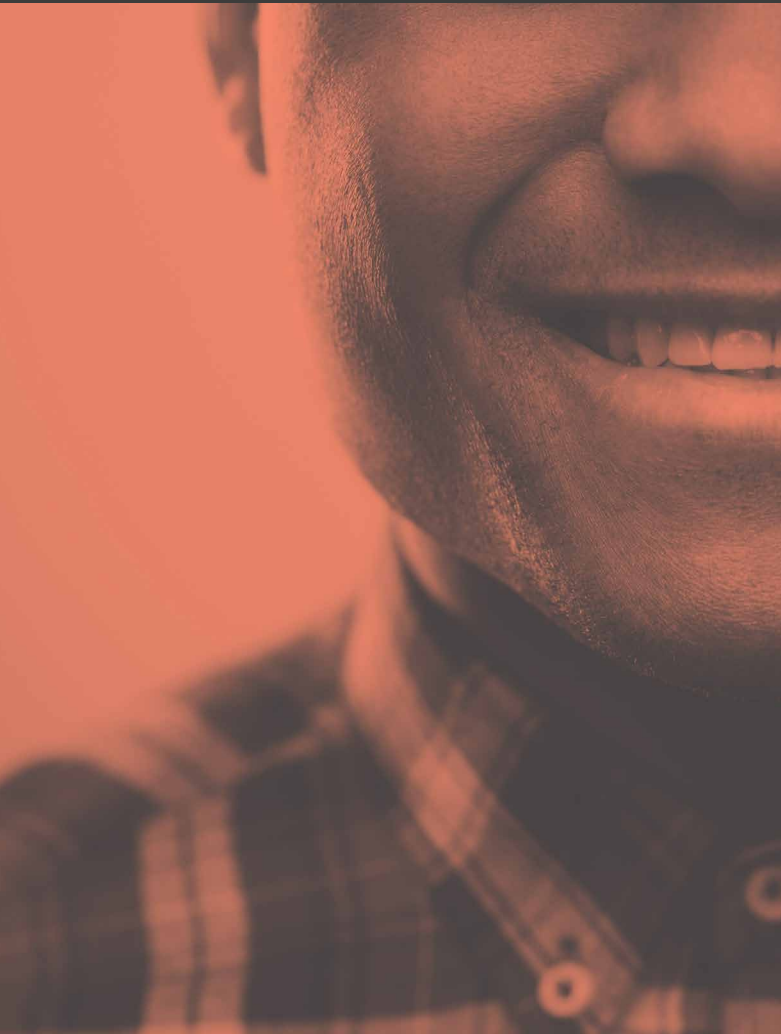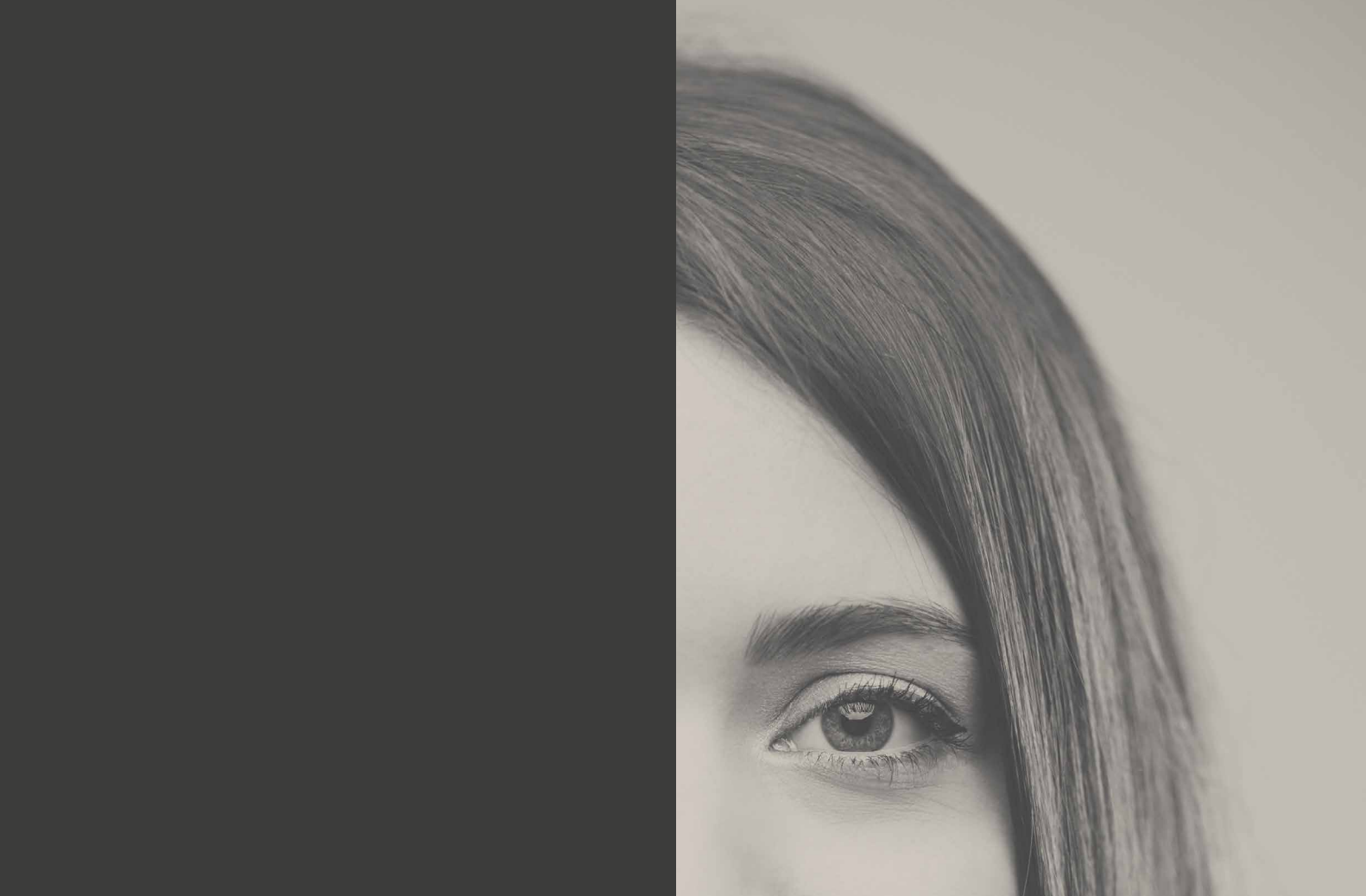
Partnership
– Just another Buzzword?

BY JON HARALD SANDE LIE
jon.lie@nupi.no

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs – NUPI

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1. INTRODUCTION

Partnership is an ambiguous concept. Over the past decades – following comprehensive high-level stakeholder consultations spanning small to large, donor and recipient, state and non-state actors – partnership has become a near universal concept within the international aid industry. It now serves as the main, unquestionable organising principle for how donors and recipients relate to each other, make policy and implement it. The concept of partnership implies an intentional revamping of inherently asymmetrical aid relations: those on the receiving end of the aid chain are now to be actively involved in making and implementing policies funded by external donor agencies. Nominally, partnership signifies a change from conditionality-driven, top-down approaches to more participatory, bottom-up and inclusive ones. However, this has proven easier said than done due to the inertia of changing established discursive practices and power relations. For example, when donors transfer power they also seek to retain control through other means, which may reproduce the asymmetries that the partnership concept originally aimed to level. Discrepancies between policy and practice, between the rhetoric of aid and what is actually taking place, are not uncommon (Lewis and Mosse 2006). However, with partnership, such discrepancies are also caused by the concept's genesis and evolvement as it has never been properly defined, so "there is no universal standard definition of partnership within the development world" (Pickard 2010: 136). Shying away from a conceptual definition, authoritative policymakers opted to establish certain partnership principles not to instruct but to direct practice. So, while most actors in the development domain share a notion of the importance of the partnership concept, there are differences as to what "partnership" means in practice.

Despite or perhaps because of the lack of conceptual clarity, partnership is now ubiquitous in international development aid. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine development cooperation without partnership. The lack of a strict definition of partnership leaves its principles subject to contextual interpretation and use by various

actors. Thus, in order to give meaning to and provide a broader understanding of the partnership concept, this study explores partnership empirically and inductively by highlighting how the concept has been and is rendered and used at different levels, in practice and in various policy documents. Addressing partnership from the bottom up reflects in many ways key tenets of the concept itself. Partnership principles emerged through a process aimed at enhancing aid effectiveness by restructuring aid relations. This entailed moving from donor-driven one-size-fits-all development models to more participatory and inclusive bottom-up processes. Decision-making power and influence of the overall development process were intentionally transferred from donors to recipients, now presumably working together as equal partners.

"Development" is inextricably linked to the practices and institutions of aid. Development can mean different things. Cowen and Shenton (1996) distinguish between two broad uses of the term as either "immanent" or "intentional" change. The former notion denotes a natural progress where a society unfolds over time to reach its potential. The second refers to an active intervention in society to assist, direct and speed up the immanent process. This latter understanding is institutionalised as "aid", which in international development expresses a relationship between donor and recipient institutions. The two forms of change, as immanent and intentional, draw attention to how development aid is intrinsically linked to power. This is because the proponents and practitioners of intentional change necessarily need to know the bearing and objective of such change, as well as how to speed up the immanent process through various forms of aid interventions and relationships.

This aid relation has changed over time, in form and conceptualisation (Jensen and Winthereik 2012). A fundamental shift in international development aid has been donors' withdrawal from operational activities and running projects to a role primarily as funders of recipient institutions' activities. Increasingly, this rela-

tion has been recast as one of partnership (Abrahamsen 2004), which often is interpreted as meaning "a joint commitment to long-term interaction, shared responsibilities for achievement, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and a balance of power" (Fowler 2000). The partnership discourse involves other morally charged conceptual siblings, including "participation", "ownership", "empowerment", "the recipient in the driver's seat", "putting the last first" (Chambers 1983, Baaz 2005, Cornwall and Scoones 2011). Partnership has been an organising principle for NGO relations since the 1980s. From the late 1990s it seeped into the bi- and multilateral sector, for example, as reflected in the World Bank and the Millennium Summit leading to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

By 2005 – marked by the OECD-DAC Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD-DAC 2008b) – most donor and recipient institutions had committed to reorganising development aid around a set of shared partnership principles. The later reiterations of the Paris Declaration led to an expansion of the scope of partnership and the type and number of actors committing to them also proliferated. The partnership concept grew rapidly and was soon consolidated to play an important role in international development aid. This is illustrated by MDG 8 – *Global Partnership for Development.*

The concept retained momentum in the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs – SDG 17, *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*, is designated as both an objective in itself and a means to realise the SDGs in general. Although the partnership concept is pivotal to the many policy initiatives, it has never been properly defined, which arguably has been crucial to get diverse actors and interests to endorse it. Partnership thus remains "one of the most overused and under- scrutinized words in the development lexicon" (Harrison 2002: 589, see also Barnes, Brown, and Harman 2016). Partnership has indeed become a key development buzzword (Cornwall and Eade 2010, Pickard 2010), a concept that is widely used despite lacking definition, which makes one wonder: if partnership is the answer, what was the question?

SCOPE, METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

This report on the concept of partnership was commissioned by Norec. Its Terms of Reference state that the purpose "is to study the concept of partnership and how it is used by other practitioners in development cooperation" drawing on a "historic picture of
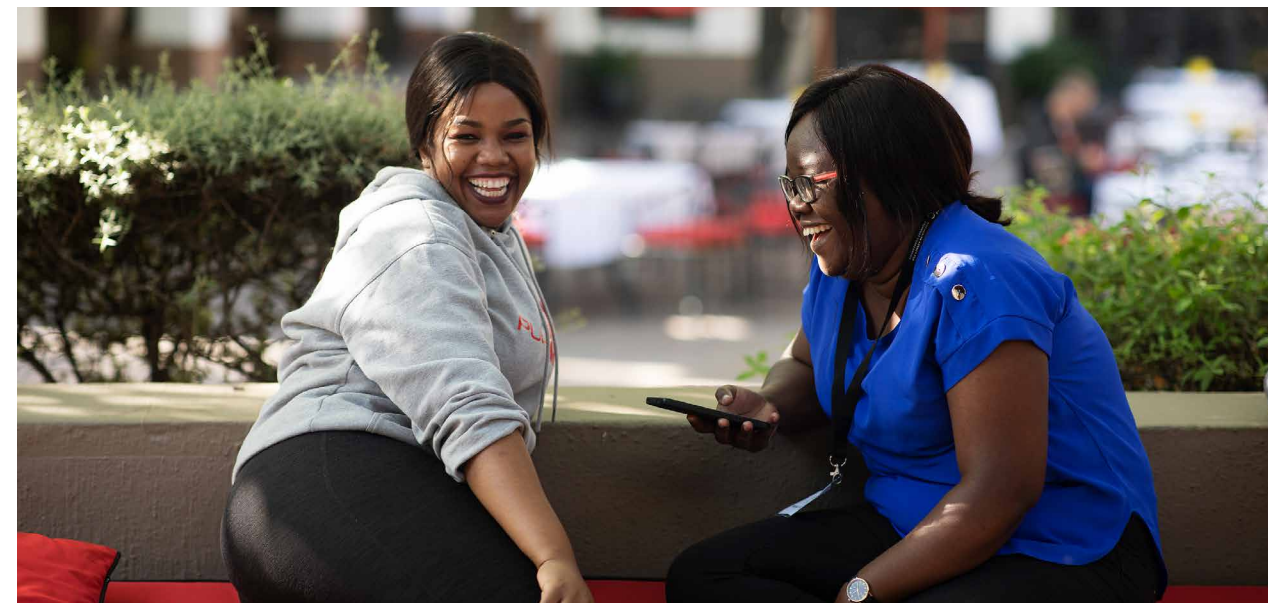
the development of different partnership models in development cooperation, followed by a description of present models in use".[1] Norec's call outlined four overarching questions to be addressed in this study:

1. What are the different partnership models used in development cooperation today, and what defines a well-functioning and successful partnership?
2. To what degree and in what way do asymmetrical power relations influence the dynamics in the various partnership models?
3. How are power relations approaches and managed in the various models and funding schemes?
4. How can Norec promote a constructive discussion on managing partnerships and power relations?

The study's scope was further interpreted in the tender document and in the inception meeting, resulting in two notable specifications. First, whereas the offer interpreted the empirical scope (i.e. "other practitioners") to mean development actors *not* involved in Norec programmes, the inception meeting specified the scope to include various partners that *are* involved in Norec exchange activities. Second – and as reflected in the bid, research literature and the findings of the present report – there are few different partnership *models*. Rather, partnership represents an organising principle, or a set of principles, that has evolved over the last decades in lieu of the challenges of establishing a conceptual definition that enjoys broad acceptance. In short, rather than exploring how different partnership models are being implemented, this study focuses on various renderings of the partnership concept. This study thus explores partnership through inductive and empirical approaches, to imbue the concept with meaning from the bottom up by analysing how the concept is used both in policy documents and by actors.

First, the report explores the seminal policy processes that propelled the partnership concept, showing the historical background and motivations driving the partnership agenda. Second, the report identifies how the partnership concept is used in practice in various policy documents. The third and main section moves from these historical and policy contexts to focus on the practical renderings of partnership among actors that are part of, subject to or responsible for operationalising the concept. Fourth, these findings are revisited,

[1] See Terms of Reference, attachment 2.

summarised and analysed drawing on extant scholarly perspectives on development aid in general and partnership and various dimensions of power in particular. The two first steps are based on a desk review of relevant policy documents. This, combined with the study's Terms of Reference, helped us develop an interview guide to frame the scope for the third step – interviews with representatives of various Norec exchange programmes. This allowed us to zoom in on practice, and explore how different actors conceive, experience and practice partnership.

We conducted 26 interviews for this study; 22 of the interviewees are current or recent representatives of Norec exchange partners. Of these 22 interviewees, 10 are from Norway and 12 represent partners in the south; 6 are women and 16 are men. The remaining interviewees represent Norad, two NGOs and UNDP. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Norec first provided a list of about 1400 actors that since 2008 have received Norec support. We truncated this list to about 150 partners using Norec's online project database to identify current or recent partners. We approached, via email, 111 partners, and interviewed almost everyone who responded to our request. We reached out to partners of the same projects in order to gain various perceptions of the same partnership and to better understand any power asymmetries. We do not claim that this selection is fully representative for the whole of Norec's exchange portfolio, but we hold it sufficiently comprehensive to respond to the ToR. The respondents comprised actors from both the global north and south, representing civil

society, (semi-)public and private sectors, and covering all types of Norec exchange programmes (north–north, north–south, triangular). We also note that "coordinating partners" were more inclined to respond to the interview request and provided more in-depth feedback to the questions. The various parameters will be selectively used in the empirical section and only when strictly relevant in order to honour the promise of anonymity given to all respondents.

The interviews took form as a blend of informal interviews and structured conversations drawing on an interview guide geared towards providing input to the four abovementioned questions. Overall, we experienced the informants as forthcoming and interested in the topic, although some may have mistaken us for a consultant assessing them. Being associated with Norec and being white researchers from the global north may have impacted the respondents, in particular the more marginal partners where the exchange projects are central to their institutional lifeline. It was easier to gain feedback on questions pertaining to the first question. Conversational detours had to be made to gain insight into the second and third questions because: we may have been perceived to be associated with Norec; the respondents did not have any notion of this due to their position in the organisation; or admitting there is an asymmetry undermines the partnership relation itself. The fourth topic is more relevant to the analysis and coda section below, and few respondents had anything to say on this topic.

2. THE PARTNERSHIP CONCEPT IN CONTEXT – PAST AND PRESENT

The concept of partnership is integral and ubiquitous to international development, serving as an organising principle for how to orchestrate and manage aid relations. Development aid expresses a relationship between donor and recipient institutions. Throughout the era of international aid this relationship has changed both in form and conceptualisation, and from the turn of the millennium it has increasingly been recast as one of "partnership" (Abrahamsen 2004).

The emergence of the partnership concept as we know it today draws on how selected NGOs from the 1980s and onwards reorganised their development aid activities. This reorganisation meant that NGOs from the north withdrew from running projects with their own offices and staff abroad in order to work with and through locally based partner organisations in the global south. This broad transition is itself reflected in the transformations that led to the creation of Norec: from a peace corps sending experts from the north to the south, this transitioned into mutual exchanges and learning based on partnership. The rationale behind this transition was "to put the last first" (Chambers 1983), to switch the role of who the expert is and what count as relevant knowledge in aid programming, not only because of ethical concerns and as a way to reduce donor paternalism, but also to improve the sensitisation and contextualisation of aid programming through participatory approaches and local ownership of externally funded projects (Chambers 1995).

During the 1990s, these lessons inspired the Nordic countries to actively consider and explore using new models for agreeing and delivering their development cooperation (OECD-DAC 2015: see Annex D). This was largely on an ad hoc basis and there were no internationally concerted efforts to establish any shared principles of how to organise aid relations. The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, self-declared as the venue and voice of the world's major donor countries, was formed in 1961 but it was not until 1995 that it first issued a statement

on partnership. As part of the process that eventually would lead to the Millennium Summit and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), DAC initiated a process to review the future of development aid. This initially produced the "Statement on Development Partnership in New Global Context", which was annexed to the subsequent report *Shaping the 21st Century. The Contribution of Development Aid* (DAC 1996):[2]

> In a partnership, development co-operation does not try to do things for developing countries and their people, but with them…Paternalistic approaches have no place in this framework. In a true partnership, local actors should progressively take the lead while external partners back their efforts to assume greater responsibility for their own development (DAC 1996: 13).

The report never defines or operationalises partnership, nor does it specify what it means or entails for development practice and cooperation. As such, the report and the above quote are more relevant to understanding past development practice and donors' own recognition of it as being paternalistic. Eventually, altering donor trusteeships and conditionality approaches provided momentum to the partnership agenda. However, at this stage of the concept's evolution, partnership – despite not being defined – was largely seen as a strategy to achieve the bold MDGs. Thus, DAC called for greater interagency cooperation against common goals, while recognising that the "elements of partnership will vary considerably" (ibid.: 14).

[2] See the report's annex for the 1995 'statement on development partnership in new global context'. 2508761.pdf (oecd.org)

This incipient partnership thinking percolated into the World Bank. James Wolfensohn, a former investment banker appointed as president of the World Bank Group, sought to make his institutional imprint by thinking anew of how to reorganise relations with client countries amidst mounting critique of the Bank's lack of results, inefficiency and paternalism (Mallaby 2004). Mirroring the overarching ideas of the OECD-DAC, Wolfensohn proposed a new comprehensive development framework building on four fundamental principles: a long-term holistic vision, country ownership, country-led partnership and a focus on results (Wolfensohn 1999). This led to the demise of the infamous structural adjustment programmes (SAP), which were replaced by poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) as a new instrument for policymaking and organising aid relations. The transition from SAP to PRSP implied turning top-down approaches into bottom-up approaches, and recast borrowing governments from passive clients into active partners. SAP meant that the Bank enforced its own policy onto client countries by making lending programmes conditional on client countries adopting the Bank's policies and priorities. In contrast, the PRSP model implies that the client country devises its own national development strategy and that the World Bank assumes a more detached position focusing on providing financial and technical support to help the country implement its own development strategy. In addition, this transition had ramifications for other donor countries, as their programmes and activities were now also supposed to be conducive to the government's national strategy as spelled out in the PRSP. Donors and recipients were now lumped together as "development partners", with developing countries put "in the driver's seat" (Wolfensohn 1999) – the World Bank's idiom for its turn to participatory approaches to foster ownership.

The emergence of the partnership concept draws on a dual rationale: moral and ethical concerns on the one hand, and aid effectiveness on the other (Lie 2019). As the indented quote above shows, traditional top-down approaches were thought of as being paternalistic

and lacking sensitivity to local concerns, culture and context. As the international development apparatus increasingly came to be seen both in the global north and south as a neocolonial project of westernisation, both ethical and moral concerns increased. However, this was not sufficient to alter existing development practice. Western aid lost its geopolitical rationale in preventing the spread of communism with the end of the cold war. International development came under increased scrutiny for lack of results and thus had to "reinvent" itself to maintain funding and relevance among decision makers. Arguably, the partnership concept could help solve both the efficiency and moral dilemmas: transforming formerly passive clients into active agents and involving recipients and beneficiaries in the policymaking and implementation process were seen to make aid more context sensitive and responsive to local concerns and needs. This made aid more ethically and morally sound by reducing external trusteeship and involving those at the receiving end was seen as creating stronger local commitment, which boosted aid effectiveness (Burnside and Dollar 2004).

AID EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Aid effectiveness appears to have been more important than moral and ethical concerns in promoting the partnership agenda. Indeed, by the 2002 Monterrey Consensus (the outcome of the UN International Conference on Financing for Development[3]) the notion of development partnerships to promote aid effectiveness was well established. Following this, OECD-DAC organised a set of high level forums under the aid effectiveness agenda (Rome in 2003, Paris in 2005, Accra in 2008 and Busan in 2011) which were instrumental in shaping and operationalising the principles underpinning the partnership concept. DAC involved an ever- widening number of non-DAC countries and development actors in these meetings, including aid-receiving developing countries, multilateral organisations,

[3] See www.un.org/esa/ffd/overview/monterrey-conference.html Accessed November 24.

NGOs and civil society organisations from both the global north and south. From the first forum in 2003 to the last forum in 2011, the number of developed countries attending grew from 22 to 45; developing countries rose from 28 to 100; the number of multilateral organisations grew from 22 to 53; and civil society organisations proliferated from 0 to more than 700 (OECD-DAC 2015: 335).

The First High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Rome, in 2003, can be seen as a precursor to the aid effectiveness agenda that unfolded over the next decade (OECD-DAC 2003). Before this meeting, DAC established a task force to explore existing donor practices to reduce the heavy transaction costs developing countries faced when dealing with multiple donors and their separate policies and reporting regimes. This exercise, somewhat shockingly today, marked "the first time developing countries were systematically engaged in DAC work" (OECD-DAC 2015: 334). With the Rome Declaration on Harmonisation, aid recipient countries were recast as partners. The Declaration states that going forward donors "will work with partner governments to forge stronger partnerships" (OECD-DAC 2003: 11), without specifying what "partnership" means.

The Second High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness was held in Paris in 2005 (OECD-DAC 2008b). There were great expectations in advance of the meeting. Important donor countries questioned the role of aid in promoting development, and civil society initiatives criticised the same donors for failing to harmonise their approaches to the global south. Calls were thus made to prevent overlap and duplications of effort, but also to make aid more predictable, transparent and in line with national priorities. Subsequently, the Paris forum aimed to create some guiding principles for making aid more effective, and thereby established what would be known as the partnership principles. Based on experience from both sides of the aid chain, this forum agreed on a set of principles to anchor and guide development practice to facilitate the aid effectiveness agenda:

- **Ownership:** developing countries shall define their own developing strategies and set their own strategies for poverty reduction; improve national institutions to facilitate the implementation of the strategies.
- **Alignment:** donor countries shall align behind these strategies and institutions, and preferably

operate via local institutions and systems to support national priorities.
- **Harmonisation:** donor countries shall coordinate policies and strategies; simplify procedures and share information to avoid duplication.
- **Results:** developing countries and donors shift focus to development results and results get measured.
- **Mutual accountability:** donors and partners are mutually accountable for development results and delivering on commitments.

These five principles synthesise and organise the 56 partnership commitments agreed upon in Paris (OECD-DAC 2008a: see Section II) which provide a common conceptual framework for ensuring effective development cooperation. Moreover, the principles are broken down into 12 measurable indicators in order to track progress towards targets set for 2010. According to DAC, this monitoring framework is a "practical, action-oriented roadmap to improve the quality of development cooperation" (OECD-DAC 2015: 335). Although the indicators are limited to the 2005–2010 period, the partnership principles continue to be highly relevant today. The principles are not perfect nor do they provide any unambiguous roadmap. Rather, the principles remain relevant because they represent a substantial attempt to operationalise the partnership concept and because they have been endorsed by most donor and recipient countries, international organisations and civil society organisations. Yet, they are merely principles and, as with any other principles, they remain open for interpretation and context-specific appropriation.

The Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra, in 2008, produced few novelties apart from reaffirming and sharpening the commitments made in Paris. Hence, the outcome document, the *Accra Agenda for Action*, was attached to the Paris Declaration (OECD-DAC 2008a). The preparatory working group this time extended beyond DAC to include representatives of developing countries, the civil society and multilateral organisations – arguably to honour the partner concept. The *Accra Agenda for Action* made little headway on the partnership concept apart from reminding the parties to strengthen their commitments to the principles agreed upon in Paris. With regard to country ownership, perhaps the key pillar of partnership, it was underscored that developing

countries needed to assume greater leadership of their own development policies and to involve both parliaments and civil society to extend ownership beyond the government level. Likewise, donors were called upon to demonstrate greater respect and support of partner countries' own policies and priorities, to use local systems and to establish predictable aid flows. These reminders of the Paris commitments can be read as a token that their implementation is slow and that development aid practice lags behind policy.

The Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness was held in Busan, in 2011, bringing together more than 3000 delegates. It culminated in the signing of the *Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation* (OECD-DAC 2011). As with the previous meeting, the Busan forum also entailed reviewing progress in implementing the principles of the Paris Declaration and how to maintain the relevance of the aid effectiveness agenda in what was now seen as a rapidly changing development landscape. Reflecting these changes, the aid effectiveness agenda and partnership principles now extended beyond traditional donors and recipients to also include south–south cooperation, the emerging economies (e.g. BRICS[4]) and private actors and philanthropies – all of whom for the first time agreed to join and sign the established framework. The Busan agreement does not further specify the partnership concept. It does, however, extend partnership "to new partnerships that [are] broader and more inclusive than before, founded on shared principles, common goals and differential commitments for effective international development" (OECD-DAC 2011: 1). More significantly, the Busan forum elevated the role of the private sector and its potent catalytic effect on development in complementing traditional north–south forms of cooperation, thus calling for new forms of public–private partnership, new financial instruments, investment options, technology and knowledge sharing. With this, the Busan agreement both reflects and drives a wider discursive shift from aid to development (Mawdsley 2012).

> **To summarise,** the OECD-DAC process aimed at promoting an aid effectiveness agenda, which became instrumental in promoting the partnership concept. Whereas one may still question the extent to which aid has become more effective, the four high level forums and the Paris Declaration in particular have significantly **contributed to shifting**

the discourse of international development aid, how development policies are made and for what purpose, and the overall practice of how institutions cooperate and relate to each other. The partnership concept is central to this turn, providing both momentum to the process and being the main takeaway point of the aid effectiveness agenda. Indeed, **both scholars and practitioners alike tend to equate the partnership concept with the Paris Declaration.**

The partnership concept was never properly defined. There are pros and cons to this. A formal definition would be politically hard to agree on and it could create strict delineations for both actors and practices as to what qualifies as proper partnership or not, which would undermine the comprehensiveness needed for the overall aid effectiveness agenda. Rather, **the partnership concept was framed by a set of principles that could be shared by most development actors as the principles remained malleable and open for context-specific interpretation and use.** Hence, it becomes important to explore how the partnership concept is rendered in different settings. Below we first explore how the concept is used in various policy documents, then we explore how it is rendered at the level of practice and from actors themselves.

THE PARTNERSHIP CONCEPT IN SELECTED POLICY DOCUMENTS

The partnership concept has a prominent position in current development policy. This section reviews how the concept of partnership is rendered in practice at the policy level, demonstrating how partnership is not only a key concept in international development aid, but also that it has multiple meanings and uses. The Norwegian government's present development policy is outlined in its *White Paper Common Responsibility for Common Future* (MFA 2017). Through its repeated use, the document illustrates the centrality of the partnership concept to Norwegian development policy: the term "partner" appears 139 times, and "partnership" 76 times. Despite this frequent use, there are no attempts to define the terms, conceptualise them or give them meaning. Partner and partnership appear as concepts that are taken for granted and that authors and readers alike will implicitly share an

understanding of. However, by engaging the concept empirically, through identifying how the concept is being used, some meaning can be discerned.

▶ First, the partnership concept is used both as an objective and a means of development aid. Norwegian development policy should, we read, contribute to building stronger partnerships, while such partnerships are seen as important means to implementing the very same policy and to realising broader development goals. ▶ Second, partnership is used interchangeably with "cooperation" on the one hand, and a "channel" for Norwegian aid on the other. ▶ Third, the partnership concept points to a wide variety of actors involved in both humanitarian action and development aid. The concept refers to domestic and foreign civil society and non- governmental organisations, bilateral cooperation and selected partner countries, regional and multilateral organisations, prioritised recipients, various international funds, philanthropies, private actors and public–private partnerships, and "strategic partnerships". The concept is also used in a generic, unspecified way by referring to "other partners".

▶ Fourth, although implicit, the paper says something about what partnership entails: predictability, working together, long-term commitment. However, it is explicit in reaffirming the Paris, Accra and Busan Declarations and the donor principles of results, partnership, transparency and mutual accountability.

Similar observations are made with reference to the White Paper on *Partner countries in development politics* (MFA 2018). Here, the main emphasis is on the concept of "partner countries" as a means to concentrate Norwegian aid on a selection of countries to boost aid effectiveness and to work towards the 2030 Agenda and its bold SDGs. Concentrating aid on a few partner countries will, arguably, both require and bolster stronger partnerships at the bilateral, state level but also among the wide spectrum of actors used

Despite a full chapter being devoted to "the concept of partner country", any conceptualisations of partner or partnership – beyond references in passing to reciprocity, the joint desire to cooperate, ownership and shared understanding of goals and priorities – are absent.

as partners, channels and implementers of Norwegian aid abroad. This White Paper also refers to the Paris, Accra and Busan Declarations, thus demonstrating their continued relevance. It states that "we no longer talk about donors and recipients, but of mutual cooperation and genuine partnership" (MFA 2018: 5, my translation).

Despite a full chapter being devoted to "the concept of partner country", any conceptualisations of partner or partnership – beyond references in passing to reciprocity, the joint desire to cooperate, ownership and shared understanding of goals and priorities – are absent.

The 2030 Agenda reveals a similar engagement with the partnership concept. Norwegian development policy should, as stated in the abovementioned White Papers, contribute to the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs. Concerning the partnership concept, the 2030 Agenda illustrates the same pattern as identified above: the partnership concept is frequently used, given a prominent role and position, while simultaneously lacking definition and conceptualisation. It states that all countries and all stakeholders will implement the 2030 Agenda in "collaborative partnership" (UN 2015: 5), through a "revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity" (ibid.: 6). The partnership will "facilitate an intensive global engagement in support of implementation of all the Goals and targets, bringing together Governments, the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system and other actors and mobilizing all available resources" (ibid.: 14). Despite stating that "we fully commit to this [global partnership]" (ibid.), the 2030 Agenda contains surprisingly little information about what it entails in practice. SDG 17, *Partnership for the goals*, however, provides some conceptual content, but the goal's targets are focused more on funding, financial and economic concerns than on how to operationalise the term.

Norec's *Professional partner guideline* (Norec 2019) and its more comprehensive and general *Guidelines* (2021) reflect a similar tendency in how it approaches the partnership concept. The 2021 version provides a list of Norec definitions, which defines partnership as "a group of partner organisations, companies or institutions, cooperating to implement a Norec supported project. All the partners sign a partnership agreement for the duration of the project" (Norec 2021: 4). This quote illustrates the challenge in defining partnership,

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and it gives little meaning as to what the partnership concept entails. At the same time, **the guidelines demonstrate how the concept is increasingly filled with meaning the closer one gets to actual practice and when outlining duties and responsibilities of the involved actors.**

There is frequent use of both "partners" and "partnerships" in the guidelines, where the former designates those institutions that take part in the exchange projects and not Norec itself. The documents outline a timeline for the partnership, designating partner institutions' duties and responsibilities relating to mentoring and practical concerns prior to, during and after the exchange activities. In the section on "working in partnership", which are found in nearly identical versions in both guidelines,[5] the partnership concept is explicitly addressed. The emphasis here is on the notions of **ownership, reciprocity and collaboration.** "Partners should ensure equal ownership of the exchange project" (Norec 2019: 4) both between the involved partners and within each partner institution from top-level management to employees – but it does not define what ownership means and entails. Partners should also strive to achieve "reciprocity and collaboration in all phases of the exchange project. Building trust, ownership and a reciprocal relationship are the most important ingredients" (ibid.) of partnership and thus paramount to achieving the project's goals. How to build trust, ownership and reciprocity is not specified, albeit some aspects are implied by the description of the various partners' duties and responsibilities. These include communication, defining and distributing project-related tasks, training and meetings. However, **it is up to the partners themselves "to strive to assure**

equal participation in decision making, preparing applications and results, and in monitoring and follow-up of the project" (ibid.: 4–5). As such, and despite Norec's partner guideline giving importance to the partnership concept, it does not provide any blueprint. Nor does it specify what ownership means, how to operationalise reciprocity and how to build trust. As with partnership, these concepts are also largely in the eye of the beholder, and it remains the partners' responsibility, both at the institutional and individual level, to give content and meaning to these concepts. "All partners are equally responsible for maintaining a good relationship... The result of your exchange project depends heavily on how you work as a partnership and how you work with your participants" (ibid.: 5).

As both the above policy reviews and the historical trajectory of the partnership concept demonstrate, partnership is often understood as yet another development buzzword. Buzzwords are essentially contested concepts that "combine general agreement on the abstract notion that they represent with endless disagreement about what they might mean in practice" (Cornwall 2010: 2). Such buzzwords thus have the dual function of both concealing (lack of) meaning and disagreement and integrating diverse actors and practice. The historical trajectory and current use demonstrate how the partnership concept constitutes such a buzzword, as it is used as a label placed on most aid relations and widely referred to in development policy documents irrespective of what is going on in practice (Cornwall and Brock 2005, Cornwall and Eade 2010).

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[5] Section 5, page 4–5 in the 2019 version, and page 38 in the 2021-version

3. PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE AMONG NOREC PARTNERS

This section moves the analytical attention one step further towards actual practice and seeks to give context and meaning to the partnership concept from the actors' perspective. We draw on the interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in various forms of Norec-funded partnerships. At the overarching level, most respondents expressed general satisfaction with the exchange projects and partnership arrangements. While being associated with Norec or mistaken for being an evaluator probably impacted their answers, some also saw the interview as a way to get stuff off their chest. However, the outline below focuses on those aspects that speak most directly to the overall partnership topic, what it means and implies, how it is being practiced, and how it conceals or reproduces asymmetries.

The present partnership model applied by Norec has developed over the years. Inspired by the American Peace Corps, it started with traditional donor-led development assistance in 1963 (under the name "Fredskorpset"). In 2001, Fredskorpset re-established itself as FK Norway – supporting "mutual exchange of professionals and volunteers between Norway and countries of the South" (Norec 2019: 26). FK Norway changed name to Norec 17 years later and currently funds projects between partners in Norway and the global south (north–south or triangular partnerships) and south–south partnerships. Norec's key guiding principles are reciprocity, mutual partnership, local ownership, equality and solidarity (Norec 2019: 26). By funding exchange of knowledge and competencies between partner organisations, Norec aims to contribute towards the SDGs.

NOREC AS A PARTNER?

At the inception meeting for this study and in response to questions pertaining to its scope, Norec staff were clear that it does not consider itself as a partner. Instead, Norec sees itself as a facilitator, organizer and funder of others' partnerships. As such, Norec not only positions itself outside the partnership relation, but

above it as the actor that enables and orchestrates the framework for partnerships between other institutions.

Among the partners partaking in the exchange programmes, several respondents state that they view Norec as a partner, although some underscore they are not in a direct partnership with Norec. Interestingly, those who do not see Norec as a partner are typically smaller organisations, predominantly in the global south, that despite nominally being an equal partner in the exchange programmes consider themselves to have a more limited or detached role. Conversely, all the "coordinating partners" that we interviewed state that they see Norec as a partner and that they are in a joint partnership, except for one representing a Norwegian civil society organisation operating in the development sector. This person found the question both interesting and intriguing, stating that "I have never thought of Norec as a partner, but our relationship with Norec is similar to that we have with those in the global south we otherwise call partners. So why not? I need to chew a bit on this one…".

> We always seek dialogue and equal cooperation among partners, but we will always have the last word.

THE ROLE OF THE COORDINATING PARTNER

Each exchange programme involves a coordinating partner irrespective of project type. Reviewing the full list of current and previous (since 2008) Norec-funded projects, almost all coordinating partners, with the obvious exception of south–south exchanges, are based in Norway: of about 250 coordinating partners, only 12 are based in the global south, and at least 3 of these have a Norwegian contact person.

The coordinating partner enjoys an elevated position in the exchange partnership by virtue of being responsible for managing the overall dialogue with Norec, being legally and economically accountable,

and responsible for applications, reporting, etc. This is recognised by the parties themselves. Coordinating partners assume they have this position because language and geography make it easier to manage the Norec dialogue. Those representing public and civil society also underscore their knowledge of public reporting systems etc. as their comparative advantage – something which coordinating partners from the global south, in south–south exchanges, envy. Bureaucracy and reporting are generally seen as challenges for southern-based coordinators. Some Norwegian-based coordinators say that the requirement of annual applications, despite having multiyear Norec agreements, undermines their ability to plan long term and build the trustful relations necessary for a successful partnership. Coordinators from the private sector hold that the extent and frequency of reporting and applications exceed what they are used to in the business sector. As one private sector representative says, "I realise and respect this is how it is done, but I don't know why. It is not very effective." Some private actors experience these bureaucratic requirements as control mechanisms which undermine the role and responsibilities they have been entrusted with as coordinating partners.

Size matters. Some coordinating partners are big organisations with designated corporate social responsibility or aid-related portfolios extending beyond Norec exchange programmes. Many of them have designated staff responsible for managing the exchange programme, reporting to Norec and follow-up partner organisations. Conversely, smaller organisations admit not having the same capacity to sufficiently deliver on the tasks entrusted to them as coordinating partners in relation to Norec and within the exchange partnership itself.

> We can't all be equal all the time. Sometimes someone simply needs to take charge and cut through.

To paraphrase the maxim in Orwell's Animal Farm, the elevated role of coordinating partner demonstrates that although all partners are supposed to be equal, some are more equal than others. This is recognised by both regular and coordinating partners alike. As one coordinator states, "we always seek dialogue and equal cooperation among partners, but we will always have the last word."

While some see it as a challenge to the equality among partners, others recognise it as a necessity to get things done. As stated by a non-coordinating partner, "We can't all be equal all the time. Sometimes someone simply needs to take charge and cut through." Nevertheless, the role of the coordinating partner demonstrates that there is an inherent asymmetry between partners owing to the structural setup of the exchange programme.

PARTNERSHIP – WHAT'S IN A NAME?

All interviewees were asked about their view on the partnership model in use, what they see as the key ingredients of a well-functioning partnership and the extent to which this applies to the partnership they are part of. Interestingly, very few had any specific input to the question about the *model* of partnership, simply because they do not consider working together represents a model, nor had they been presented with or instructed to follow any particular model. Many of those who raised concerns with other partners and their cooperation felt that a model, in the form of a template with clear operational lines with distribution of tasks, would be beneficial to sort out differences and settle disagreement. However, most expressed that a model could also become a straitjacket limiting the flexibility needed in the partnership. "Partnership goes beyond documents and agreements. It cannot be summed-up in a model. It is what we do together daily and it requires a good relationship", a southern partner states.

Trust and mutual respect were mentioned by most respondents as being the key ingredients of a successful partnership. Other aspects that regularly surfaced in the interviews were regular communication, transparency, a clear partnership agreement that designates tasks and responsibilities, accountability, cross-cultural understanding, commitment, shared expectations and project objectives, and that all partners participate equally in planning and reporting activities.

There is a chicken-and-egg dilemma to many of these aspects. While most of them may be seen as inter-related, some can be seen as functions of others. Trust and mutual respect were highlighted by most, but respondents differed as to whether these are the product of or produce the other aspects. For instance, are transparency and cross-cultural understanding causes or effects of trust and respect? Moreover, understanding cultural differences in practice is seen both as a precondition for a good partnership and an objective of partnership itself.

Time, project duration and long-term commitment were all highlighted as critical to engendering trust and mutual respect and thus a good partnership. Two challenges and one solution arise pertaining to these temporal dimensions. ▶ First, a good partnership is often based on personal relations. Much responsibility for this is placed on the exchange participants since building personal relations is time consuming and requires regular meetings. ▶ Second, the exchanges take place as annual exercises within short- and medium- term institutional agreements. It takes time to properly include exchange participants in the host's activities and institutional culture. Also, it is not given that participants re-join or get employed by their organisation upon return. Some are volunteers and not destined to work for their home institution. The majority of participants are fairly young, in their formative career years and thus more likely to shift jobs. To mitigate these concerns and to increase the partnerships' sustainability beyond the role of the exchange participants, respondents proposed centring partnerships more on the organisations and institutional cooperation.

Interestingly, some private sector partners have a somewhat different notion of what partnerships entails and means. While duly acknowledging the importance of trust, reciprocity and respect as fundamental to their collaboration, some also state that "we do not see ourselves as partners, but as one joint enterprise". This quote from a private sector representative demonstrates a closer connection than what is covered by the partnership concept, which presupposes cooperation between distinct entities. The respondent not only stresses how they work as one integrated unit, but also that they did so before joining the exchange programme and will continue to do after its discontinuation. The added value of the exchanges is thus that "the Norec funding allows us to swap staff where we can focus more on the cultural dimension and the importance of cross-cultural learning, not only on profit margins". A similar view is reflected by a semi-public actor stating that "we had joint objectives from before, but the Norec support adds another dimension to our existing work". As such, these exchanges underpin the interests of already established cooperation, in contrast to the exchanges involving civil society organisations where their partnership presupposes Norec support.

PARTNERS WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP – CHALLENGES AND GOOD PRACTICES

Practicing a partnership based on, or to facilitate, trust and respect, is easier said than done. There are few examples of what partners themselves consider to be best or worst practices. This does not mean there are not lessons to be learned. Among the key lessons is that **partnership is a process that evolves over time**, where project duration, long-term commitment and personal relations are crucial to and interwoven with each other. Most of the partners interviewed had experienced a range of challenges in their partnership. The minor challenges were language issues when exchange participants do not speak the language of the host partner organisation. Language issues make the partnership biased towards the Anglophone world. Others mentioned cultural difference as a challenge – referring to the organisational culture (e.g. lacking a control unit) or differences in how the organisation is run. Most minor issues were solved through meetings where partners sat down together and came up with ideas on how to proceed.

A major challenge mentioned by most partners was the Covid-19 pandemic, especially its impediments on travel affecting the exchanges. Some projects and

exchanges, notably those in knowledge intensive sectors, maintained operations via virtual exchange of competencies made available by reallocating project funding to technical equipment needed for video meetings etc. The flexibility of both Norec and the partners themselves was thus key to sustaining project activity during the pandemic.

Reporting, planning, bureaucracy and administrative tasks all surface when partners respond to what the partnership actually entails in practice, that is, what the partners do together. These practices have two distinct effects. On the one hand, they are a source of frustration among those managing the partnerships (see above). On the other hand, these practices have an integrative effect in serving as the glue holding detached actors together as partners, in a partnership. Making plans for the future, coordinating current activities and reporting on past achievements can involve a lot of interagency cooperation. As an important feature of partnership, such cooperation both produces and depends on trust, equality and respect. However, how it is undertaken differs among different project partners. Whereas some tell of comprehensive and joint exercises based on mutuality, others tell of processes largely driven and defined by the coordinator. Some tell of open-ended processes and broad sharing of documents where everyone involved is encouraged to voice their interests. A few report closed and predefined processes where they are merely invited post-hoc to give their input or agree to what has already been decided.

Establishing and maintaining partnership relations are thus difficult. The perception of these processes varies, and there are differences in the extent to which partners are involved and when in the formation of partnership. Nevertheless, the practices and processes described above demonstrate the potential power of the coordinating partners owing to the responsibilities they are given. As recognised by a coordinator,

Trust and mutual respect were mentioned by most respondents as being the key ingredients of a successful partnership. Other aspects that regularly surfaced in the interviews were regular communication, transparency, a clear partnership agreement that designates tasks and responsibilities, accountability, cross-cultural understanding, commitment, shared expectations and project objectives, and that all partners participate equally in planning and reporting activities.

"we have much power and a huge responsibility to make the partnership work. But there are differences in how partners contribute and their ability to do so." Interestingly, this coordinator first recognises her responsibility, before she transfers failure to do likewise onto the partner. Most interviewees however, partners and coordinators alike, not only recognise the coordinators' elevated role in the partnership, but also claim it as a necessity to get things done, thus effectively questioning the basic idea of equality in the partnership. One coordinator also affirms having "to let go of one partner" due to lack of administrative follow-up and reporting, thus demonstrating not only the elevated role of the coordinating partner but also that they serve as the partnership's gatekeeper.

TEACHING AND LEARNING AMONG PARTNERS

The exchange partnerships nominally are about reciprocal teaching and learning. One topic that emerged early in the data collection, from a partner based in the south, was the notion that the exchange projects were about participants from the north going abroad to teach, while those from the south travel to the north to learn. Most other respondents confirmed this sensation: it was strong among civil society partnerships, but near absent in private sector partnerships and in exchanges drawing on highly competent, knowledge intensive sectors. Among the private actors inter-

viewed, the focus was more on the added value of cultural exchanges rather than teaching and learning. A south–south partnership of private actors represents a notable exception, as the scope of the project itself was competence building drawing on the knowledge of one experienced actor, which made both partners duly aware of their asymmetry. Among the knowledge intensive projects – like those involving research collaborations, hospitals and health clinics, etc. – there was also a strong notion of equal relevance, mutual learning and respect for one another's expertise despite material differences.

However, among civil society partners the teaching/learning imbalance was much more prominent and spoken about, in particular where exchanges involved volunteers and not permanent staff of the partner organisations. **Here, the success of the exchanges and partnership are contingent on there being a good match between partners.** If the partners are too different – in scope, capacity, and commitment to the partnership – the learning outcome becomes imbalanced and some face difficulties in transferring what they learn abroad to their home institution. As succinctly stated by one respondent, "birds of a feather flock together".

The partnership concept is central to the organisation of aid relations and how development projects are being made, implemented and reported on. As argued in the introduction and as reflected in DAC's aid effectiveness agenda outlined above, there is no unequivocal standard definition of partnership shared by the multiple and diverse actors inhabiting the development world. There are pros and cons to this. A strict definition or a singular partnership model to be imposed and used irrespective of context may serve as a straitjacket undermining key principles of the partnership concept, notably the rationales of sensitising aid to particular contexts and participatory approaches to enhance bottom-up perspectives. Conversely, a too loose notion of the concept potentially turns everything into partnership – as illustrated by the White Papers review – thus jeopardising its semantic meaning. However, this ambiguity does not mean the recasting of donor–recipient relations as partnership has been irrelevant to practice. The partnership concept has indeed changed aid practice, partner relations and development programming. Since partnership is "a word that must be given meaning within a specific context" (Pickard 2010: 136), one needs both temporal distance from the 2005 Paris Declaration and to move analytical attention from the level of policy to that of actors and practice.

Norec exchanges are diverse in their type and activities and the partners they bring together. As illustrated above, this has bearing on the formation of partnership

and its dynamics. As such, it is difficult to give unequivocal answers to the four original questions stipulated by Norec (see above). Norec, in its guideline (Norec 2019), pays tribute to the key partnership principles of the Paris Declaration by focusing on ownership, reciprocity, trust, equal participation and collaboration. Although to different degrees, most partners paraphrase these terms, or a selection of them, when asked to characterise their partnership and its ideal requirements. This indicates that most partners across various exchange projects largely share understanding of the partnership concept and that they may have internalised – or, alternatively, have adopted or pay lip service to? – Norec's partnership rhetoric and its rendering of the partnership principles.

THE POWER IN AND OF PARTNERSHIP

Greater differences surface when we move the analytical attention from how partners speak about partnership and its ideal requirements to how they experience and practice it in concreate projects. Here, **most acknowledge that there is an asymmetry among partners, in particular with regard to the elevated role of the coordinating partner.** A similar asymmetry is also identified in larger and more complex exchange projects that involve several partners and where **some experience themselves as "at the bottom of the hierarchy"**, as expressed by one partner who says they never dealt directly with either Norec or the coordinating partner. Rather, they were approached by one of the larger and seemingly equal partners "with a readymade plan just to be implemented". Although it was viewed more as a sensible division of labour and not as distrust, it nevertheless testifies that there may be differences among partners as to how the principle of equal participation manifests itself in practice. As such, partnership asymmetries are identified both as a function of the structural setup of partnership, and as a function of complex partnerships involving several partners of different size. However, both instances place great responsibility on the coordinating partner to interpret and manage the partnership principles as intended. The practical formation of partnership and

the extent to which asymmetries are (re)produced are thus contingent on the coordinators' interpretation and use of the partnership principles, as well as their managerial capacity. The coordinating partner may not intentionally assume a position of power or wilfully use their power to dominate others. Quite often it is more a result, or combination, of the responsibilities entrusted to the coordinator and how other partners view and experience the coordination. For these reasons, partners' experiences with partnership and power relations differ between cases.

Few admit the partnership is an asymmetrical one and that power differences exist within the partnership, despite interviewees referring to the elevated status of the coordinating partner, the hierarchy among partners, that some are not included in planning and reporting, invited to meetings, etc. **It thus appears to be a structural discrepancy between what people say on the one hand, and what they do or say they do on the other hand.** This, when seen together, may suggest limited awareness among partner institutions to the power dynamics of exchange partnerships that also are implied by the ToR for this assignment and its four questions listed in section two above. Indeed, issues of power and asymmetrical relations, and how to manage them, are given limited attention in the Norec partner guidelines (Norec 2019; 2021). Power has nevertheless been dealt with, although sparsely and implicit, in some of 26 evaluations previously commissioned by Norec.[6] The first evaluation listed (Borchgrevink 2003) concludes that partnership should be real, not just in name. Although "power" does not appear in the evaluation, it is discussed whether partnerships are truly balanced in practice, that "North participants are expected to teach while the South participants shall primarily learn" (ibid.: 6) and that the Norwegian partner "was alone in reporting to Fredskorpset" (ibid.: 41). These findings in a nearly two decades old report are also reflected in the contemporary material above,

suggesting that **power in partnerships may not have been properly dealt with or reflected upon.** Also, the term power does not appear many places in the five most recent evaluations and reports, all published in 2019 or 2020. The emphasis is rather on how the partnership should be equal and based on trust and reciprocity, despite the potential asymmetries implicit in and masked by the reciprocity concept (Lough 2016). That people don't experience power differences or see them as problematic may be due to how the prevalence of the partnership rhetoric masks such asymmetries, or the fact that power is not something people feel or observe unless outright domination and arm-twisting takes place. But power may operate in various and more tacit ways, and we may need other analytical lenses to see it.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF POWER

Steven Lukes (1974) argues that power can be exercised in three, interchangeable ways, as decision making, agenda setting and ideological power. Decision making is a direct and explicit form of power where there is no discord about who governs who and what the interests at stake are. This dimension of power is acutely felt by those subject to it, as power here is seen as someone's ability to get others to do something against their will. The second power dimension relates to agenda setting and controlling the parameters of a discussion, meaning that deciding on what should be discussed or not and who to include or exclude from the discussion constitute a source of power. One may be able to prevent someone making a decision, or even prevent them discussing a decision, simply by controlling the agenda of the meeting. The third dimension of power is ideological. It points to the power that comes with influencing people's beliefs and ideas, wishes and thoughts, thereby even making people want things that are opposed to their self-interest, by framing the wider discursive and ideological framework within which actors operate.

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[6] See www.norec.no/en/about-norec/organisation/reports/ Accessed November 28, 2021.

Taking an analytical step back, it is evident that "partnership" is now established as a key development buzzword (Pickard 2010), and it is hard to imagine development aid and cooperation without reference to the partnership concept. This section presents various analyses of and approaches to the partnership concept in theory and practice. Not all are necessarily directly relevant to the empirical material presented above. They nevertheless demonstrate and serve to create awareness about relevant dynamics, unintended consequences and effects that may emerge in the name of partnership, and how the partnership discourse itself may reproduce the asymmetries it aims to level out.

As demonstrated above, the partnership concept is liberally sprinkled into policy documents, websites and funding proposals, and widely used among practitioners to refer to any form of cooperation. Despite the buzzwordness of partnership, it is not simply a passkey to funding and influence. Policymakers and aid practitioners tend to reflect little on such words and their meaning, as this may seem irrelevant to the real business of getting stuff done. But words make worlds – aptly illustrated by the term partnership and the efforts put into making, maintaining and implementing it. However, the nominal, discursive representations and meanings inserted into words should not unequivocally be equated with what's going on in practice. Rather than taking a concept for granted, assuming everyone knows and shares its lexical meaning, we should focus on what such buzzwords do and how they are put to use and given meaning in concreate settings.

Buzzwords, such as partnership, are essentially contested concepts that congregate actors around a concept, at the same time as they allow for, or conceal differences about what they may mean in practice (Cornwall 2010). As such, buzzwords have a dual function. On the one hand, they conceal disagreement and (lack of) meaning. On the other, they function to integrate diverse actors and practices. The partnership concept thus gains its purchase and power through its

vague and euphemistic quality, its capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, and its normative resonance to get things done, together and as equal partners.

Focusing on what policies do, such as that of partnership, David Mosse inverts the causal relationship between policy and practice. Nominally, policy directs practice – which is the rationale for why so much effort is put into policymaking processes, as demonstrated by the Paris Declaration's partnership agenda. But what if we turn this causality around, to ask "What if development practice is not driven by [partnership] policy?" (Mosse 2005: 2). What if everything that constitutes a good partnership – ownership, reciprocity, trust, accountability – is quite different from what makes it implementable? Could it be that the partnership concept not only conceals but also reproduces the asymmetrical relations it originally aimed to dismantle? "What if, instead of policy producing practice, practices produce policy, in the sense that actors in development devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events?" (Mosse 2005: 2). The concept of partnership, as we saw above, may work in a similar way: partners' extensive talk about partnership not only reinforces the partnership discourse, but also glosses over ambiguities and differences that may exist. Seen this way, partnership is "not a coherent set of practices but a set of practices that produce coherence" (Yarrow 2011: 6) among distinct actors in order to legitimise persistent aid asymmetries.

When comparing the theory and practice pertaining to the partnership concept, a potential ambiguity reveals itself. On the one hand, the partnership ideas of, for example, participation, reciprocity and ownership seek to empower partners on the receiving end of the aid chain with greater freedoms and self-determination over their own development policy. On the other, we observe that aid asymmetries persist and that donors or coordinating partners seek to retain control despite promoting the partnership concept themselves. This ambiguity indicates a conflation of Lukes' (1974; see

The first dimension of power, decision making, is a direct form of power that is easy to identify as it implies coercion and thus makes disagreements clear. However, few admit to exercising such coercion or falling prey to it, as this would run counter to the basic tenets of partnership. Apart from the instance with the coordinator who had to let one of the partners go due to continuous defaulting on reporting routines, nothing was identified or reported on through the many interviews undertaken that would suggest that this form of power characterises partnership relations in Norec exchanges.

The second and third dimensions of power are more relevant to grasping and understanding power dynamics and the persistence of asymmetries taking place in partnership relations. Agenda setting, the second power dimension, refers to who has the power to set the parameters of the partnership relations. Whereas Norec provides the overarching framework, the coordinating partner enjoys a position of power by virtue of being responsible for administering what takes place in the partnership and by whom. Who is invited to participate in planning meetings, what are the topics being discussed and what is left out; how is the dialogue between partners managed and is there equal sharing of and access to information; to what extent are partners' different views and interests conveyed to Norec by the coordinator serving as the project's information gatekeeper? These questions point to instances where

power is being exercised, but few informants recognise this as power but rather as a bureaucratic necessity and an effect of the structural setup of partnership.

The limited reflections on these power dynamics indicates that partnership is a discourse largely taken for granted among partner institutions. This draws attention to the third dimension of power, ideological power, which suggest that questions about power and governance are not asked because the actors themselves have internalised the ruler's ideology and act in accordance with it. Indeed, partnership appears to be the only possible way to conceive of how to organise relations between exchange partners. Very few questioned the concept of partnership and its associated principles of ownership, accountability, reciprocity and trust. As such, interviewing the exchange partners demonstrates that the partnership principles, at the ideational level, have stood the test of time since the 2005 Paris Declaration. It also illustrates the concept and its principles' extensive reach, from central and authoritative global policy, such as the 2030 Agenda, to small, local and diverse exchange partners that do not necessarily consider themselves part of the international development aid sector. Certainly, seen through the prism of ideological power, it appears difficult to imagine development and even Norec exchange projects without recourse to the partnership concept.

above) bureaucratic power of agenda setting with his ideological power dimension. Seen in tandem, they draw attention to what Foucault called governmentality (Foucault 1991) – a form of power drawing on bureaucratic governance technologies coupled with how people govern themselves by embodying the governor's mentality. Building on Foucault, but tailored to the development sector, the developmentality concept (Lie 2015) aims to further explore and make sense of the ambiguity of partnership and the confluence of participatory, bottom-up approaches and top-down conditionality approaches. This ambiguity was once aptly illustrated by a donor informant: "ownership exists when they do as we want them to do, but they do so voluntarily" (Randel, German, and Ewing 2002: 8).

The developmentality concept aims to make sense of this ambiguity: how the transfer of power from donor to recipient institutions being integral to the partnership discourse gets subverted in the practical formation of partnerships. This entails processes through which the donor attempts to make its policies those of the recipient. The developmentality perspective originally emerged from the study of NGO partnerships, and was later refined in the study of the World Bank–Uganda partnership, which demonstrates its relevance to different scales and contexts. Developmentality can be neatly illustrated with the World Bank's orientation towards partnership as part and parcel of its move from SAP to the PRSP model (see above). Under the PRSP model, client governments are expected to devise their own national development strategies, drawing on participatory approaches to demonstrate ownership of the policies. However, for a partner government to receive a loan to implement its PRSP, the World Bank first needs to approve it. So, although the PRSP model aims to put the client partner "in the driver's seat", the World Bank remains responsible for approving the roadmap and the course set. This constitutes an indirect use of power and conditionality, as captured by the developmentality concept.

Developmentality rests on the donor's ability to frame the conditions under which the recipient may exercise the freedom granted by the partnership discourse, and how new bureaucratic governance mechanisms of control and surveillance enable the donor to "govern at a distance" (Rose and Miller 1992: 181) by using "freedom as a formula for rule" (Abrahamsen 2004: 1459). This demonstrates how governance practices

are concerned with the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1991). Returning to Lukes' three dimensions of power, developmentality is thus not about direct coercion, but relates to how ideological power and agenda setting operate in tandem and are underpinned by an "audit culture" of bureaucratic practices such as regular monitoring, reporting, planning and applications (Lie 2020). These practices not only demonstrate lack of empowerment and trust in the recipient partner, but also enable regular donor control to ensure that the partner is on track and that the freedoms of partnership are managed and administered correctly. Developmentality pertains to the conditions that enable the donor to govern at a distance by orchestrating the wider realm of ownership and framing the conditions under which the recipient may exercise the freedom granted by the ownership discourse. Central to developmentality is how the donor seeks to make their policies those of the recipient. Applying a developmentality perspective to the partnership agenda demonstrates how partnership in practice entails processes of "responsibilisation", meaning that the recipient becomes dependent on and responsible to their benefactor to achieve what are formally joint plans, processes and objectives as per partnership (Lie 2015).

That the lived life of a policy-oriented concept diverges from its intention is not new nor particular to the partnership concept (Olivier de Sardan 2005, Lewis and Mosse 2006). In 1995 Robert Chambers – who championed participatory, bottom-up development approaches to "put the last first" (Chambers 1983) – asserted that there are three broad usages of "participation" (Chambers 1995). As participation and partnership are conceptual siblings, his divisions are also relevant to understanding current use of the partnership concept and the power dynamics it entails. Drawing on his work, we can discern three different uses of the term partnership. First is merely as a cosmetic label, to make proposed projects look good due to the requirement or expectation of organising the cooperation in terms of partnership, irrespective of what actual practice is. Second, partnership may be used as a co-opting practice to mobilise aid-receiving partners and thereby to reduce project costs, meaning that "they" participate or partner in "our" project. Third, the use of partnership may refer to a process of empowerment that enables all partners to participate equally, to make their own analysis, take command, and implement their own choices and decisions. All notions

are identified in the empirical section above. Almost all at the discursive level adhere to the third usage, the first usage is stated by several of the interviewees and reflected in policy documents, the second usage is more tacit and dependent on analytical perspective, such as developmentality and the ideologic power dimension.

As both the empirical material and the theoretical perspectives show, partnership is a concept that may mean and do different things depending on context. It may be a concept to truly promote empowerment and lift subaltern voices and perspectives to the core of development programming. Or it may be a concept that conceals differences and reproduces lopsided aid relations. How the concept is being used and what (unintended) effects it produces are dependent on the actors themselves: first and foremost it depends on donor agencies' will and ability to let go, to truly transfer decision-making power to nominally equal partners. Second, the formation of partnership is contingent on the role of those responsible for managing or coordinating it. Partnership requires that the donor and the coordinating partner entrust others further down the partnership chain with power and decision-making authority. Finally, the formation

of partnerships thus also relies on the partners' will, ability and capacity to fill the position required of an equal partner.

The practices of partnership – or practices taken place in the name of partnership – produce and are produced by idiosyncratic and complicated relationships that aid practitioners have to manage and navigate, often informally. Significant power and responsibility for the partnership formation are thus placed on the coordinating partner, who has to serve as a broker and translator of various interests, as well as the partnership's overall gatekeeper. As the principles of partnership seek to instil agency in those at the receiving end, the practice and effects of partnership need to be understood in their empirical context with particular attention given to the partnership's managers and coordinators. These practices are shaped by historical legacies among and within partners, critical events in the partnership and aspects external to the partnership relation itself. Most importantly, these practices are also shaped by actors and aid professionals who on a daily basis manage the partnership relation, seeking to establish coherence between local concerns, the donor's interests and established partnership principles.

6. CODA

In lieu of a conclusion, this final section seeks to inform the fourth and probably the most difficult question stipulated in the Terms of References: how can Norec promote a constructive discussion on managing partnerships and power relations? This report sheds light on different issues and practices relating to power and asymmetrical relations that unfold part and parcel of how the partnership concept is used in practice. A constructive discussion requires not only an open dialogue inclusive and respectful of different perspectives and alternative views, and that each actor involved in the different exchange partnerships – Norec included – critically reflect on their own position. Such a discussion also requires that one does not shy away from potentially difficult or disturbing issues, and that the agenda-setting of these discussions are inclusive and open ended.

For the discussion, it is important to realise the centrality of power to all forms of aid relations, that development itself constitutes a form of power, and that the partnership concept does not make power dynamics irrelevant or redundant despite its emphasis of equality and reciprocity. As argued above, power comes in multiple and diverse forms, and the partnership concept may itself both conceal and (re)produce asymmetrical aid relations. This does not mean that the partnership concept is or has been irrelevant to development practice and aid relations at the general level, nor with regard to Norec's portfolio and exchange projects. Nor does it mean that aid donors and

exchange facilitators are almighty, powerful hegemons. **Power is, just as partnership, a relational concept. This means that it needs at least two parties to manifest itself: one actor cannot be in partnership alone, just as one actor cannot be powerful unless there is someone to dominate. Power is not something someone has or not. Rather, it is produced and enacted in the practical encounter and relationship between different actors with competing interests.**

Power is present and formed in social relationships, as, for instance, aid partnerships. As shown above, **there is no shared standard definition of partnership within the development industry, nor in Norec or among exchange partners. There are pros and cons to this. On the one side, this makes the concept's organisational principles relevant to the many and diverse actors, activities and relations identified in the various Norec exchange projects. The flipside is that it becomes the responsibility of the actors involved in particular projects to frame and shape the partnership.** Consequently, there is variety as to how partners perceive the partnership and how lopsided power relations are becoming manifest and affect the project and partnership. There are, however, some common denominators across the projects.

The responsibility of shaping and framing the partnership lies on the actors inhabiting the partnership space, and with responsibilities come power. Despite Norec considers itself a facilitator, exchange partners and coordinating partners in particular perceive Norec as part of the partnership. **Irrespective if Norec is formally a partner or facilitator, it should not be exempted as an actor from discussions about how partnerships and power relations are managed.**

The coordinating partner is entrusted with great responsibilities in operationalising the partnership concept at the project level. This structural dimension implies that not all partners are equal. The coordinator holds a prominent gatekeeping position in framing the partnership, but the capacity to do so and how partner-

Awareness among the coordinators, especially those with limited capacity and personnel, about the power and responsibilities they have as partnership gatekeepers is important to prevent the coordinator assuming the role as a paternalistic mini- donor at the project level, a proxy for Norec, or an uncommitted and irrelevant paper tiger.

ship is implemented differ a lot between the exchange projects. In discussing how to manage partnership and power relations, particular attention should be given to the role of the coordinating partner how it understands and practices the partnership concept. **Awareness among the coordinators, especially those with limited capacity and personnel, about the power and responsibilities they have as partnership gatekeepers is important to prevent the coordinator assuming the role as a paternalistic mini- donor at the project level, a proxy for Norec, or an uncommitted and irrelevant paper tiger.**

The importance of personal relations for a well-functioning partnership cannot be overestimated. Personal connections are not only important to build trust between institutions, but may also be a remedy for misunderstandings and a source to settle disagreements when they occur. Much responsibility for establishing and maintaining such relations are put on the exchange participants. This is not optimal. As project participants may come and go in the short term, partner institutions' managers have a longer-term perspective and involvement beyond the annual exchanges. Efforts to ensure good personal relations between partners at the management level appear as a sensible way to reduce transaction costs and challenges in starting a project, and institutionalise trust between the partners irrespective of project participants. Joint

partner visits during the exchange cycles, by the partners' administrative staff responsible for coordinating the projects and participants, was mentioned as a way to improve institutional cooperation and to "get to know who is on the other side of the email exchanges". **Partnership could be built more around the partners' administrative staff, those who are responsible on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis for following up the projects, and less on the participants themselves.** This may further facilitate relations where project managers can discuss and reflect on challenges and lopsided relations occurring in the partnership formation.

While Norec exchange projects are different to mainstream development aid, they share and draw on the same partnership concept. There is also a potential in thinking anew about the Norec model, especially about a partnership concept that is not so closely linked to conventional aid. The question of how to manage partnerships and power relations is also a question of how to manage trust and the extent of entrusting partners with responsibilities. In its simplest form, the partnership concept implies transferring power from donor to recipient institutions so that they may operate as equal partners.

A well-functioning partnership requires mutual trust, but trust also necessitates flexibility at all stages of the partnership in the sense of accepting the diversity in how the partnership concept is being used. Norec is generally seen as a flexible partner, but how flexible is it willing to be with regard to entrusting its partnership with greater responsibilities? The partnership concept is practiced and implemented somewhere along the continuum between trust and control. How willing is Norec to loosen the reins, to be true to the partnership ideals, so that partners participate equally, without the structural asymmetry caused by the role of the coordinating partner and without Norec's oversight mechanisms?

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