

A Critical Analysis of North-South Educational Partnerships in Development

Contexts

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Introduction

This special issue of *Policy and Practice* was conceived with the intention of critically analysing the process of North-South educational partnerships in development contexts. Many Irish and Southern Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have, particularly in the past decade, invested heavily in educational partnerships for development, both in terms of finance and personnel, but also in intellectual and academic terms. However, there is a dearth of critical reflection and analysis on North-South educational partnerships, based on national and international experiences gleaned to date.

The importance of partnership was articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the eighth of which calls for the establishment of a global partnership for development. This prominence was later strengthened by the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* of 2005 and the *Accra Agenda for Action* (2008). Steve Kayizzi-Mugwera (1998: 220) has described partnership as the ‘new big idea’ in development discourse. Yet, this ‘new big idea’ has not been subject to the critical scrutiny commensurate with its standing.

Partnership as a burgeoning concept within both educational and research institutes has been generally heralded as having the potential to bring reciprocal benefits and mutual rewards to all parties involved in the process. Yet such examinations of the practice rarely involve an

exploration of what ‘partnership’ actually entails, signifies and implies. In fact, so arbitrarily is the term ‘partnership’ utilised that its meaning is in danger of becoming undermined to the point of banality. The term ‘partnership’ has been used to describe a multitude of diverse collaborative activities, and has come to be used interchangeably with terms such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘link’ (Africa Unit, 2010: 9). In reality, the ubiquity with which ‘partnership’ is invoked means that virtually any relationship between educational institutions, regardless of its scope, has come to be described thus.

The underlying aim behind this issue of *Policy and Practice*, therefore, is to bring together Irish and international experts in the area of educational partnerships in a collective effort to initiate a critical review of such partnerships and to consider how future planning and policy decisions, methods and performances, both nationally and internationally, might be improved in these fields. Concomitantly, this issue sets out to examine ancillary topics such as the principles of partnership, partnerships in practice, policy perspectives on North-South educational partnerships, and how an analysis of the above could inform future collaborative projects in the area of educational partnerships.

What is partnership?

As outlined in the Africa Unit’s guide to good practice in educational partnerships (2010), the paradigm and discourse of partnership has, over recent decades, become dominant in the world of development cooperation as a reaction against the ‘former’ power asymmetry between North and South. This has resulted in a shift in perspective within development from the notions of

‘external imposition’ and ‘prescription’ to ‘partnerships’ in development cooperation. However, even after this shift has occurred, most of the educational partnerships undertaken posited a one-way flow of ‘development knowledge’ which reflects the dominance of Western models of development (Africa Unit, 2010).

The concept of partnership, and particularly institutional partnership between educational and research establishments, is inherently complex and multifaceted. Indeed, the difficulty of defining what partnership entails in these contexts remains virtually elusive. There exists a high degree of normative or aspirational language to describe what partnership ought to entail, e.g. partnership should be based on ‘shared interests’ and ‘mutual vision’; but how these interests are manifested may merely serve to exacerbate prevailing asymmetries in terms of power, resources and capacities among the partners.

Former Senegalese president, Abdou Diouf outlined his own normative vision of what educational partnerships ought to entail in a 1997 address to the Association for the Development of Education in Africa. He stated that:

“[T]he type of partnership we should promote cannot be founded on a vertical relationship based on authority, constraint, the imposition of an imbalance of power, substituted sovereignty and the transportation of models, or... paternalism and condescension. Instead, it should be founded on conditions such as authentic dialogue in a horizontal relationship in which the actors recognise each other as equals and participate in an exchange considered mutually useful and enriching by both parties” (cited in Boak and Ndaruhutse, 2011: 24).

Mindful of Diouf's assertion, it may be salutatory to examine the respective motivations of those undertaking the educational partnership process. For instance, Jeanette Kuder (2005), writing on the partnership process between educational institutes in the United Kingdom and Tanzania, opines that the terms 'partnership' and 'ownership' have been over-emphasised by governments and donors, 'perhaps to hide the sense that a great deal of governance power is shifting in favour of donors and international agendas' (Kuder, 2005: 173). She continues by stating that this practice 'obscures the hard fact that un-elected non-Tanzanians are increasingly participating in the governance spaces and activities of making public sector policy decisions on behalf of Tanzanians' (Kuder, 2005: *ibid*). Elsewhere, Kuder stresses that international development targets 'comprise a governance system that intrinsically advances the participation of non-nationals in the process of domestic public policy formulation, a participation that is often actively promoted - and hidden - by the term "partnership"' (Kuder, 2005: 168).

While Kuder's analysis may, in some sectors, be dismissed as a cynical interpretation of the process, it should serve to highlight that the motivations governing involvement in educational partnerships often go far beyond the ostensibly benevolent reasons that some educational institutes proffer as explanations for their participation. Educational partnerships are often linked in to particular institutes' internationalisation strategies and serve as a mechanism for joint research opportunities. Indeed, as Kenneth King (2008: 1) stresses, 'partnership is no longer a choice for Northern researchers wanting to work in the developing world; it has become a condition of doing research in the South'. Partnerships, therefore, not only provide opportunities in terms of funding and access to resources, but they can also enhance the continuing professional development and training of staff in educational institutes.

Partnership and Development Education

One of the more salient definitions of partnership emanates from the Africa Unit (2010), which suggests that partnership, in the context of educational and research institutes, could be described as:

“A dynamic collaborative process between educational institutions that brings mutual though not necessarily symmetrical benefits to the parties engaged in the partnership. Partners share ownership of the projects. Their relationship is based on respect, trust, transparency and reciprocity. They understand each other’s cultural and working environment. Decisions are taken jointly after real negotiations take place between the partners. Each partner is open and clear about what they are bringing to the partnership and what their expectations are from it. Successful partnerships tend to change and evolve over time” (Africa Unit, 2010: 18).

A cursory examination of such a definition may prompt questions about the relevance of North-South educational partnerships to the scope and coverage of a review whose primary remit is development education. Fiona Baily and Anne Dolan (2011) may provide a satisfactory answer to this quandary as they have detailed how development education has much to offer the concept of educational partnerships in terms of the former’s process, action component and conceptual framework. Additionally, development educators have recognised facilitation and inter-cultural skills as effective mechanisms for dealing with the negotiation of power relations. This is important in terms of a critical assessment of educational partnerships, they argue,

because in order to move beyond the often vacuous rhetoric of ‘partnership’, it is imperative that partners openly address the issue of power in terms of ownership, decision-making, funding, planning and evaluation (Baily and Dolan, 2011). As Jennifer Birkenhoff (2002) declares, the intrinsic power relations in international development make it impossible to exclude power and power relations from partnership discourse and practice.

Furthermore, while partnerships are theoretically committed to collaborative relationships predicated on reciprocity and mutuality, this is far from the case in reality. Partnership processes could therefore benefit from adopting some of the systems of intercultural and development education in order to clarify expectations, assist in the creation of greater levels of mutuality, and develop basic cross-cultural communication.

Use of the term ‘North-South’

The term ‘North-South’ when applied in the context of ‘North-South’ educational partnerships is not utilised to delineate a strict geographical divide between countries and regions North and South of the Equator. Given that most of what we conceptualise as ‘The South’ lies geographically North of the Equator, e.g. much of sub-Saharan Africa; and that highly-industrialised countries such as Australia and New Zealand are located near to or below the Tropic of Capricorn, it would be simplistic to cast the great disparities in wealth and development as a quasi-Manichean struggle between two separate geographically-based polarities. Indeed, the use of binary terms such as ‘North’ and ‘South’ can be extremely problematic and lead to over-simplifications in the arena of educational partnerships and other related domains. In their Focus article for this issue of *Policy and Practice*, Fran Martin and Lynne Wyness seek to overcome this particular roadblock by emphasising how the terms ‘North’

and 'South' have a variety of meanings depending on the context in which they are used. For Martin and Wyness, therefore, both terms are used to represent a spatial distinction between countries that are globally located in the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

Use of dualistic language such as 'North' and 'South' should not blind us to the internal dynamics and disparities within the countries of the 'global North'. In this context, it is salutatory to consider the words of Fiona Beals in her Viewpoint article which draws attention to many of the problems encountered in the use of labelling peoples as emanating from the 'North' or 'South'. She declares that the Children's Commissioner of New Zealand found that 25 percent of children in that country live in extreme poverty, yet such children do not fit in to the 'majority/minority' world or North/South narrative as devised by development educators. Similarly, she says that while working with a group of Maori academics on a development education resource for the UK, the group were confused as the label 'North' had never featured in their cognitive framing of Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand). As she later states presciently, 'the classroom (both formal and informal) is a contested and political space, and the language of labelling, coupled with the art of political correctness, often creates confusion for educators as those constructing development education resources jostle for dominance in terminology and change language without consultation'.

Introducing Articles in Issue 16

Some of the more acerbic readers of this issue might pinpoint that each article is composed by a member or members of only one of the institutional partners involved in the North-South partnerships featured in this issue of *Policy and Practice*. Although such a discrepancy was

certainly not a deliberate ploy on behalf of any of the researchers or editors, it is perhaps indicative of how the partnership process in North-South educational contexts can, on occasion, be driven more forcefully and led by a single institutional partner, rather than being an egalitarian practice of equal input guided by mutual collaboration with reciprocal benefits for all the partners involved.

In the first of the Focus articles in this review, Fran Martin and Lynne Wyness present the findings of one strand of a three-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project which focused on the nature and development of two educational partnerships (involving organisations in Gambia and India) with a view to understanding the context they provide for annual study visits to India by UK student teachers, and bi-annual study visits for UK teachers to The Gambia. Martin and Wyness note that their intention was to map patterns across the two cases under review, and to relate the similarities and differences between them to their specific contexts. Their research intended to address gaps in the knowledge about whether study visits framed in a long-term global partnership lead to more meaningful and long-lasting changes in perceptions about what Edward Said termed the ‘Other’.

Their paper outlines how there has been a precipitous rise in the number of educational organisations developing North-South partnerships as a result of government education policy in the UK since 2000. Such partnerships and study visits, they maintain, are framed at a policy level within a neo-liberal discourse, which is evident in the economic goal of maintaining the UK’s position on the world stage. Using aspects of post-colonial theory to inform the research design and methods, Martin and Wyness also sought to identify and explore innovative

participatory approaches to research between the global North and South, by working with the idea of 'Third space'.

Highlighting the possibility of potential bias from their own perspective as Western academics, Martin and Wyness nevertheless stress that the two organisations involved in one of the studies (Tide and NEA), from the outset discussed a shared goal of working together in ways that were underpinned by principles of mutuality, reciprocity and equality (themselves contested terms). The partnership contained an explicit focus on what ethical engagement constitutes in the context of a North-South partnership, and both parties were committed to work in ways which challenged what the authors term 'the neo-liberal, donor-recipient patterns of relating which are common to many North-South educational partnerships'. Mutual learning was central to the Tide-NEA partnership, as such learning was perceived to be an alternative way of working and relating between the global North and South, and a contrast to more stereotypical media portrayals of that binary relationship. Stressing the fundamental importance of the intercultural encounter, the authors conclude that so often in partnerships the 'Other' is unwittingly positioned as an object of study, thus recreating aspects of the colonial mission and thereby doing little to support the development of ethical relationships which are necessary in achieving deeper intercultural understanding.

Gerard McCann's article examines the potential role for higher education institutes in micro-development strategies which aim to contribute to the generation of pro-poor economic growth and quality employment. He outlines how neo-functionalist mechanisms for integrating peripheral economies within the global market system are wholly inadequate in empowering local communities. Instead, by taking a broad survey of policy and practice, he looks at alternative models of poverty alleviation, focusing on community-sourced initiatives and

emphasises the potential role of community-linked institutions, such as universities, in providing a hub for micro-economic development in marginalised areas. Stressing that actions should be consensual and start with the beneficiaries before working upwards to intra-state and transnational actors, he states that micro-development can provide a mechanism to tailor investment and partnership in an empowering, regionally-based and socially-sensitive manner. Universities, he asserts, have a potential in micro-development support because of their proximity to communities that are attracted to this model of development and because of the resources that can be tapped into to stimulate local economic activity.

Peter McEvoy examines past and current experiences of higher education partnership approaches within the wider context of development co-operation with Africa. His article details the changes that have occurred in the arena of higher education and development and how Ireland's stance on these issues has altered as a result. He provides two case profiles, separated by an interval of over thirty years, to demonstrate how the interface between higher education and development assistance has evolved over this time. The two case studies in question, Higher Education for Development Cooperation (HEDCO) and the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP), show how Irish government support to higher education has been targeted and how it has changed significantly since the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the HEDCO era, assistance was focused predominantly on strengthening undergraduate teaching capacity, while recently the emphasis has shifted to graduate training, continuing professional development and strengthening research capacity.

McEvoy states that future aid programming should incorporate higher education and research capacity support as an integral feature within the broader aid effectiveness framework. Additionally, he asserts that Ireland's contribution in this arena should inform, and be informed

by, shared intelligence among like-minded donors about what constitutes good practice. He concludes by stressing that nurturing institutional partnerships of medium-to-long-term duration should be central to a strategy for harnessing higher education and research in the service of development.

Jonathan Harle's article, which reflects on policy, partnerships and politics with regard to the strengthening of research in African universities, attempts to set partnership initiatives in the wider context of African higher education policy and funding. While Harle does not set out with the intention of interrogating the success (or lack thereof) of partnerships, or to problematize the idea of partnership itself, he does attempt to explore some dimensions of research capacity, an area to which partnership is often applied, and to locate this within wider debates. He shows that while educational partnerships will continue to play an important role in enabling African academics and their respective institutions to rebuild and re-energise their research departments, partnerships also bring with them normative ideas which in themselves pose new challenges. Concomitantly, as their engagement in international educational partnerships grows, African universities are becoming embroiled in debates and agendas determined by and for Northern higher education systems, which are not only substantially better resourced, but also respond to different social, economic and political demands and ideas.

This issue also contains two Perspectives pieces by Ronaldo Munck and John Oliphant respectively. Munck tackles the issue of Futures-oriented development research by focusing on a foresight exercise undertaken under the auspices of the IAP. Munck argues that the Foresight approach and methodology can provide a useful contribution to development research, particularly if it is genuinely partnership-based. Such a partnership-based approach can, he maintains, not only encourage dialogue across disciplines, but could also help to bridge the

divide between researchers, practitioners and policy makers by providing a space for long-term thinking and visualisation. Additionally, the Foresight approach could assist in empowering Southern-driven research agendas and help to harness global development resources within higher education and research institutes. Nevertheless, he also cautions that Foresight could readily become yet another top-down ‘solution’ to development issues based upon the perceived superior knowledge of some of the institutional partners.

An assessment of international collaborative learning by Susan Cozzens and other researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Cozzens et al, 2011) found that, despite the increase in international research collaboration in recent decades, there is a dearth of focus in relation to the global ‘South’. Indeed much of the research in this area utilises Immanuel Wallerstein’s worlds systems framework, visualising the world as a system of cores and peripheries linked to each other by a network of unequal economic exchanges, characterised by inequality in terms of resources and capacity, in which such lack of resources, opportunities and information can be surmounted by collaboration with researchers in ‘core’ states. Given this dearth of focus on the partnership process in the global ‘South’, it is imperative for the purposes of this issue of *Policy and Practice* that a ‘Southern’ perspective be articulated.

John Oliphant of the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) in Maseru provides a critical examination of his institution’s experience in a partnership based at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland, known as the Centre for Global Development through Education (CGDE). This partnership also involved 13 Irish third level institutions, one Ugandan teacher education institution, as well as the ministries of education in Uganda and Lesotho respectively. Oliphant finds that this partnership was one of the few meaningful ones embarked upon by the LCE,

though not one bereft of difficulties. He emphasises how the partnership, while demand-driven, was weak in terms of planning for long-term sustainability and that comparatively little attention was paid to ancillary issues such as enhancing cooperation among the Southern partners in the process. Nevertheless, the partnership did engender a strong sense of ownership, responsibility and mutual belonging among its members, and could help to provide a template for how partnering for development with the South can be conceptualised, structured and managed.

As highlighted earlier, Fiona Beals's Viewpoint article explores the implications of development labels such as North/South in the Aotearoa / New Zealand education system. She argues that Aotearoa's discursive position within the 'North' has ramifications in the ways that power, relationship and identity are understood and played out in educational settings. Labels such as 'minority' and 'majority' have only exacerbated the prevalent confusion and have resulted in a disempowering of the players in the educational process.

Conclusion

As resources allocated to the development sector are beholden to ever-greater scrutiny, a critical analysis of a central tenet of overseas development assistance, namely North-South educational partnerships, is necessary in order to demonstrate how collaborative teaching, learning and research at international level can be ameliorated in the arenas of policy and practice. The conceptualisation and practice inherent in educational partnerships raise many questions regarding the medium to long-term sustainability of the partnership process, the asymmetrical benefits which tend to accrue to partners from the process, the difficulties inherent in monitoring and evaluation, and the efficacy (or otherwise) of investing in educational partnerships. This

collection of articles can be a starting point in the debate concerning the relevance and effectiveness of such partnerships and whether they can become self-sustaining, self-financing and mutually beneficial entities for participants in the medium to long-term.

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