

NGOs, Partnership and Accountability – A Case Study of ActionAid and its Local NGO Partners in Nigeria

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Abstract:

The NGO sector has been widely criticised for their failure to demonstrate the ideals of partnership in practice, especially between INGOs and their local NGOs in developing countries. Previous literature asserts that conventional partnership often fails to demonstrate its ideals in practice because INGO donors wield enormous power and influence over their local NGO partners because of their control over funds. Using face-to-face interview, focus group discussion, participant observation and documents analysis, firstly, this paper investigates whether ActionAid Nigeria and its local NGO partners share a common understanding of the ideals of partnership? Secondly, it investigates whether these partnership ideals are actually demonstrated in practice. Empirical observations have shown that there is a common understanding of the key principles and values of partnership between the INGO donor and their local partners in Nigeria. In addition, the findings suggests ActionAid Nigeria and its local NGO partners are striving to demonstrate these ideals in practice. Also, the study suggests that the INGO donor and its local NGO partners are willing to promote mutual accountability in their partnership engagements to promote concrete changes in the lives of the beneficiaries of their work.

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1. Introduction

Local partnership between International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) with NGOs from the developing countries has become a necessity in the delivery of development aid (Brehm et al. 2004; Macpherson, 2009). It is argued that the ideals of partnership are often poorly demonstrated in reality within the engagement between NGOs (INGOs and local NGOs in developing countries) but has become a slogan by these organisations to describe a wide range of relationship (Baaz, 2005; Elbers and Schulpen, 2013). Conventional NGO partnerships often masks hidden motives or a subtle way of imposing the views, interpretation, and agenda of INGOs (often act as donors in this regard) on their local NGO partners (Brehm et al. 2004; Macpherson, 2009; Elbers, 2012; Fowler, 2015). This tilts accountability upward to INGOs/donors rather than a mutual or downward accountability to their local NGO partners. According to Fowler (2015), the idea of partnership concerned with mutuality and solidarity is yet to happen at a meaningful scale, and less likely to be achieved in the future. However, Elbers (2012) suggests that rights-based NGOs are experiencing effective or genuine partnership between them by looking beyond vertical donor-recipient relationship based on funding arrangements, which reduces the imbalance of power and influence between INGO donors and their local NGO partners (see also Brehm et al. 2004). An effective partnership can be defined as a joint commitment to long-term engagement, shared responsibility to achieve desired outcomes, reciprocal obligations, equality, mutual accountability and balance of power between partners, with focus

on promoting tangible improvements in the lives of the beneficiaries of aid (Hoyer, 1994; Fowler 2000; Elbers, 2012). An effective partnerships between INGO donors and local NGOs is essential to promoting beneficial social changes in the lives of the beneficiaries of development aid in developing countries (Baaz, 2005; Bond, 2015; Fowler, 2015).

This is an exploratory research based on a case study of the partnership between ActionAid Nigeria (henceforth AAN) and its local NGO partners in the country. Using participant observations, face-to-face interview, focus group discussion and documents analysis, the study examines how key individuals describe the ideals of partnership and their experience of its demonstration in reality. This study has two main objectives: firstly, to investigate whether the ActionAid and its local NGO partners in Nigeria share a common understanding of an ideal partnership? Having a common understanding of partnership between organisations working together is deemed to be crucial to achieving effective engagement among them. Following on from this, secondly, it investigates whether some of the key ideals of partnership are actually demonstrated in practice?

This study intends to contribute to the literature on the current understanding of partnership between these organisations and on the necessity of effective partnership between INGO donors and their local NGO partners in the global South (Fowler, 2015). This paper suggests that an effective partnership between NGOs possibly will empowers local NGOs to

have more influence on the development agenda and processes as well as promote downward accountability of INGO donors to local partners. It is important to note that AAN, Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC³), and Centre for Community Empowerment and Poverty Eradication (CCEPE⁴) are committed to rights-based ideologies and claimed to premise their partnership arrangements on the values of the rights-based approach with a focus on promoting beneficial social changes in Nigeria by transforming power relationships in every community they work.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the next part (section 2) provides a conceptual framework of the key works on NGOs and partnership among them. This section also includes a brief overview of accountability in NGO partnership, as this has been an integral component of this research. Empirical observations from AAN and its partnership practice with local NGOs namely CCEPE and JDPC are outlined in section-3. This is followed by a critical analysis (section -4) and conclusion (section – 5). The findings of this study suggest that there is a common understanding of the key principles and values of partnership between the AAN and its local NGO partners as the AAN aspires towards building an honest and balanced relationship with its local NGO partners that focuses on the exchange of

³ Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) is another national NGO founded and mainly funded by the Catholic Church,. Each Catholic Diocese in Nigeria has its local JDPC and this study focuses on partnership between AAN and Ondo State JDPC.

⁴ Centre for Community Empowerment and Poverty Eradication (CCEPE) is a local NGO based in Ilorin, Kwara State in the North-Central Nigeria.

ideas in practice. However, there are disagreements on some aspects of partnership.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section offers a brief overview of some of the key scholarly works on NGO proliferation; their partnerships and accountability (within partnership) in order to provide a conceptual framework for this paper. The section starts with NGOs and later move on to partnership and accountability.

Since 1990, the number of NGOs in aid recipient countries have increased in great numbers leading some scholars to describe this phenomenon as NGO boom (Devine 2003) or mushrooming of NGOs (Howell and Pearce, 2002). Nigeria also witnessed the proliferation of NGOs in recent times. This was mainly due to the failure of the state to deliver goods and services as well as because of increased flows of foreign aid (Smith, 2010; Lampert, 2012). While rapid increase in numbers led the NGOs to engage in myriad development programmes, some critics (such as Lampert, 2012; Smith, 2010; Hearn, 2007) argue that this has also contributed to popular complaint about corruption in the country's development sector. As majority of the NGOs are being established and run by corrupt elite turned local development activists or workers. This was primarily in response to

the awareness that donor money was or are available to be exploited⁵ through an appropriate mechanism and setting up NGOs seem to have worked well in that endeavour. Smith (2010) reveals that many Nigerians have negative perceptions about these NGOs and coined several critical yet insightful acronyms for them⁶ (see also Vakil, 1997). For example, they call some NGOs as GONGO (government organised NGOs) – these are NGOs set-up by ruling elites and run by their cronies. Private sector employee-established NGOs are often called IONGOs (individual organised NGOs) or BONGOs (Bank-organised NGOs). NGOs established by the proprietor who lives in the capital (Lagos) and claims to be carrying out development works in distant rural communities are often called LABONGOs (Lagos-based NGOs). PONGOs (Project-Oriented NGOs) are NGOs that are often physically non-existent but send out proposals to seek funds without having office, staff and ongoing project(s) under implementation. There are also ENGOs (email-NGOs) whose activities are only visible through emails

With the proliferation of national level NGOs in many developing countries, a new trend has emerged within the development landscape where INGOs are becoming new donors, especially at regional or national levels (Richey and Ponte, 2014; BOND, 2015; Bebbington et. al., 2007). As the NGO sector has grown, INGOs have gradually moved away from directly

⁵ While such a view is not very uncommon in Nigeria, we the authors, however, would like to state clearly that this also represents a somewhat oversimplified criticism. As, in our experience, it is also clear that there are a good number of examples where statement of such kind would be incorrect.

⁶ These acronyms highlight that NGOs are not a homogenous category. Different NGOs have variable interests which may have diverse implications in realising the theoretical ideals of partnership in practice

implementing projects by themselves and become a source of funding for many local NGOs for implementing assorted development projects. Hence as a necessity, INGOs are increasingly investing in local partnership and alliance building with local NGOs often to comply with official donors' requirements, enhance their legitimacy, effectiveness and value-for-money as well as to promote global justice (Smith, 2010; Fowlers, 2015; BOND, 2015, p.12). For global justice, local partnership is critical to build the capacity of local organisations in the global south to engage in research, policy, advocacy and make their government accountable, especially where efforts by international actors may be politically or culturally challenging to ensure no one is left behind (BOND 2016). For effectiveness, partnership is necessary because local NGOs in the global south are in the best position to provide essential services to people in hard to reach through other actors (BOND, 2016). This trend of increased collaboration between INGOs and local NGOs has led to the emergence of a large volume of literature on partnership, which is a key focus of this paper.

The concept of partnership emerged during the 1980s and 1990s in response to the criticism that, in development, the power of those with money enable them to impose their agenda on the recipients of aid (Wallace and Chapman, 2003), especially local organisations in developing countries (Hamilton, 2000). Against the backdrop of such critical perception, the term 'partnership' conjures a positive reaction, implying a desirable collaboration among the partners involved in it (Brinkerhoff, 2002). This, theoretically

speaking, represents a relationship based on 'mutuality; clearly defined expectations, rights and responsibilities; accountability and transparency bound together by the elusive principles of trust, respect, integrity, credibility and ownership' (Brehm et al. 2004, p. 21). Additionally, scholars and practising organisations have identified a range of components those, in their views, are also very important for a 'successful' partnership. These components generally include:

- i) mutual trust, complementary strengths, reciprocal accountability, joint decision-making and a two-way exchange of information (Postma, 1994, p. 451)
- ii) clearly articulated goals, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, performance indicators and mechanisms to measure and monitor performance, specific delineation of responsibilities and a process for adjudicating disputes (USAID, 1997, p. 1)
- iii) shared perceptions and a notion of mutuality (Tandon, 1990: 98)
- iv) mutual support and constructive advocacy (Murphy, 1991, p. 179); and
- v) transparency with regards to financial matters, long-term commitment to working together where the role of each partner are being recognised accordingly (Campbell, 1988, p. 10).

As a result, the practice of INGO-local NGO partnerships has become an integral part of contemporary development debate (Brehm, et al., 2004) which is also visible in several high-level summits or forums. For example,

the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005, p. 3-8) emphasises a commitment to mutuality between development partners in the area of accountability for development outcome (implying that partners have valuable contribution to make as equal and autonomous organisations). Accra Agenda for Action (OECD, 2008) suggests that development actors from the global South are expected to take ownership of development policies and coordinate their implementations. In addition, donors including INGOs are expected to effectively and transparently align or harmonise their funds with local development actors' strategies, institutions and procedures. An effective and inclusive partnership should, therefore "fully harness the energy, skills and experience of all development actors – bilateral and multilateral donors, global funds, civil society organisations (CSOs), and the private sector" (OECD, 2005, p. 17).

Moreover, the Busan 4th High-Level Forum (OECD: 2011) recognises that partnership between development actors should be inclusive based on shared principles, common goals, and distinct commitments from all stakeholders especially from the local actors toward development effectiveness. Therefore, as a concept, partnership between organisations means cooperation for a specific purpose in order to achieve common objectives. In theory, partnership between NGOs should be based on equality, trust and reciprocity in ways that promote the autonomy and organisational capacity of their local NGOs partners (Elbers, 2012; OECD, 2011, p. 3). But in practice, often partnerships may take a conventional

sub-contractual approach⁷ highlighting an unequal marriage between aid donors and recipients (Brehm et al. 2004; Green, 2015; BOND, 2015; Van Brabant, 2016).

This can be discerned from the above that accountability constitutes an important element of partnership as described through the aspects of trust, respect, equality, mutuality, transparency. Literature on effective partnerships assert that INGOs, in theory, should be accountable to their local partners as a duty or right, while they can also demand the same from local NGOs and other partners (William and Taylor, 2009; Szporluk, 2009; ActionAid, 2010). For Ljungman (2004, p. 12), accountability means that rights imply duties and duties demand answerability or responsibility. Accountability is the act of being responsible to stakeholders including to local beneficiaries such as the poor and their organisations, something Ebrahim (2006) has termed as downward accountability. Accountability consists of a vibrant relationship or exchanges between organisations in different positions and should be a continuous process in which the local NGOs and other development actors with less power and resources are to be empowered to demand answerability from INGOs and donors, particularly on the development plans, policies and processes⁸ (see also Eyben, 2003).

⁷ Elbers and Schulpen, (2013) insist that INGO-local NGO partnerships are often unequal because the former are often advantaged due to their access to funds and in most cases the latter act as sub-contractors.

⁸ There are increasing calls for INGOs to scale-up accountability to the beneficiaries of their work, particularly to their local NGO partners (Naidoo, 2004; Kilby 2006; Fowlers, 2015; BOND, 2015).

Accountability in this sense entails how development assistance should be utilised, what results are expected, and how effective the results can be in promoting tangible changes in the ways aid is delivered with a growing demand for these in both developed and developing nations. Kilby (2006) argues that downward accountability of INGOs to the beneficiaries and local partners influences the effectiveness of the process of empowerment for the poor people and the excluded communities in the developing countries. Bradley (2007) argues that viable mechanisms by INGOs to promote downward accountability to local NGO actors and their communities can improve the impacts of their engagements in the developing countries. Therefore, INGOs' accountability to their local partners can have a significant impact on the partnership with their local partners (Brehm et al. 2004; Szporluk, 2009; Crack, 2013; Green, 2015). In this context, INGOs are expected not only to be accountable to their donors (upward accountability) but it is also a requirement to be committed to enhancing their accountability to local NGOs and the beneficiaries of development aid: an important component of an effective partnership among or between NGOs.

Notwithstanding, critics argue that partnerships between NGOs in practice often deviate from its theoretical ideals (Fowler, 2015; Elbers and Schulpen, 2013). One of the prominent reasons is that partnership between NGOs varies widely: NGO partnership can be founded on a range of

principles, from solidarity, mutuality and institutional values or objectives to narrower funding-based donor-recipient relationships (Brehm et al., 2004). Therefore, partnership may mean different things to different organisations which has turned into a buzzword in the aid sector (Harriss, 2000). Today in the development sector, everybody wants to partner with everyone else on everything, rather than a strategic alliance that should involve the sharing of resources and responsibilities to achieve common goals (Fowler, 2000; Brehm et al. 2004). However, given that the ideational motivation for forming partnership between or among the NGOs is to combine different attributes and strengths of different organisations, perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that different organisations involved in this process will always have exactly the same view of how the relationship should be structured. In addition, Banks and Hulme, (2014) argue that partnerships between INGOs and local NGOs from developing countries are often underpinned by power relationship that is tilted in favour of the former because of their position as funders. Moreover, partnerships among the donors, INGOs and local NGOs are often influenced by the changing conditionality, priority, objective and agenda of the donors (Wallace et al.2006).

Furthermore, various literature argue that partnership between INGOs and local NGOs often take a top-down structure, with no local ownership and is driven more towards control instead of trust, and dependence instead of autonomy, in ways that undermine the theoretical ideals of partnership

(Baaz, 2005; Elbers and Schulpen, 2013; Fowler, 2015). For Szporluk (2009), the increasing dependency of local NGOs, especially based on the conventional funding mechanism, can prevent the INGOs from being accountable to the poor and to the communities they work in. This skews accountability upward to the donors rather than a downward or mutual accountability to all partners. This is not only detrimental to achieving effective partnership but also negative for achieving common objectives of partner organisations.

Moreover, Baaz (2005) argues that partnership could be employed as a political slogan to mask other motives such as the demand to promote the effectiveness and efficiency of development aid. As local NGOs are often framed as incompetent, corrupt and cannot be trusted to deliver the desired development. Therefore, Crewe and Harrison (1995:188) insist that in conventional partnerships there remains a yawning chasm between the stated goals and its practices and outcomes. As such, ambitious aims of partnership often appear disappointingly empty. The apparent inability of the local NGOs to generate sufficient funding for their work and the competition for scarce resources from funding agencies is also a thorny issue in realising the promises of partnership (Elbers, 2012). Nevertheless, some scholars believe that partnership between NGOs adds value to the development sector by empowering the recipient of development aid (Gready, 2008; Elbers and Schulpen, 2013). For example, recent studies suggest that local organisations in developing countries are now exploring

their constituencies to raise funds thus limiting their dependency on external funding (Olawoore, 2017). In addition, many rights-based NGOs are being selective on which INGO donors they have a financial relationship with, which can increase their influence and power in their engagement with their foreign partners and promote an effective partnership between them (Elbers, 2012; Olawoore, 2017). Therefore, Elbers (2012) suggests that it is possible that rights-based NGOs in partnership are experiencing effective engagement among them because they focus less on financial resources in their relationships.

In understanding how theoretical ideals of NGO partnership is being realised in practice, it is important to bear in mind that an effective partnership requires INGOs to be transparent in agenda setting, be conscious of their power as donors, and promote mutual accountability in their relationship with their local NGO partners (Offenheiser and Holcombe, 2003; Elbers and Schulpen, 2013). The notion of NGO partnership, at least in theory, should not just focuses on reversing the power relations between partner organisations (Eyben, 2006) by reversing the influence of the powerful partner(s). It is should also challenges the simplistic dichotomy of donor (being powerful and more authoritative) and recipient (with less power and authority). According to Fowler (2015, p. 1), the notion of partnership as mutuality and solidarity is yet to happen at a meaningful scale. Although there are differences in the ways different partners see and narrate partnership in extant literature, this study, however, offers new

evidence describing the existence of a common understanding on the key principles and values between the ActionAid Nigeria (AAN) and their local partners⁹ as delineated in the next section. This paper also argues that it is important to glean what are the points of contentions¹⁰ and how they shed new light on the existing scholarship of NGO partnership.

Research Method and Data Analysis

This research was carried out in two states (Kwara and Ondo) and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja in Nigeria from September to November 2014. Nigeria provides an interesting case study to explore more about NGO partnership as it is the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa and a major political and economic player in the region. In addition to having many more NGOs working on different issues in recent years, Nigeria represents an example of 'resource cursed' nation with a vast reserve of natural resources. However, there are also high rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, mainly because of ethno-religious violence and structural inequalities in access to resources and opportunities among its population (Ushie, 2012, p. 1). Such a condition provided the platform for numerous INGOs and local NGOs to work on various development issues¹¹. Also, the two states selected in this study represent different

⁹ This is cognate to the first objective of this study whether AAN and its partner NGOs in Nigeria share a common understanding of partnership.

¹⁰ This coheres with the second objective of this study in revealing in this particular case whether theoretical ideals of partnership are manifested in practice.

¹¹ While the actual numbers of NGOs and INGOs working in Nigeria are slippery, but it is estimated that by 2009 there were many thousands involving millions of paid staff as well as volunteers (Dibie and Dibie cited in Smith, 2010).

contexts: Ondo state is located in the South-Western region of Nigeria and witness an extensive presence of ActionAid and other INGOs. Kwara state is located at the North-Central region of the country, where ActionAid have many of its programme. The lead author speaks the local language of the people for both location and there was no need to hire an interpreter; the researcher gathered the information first-hand without the distortions that may occur when a third party is used as an interpreter. ActionAid is based in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, where the research engaged with the INGO officials.

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. In total, seven face-to-face interviews, and seven focus group interviews with staff members of AAN, CCEPE, and JDPC were convened for this study. Participants in the focus group discussions were between 8-12. AAN has a long-standing presence in Nigeria (since 1999) and has been involved in various development activities with many local organisations in all major cities and localities in Nigeria. Over the years, AAN has formed partnerships with many local NGOs. One of its condition for partnership with local NGOs is that local NGOs must have a close link with the people at the grass-roots or be based in the rural areas where a large number of poor people live based on its commitment to the philosophies of the rights-based approach. The philosophy of the rights-based approach emphasised the balance of power, accountability and free and meaningful participation in the decision-making processes between partners (Crawford and Andreassen, 2015).

Therefore, AAN claim that its partnership principles and engagements based on the values of a right based approach. For AAN, partnership is all about equality in a relationship, mutual respect, and mutual accountability those chime with the theoretical ideals discussed in section-2.

According to ActionAid's Action on Rights (2010), partnership signifies a way of building and strengthening a diverse, broad movement of organisations working together based on common values. Therefore, the rights-based approach determines their decisions to take care of how they deploy their power and influence as individuals and as an organisation with regard to their local NGO partners. The AAN expect its partners to share its values and principles because structural change can only happen when people stand together, hence they only work with organisations with similar values. JDPC is a major partner of AAN that claimed to have adopted the rights-based approach in carrying out their development activities and also claims to cater for all people that are in need within each diocesan jurisdiction, irrespective of religion, culture, race or gender based on justice and human dignity in promoting a just, safe and free environment. CCEPE was previously a local rights programme of AAN that later became autonomous NGO working with several local and international partners as well as governments on rights related issues. The AAN still remains CCEPE's main source for funds. The three organisations have a common belief in the implementation of the rights-based approach in conducting their development activities and have been working together as partners for

more than ten years in Nigeria. Considering their beliefs in an equal and balanced relationship based on their commitment to the ideology of the rights-based approach, this case study is relevant to examining if these organisations are indeed demonstrating the ideals of partnership in practice.

Additional data were collected through direct (but non-participating) observation of ActionAid Partnership Forum in 2014. Interviews were scheduled after directly approaching the AAN through a formal letter. This led to further access to other respondents – for example, the opportunity to attend the ActionAid Partnership Forum 2014, and meet with the Executive Directors of the CCEPE and JDPC. Other participants were contacted through snow-balling technique (contacts established from attending the Partnership Forum). Informed consents were obtained prior to conducting the face-to-face interviews and focus groups discussions. The participants (both for individual interviews and focus group discussions) selected from the INGO and local NGOs were mainly at management cadre of respective organisations. This was assumed that these individuals would be well versed in the policies and practices of their organisations. Most often they were directly involved in building and overseeing the partnership programme(s). It is important to recognise that this study is based on a limited set of data and different findings might be observed with different sets of NGOs and in a different context. It is also crucial to note that this is an exploratory study that is mainly based on the perceptions and opinions of the research participants.

Three main interview questions were employed in this study: first, what determines the choice of partners? Second, their understanding of an ideal partnership between NGOs? and third, their experience of partnership in practice was explored. These questions helped to frame respondents' perspective of NGO partnership both in theory and practice. Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analysed manually by coding and following emerging themes through using codebook, which assisted to capture repeated ideas and patterns¹². These were later subject to qualitative content analysis. These were coherent with the main research objectives and questions asked to the respondents and provided an in-depth understanding of respondents' experiences of partnership in practice (e.g. what influenced the processes and outcomes, the aspects of accountability in improving partnership, and funding ability or fundraising capacity and its implications in partnership). Throughout this paper, the occupational positions of the respondents have been used because they consented to it been used.

3. Partnership in Practice – A Nigerian Case Study

In this section, the understanding and practices of partnership are being examined from both an INGO and local NGOs' perspectives. It is observed that for some elements of key principles and values of partnership,

¹² The main emerging themes were notion of equality, accountability, respect, dominance, and mutual learning within partnership.

coherent with the first objective of this study, there is a common understanding between the AAN and their local partners. However, there are also competing narratives around some aspects of partnership reflective of the second objective of this study. These are evidenced below.

According to the Deputy Director of the AAN, partnerships with local NGOs are aimed to empower the poor and marginalised people. From an INGO perspective, she explains, partnership involves building solidarity to create a social movement for positive change. It is a process of identifying and teaming up with local actors, and bringing together their active agency and including other stakeholders in the development process. A broad overview of partnership representing the AAN's perspective can be perceived from her opening presentation at the ActionAid Partnership Forum 2014, where she states:

We believe in partnership with organisations that share similar values and vision. It is not a one-off exercise. One-off thing is not a partnership for us in ActionAid. Partnership is a dynamic process. It evolves, and, there is a process of transferring resources, not just money but ideas, skills, whatever it is that you [the local NGOs] have and that we also have. These could be employed for our joint learning to achieve what we have had in our dialogues and agreed on to do. We usually have a formal, not just a verbal agreement with our partners. We are very clear about obligations that guide our

relationship including the issues of financial management, deliverables, processes, programme documents, project objectives and the expected outcomes. Anything outside what I have stated here, we don't regard those as partnership.

A similar view was expressed by the AAN's Head of Partnership and Local Rights Programme or Conflict Support Programme. He sees partnership as a step to ensure that development should emphasise the interests of the people living in poverty, highlighting their values in human dignity in the delivery of aid. In addition, another member of Advocacy and Local Rights Programmes Unit of the AAN claimed that the real focus is increased conscientisation of people to have a bigger voice in setting out the development agenda and to demand their rights from appropriate duty-bearers.

According to ActionAid's Action on Rights toolkit (2010), their approach to partnership is to ensure close engagement with local actors and organisations as this seem to be the only way to deliver development effectively. The toolkit document also suggests that the status of funder or the recipient is not important, partnership is a relationship of trust, and an agreement to promote common objectives. Views represented by the senior officials of the AAN are congruent with some of the theoretical ideals of partnership such as mutual trust and respect, financial transparency, shared complementarity etc. (see section-2 for more details). This was

observed that top officials of local partner NGOs seem to share a similar understanding. For example, the Executive Director of the CCEPE claimed that partnership is a framework for transferring the knowledge to the people who should own development and make it clear that governments are responsible to fulfil their rights. This can be explained further in the words of a Programme Officer of CCEPE who claimed that their partnership is premised on the notion that if people's rights are fulfilled development will follow in an effective way providing a link between the ruled and the ruler. The Programme Officer of the CCEPE stated:

We only partner with organisations that share our common interests and aspirations, our vision, mission, goal and values. We value organisations that give results by making judicious use of available resources and possible impacts on the lives of the people. That is the relationship between us and ActionAid - we share common values and the goal of ending poverty in our communities. We believe in mutual respect and trust of our partners.

While there have been some common grounds on shared perception on mutuality and common goals, alternative narratives were also observed in this research. Such views were expressed by the representatives (mainly working at mid to senior level positions) in the partner NGOs. To some extent, this may highlight that perhaps there were some gaps between theory and practice but at the same time, this is indicative of a learning

mechanism from local partners that was in place. This was observed during ActionAid Partnership Forum 2014, where the AAN provided an opportunity for its local partners to assess their engagement in partnership for the previous year (based on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 was the highest and 1 was meant for the lowest score). The main aspects of this assessment were humility of AAN staff members, mutual respect, accountability, honesty and transparency, the courage of conviction, interdependence and solidarity. Representatives of partner NGOs were organised into three groups and they came up with mixed results. A representative from each group was chosen to present the result to the audience. One of those groups explained to the forum that group evaluation results were based on agreed values among the group members. They claimed that on the value of mutual respect, the group concluded some officials of AAN deserved to be scored zero, while some deserved hundred percent. In the words of the representative of that group:

Our reason is that, in ActionAid, you have some staff who really maintain these values: they are very humble and very engaging. On the other hand, some of your staff are very arrogant and they are not living out the values, no mutual respect, no humility in their engagement and your organisation needs to look into that. If indeed we are equal partners, we should work together towards achieving beneficial changes in our work in practice. We are not saying you should be a perfect organisation, but we agreed that some of your

members of staff need more training in dealing with partners and the grass-roots people.

Another group's representative stated:

On mutual respect and humility, we have scored your organisation a 3. Some of our group members even argued that we should probably give it a 2. However, on equity and justice, you stated that it is an equal opportunity for everyone irrespective of age, race or sexual orientation, HIV status and colour. Bearing this in mind, we frequently noticed that in the local communities when you come with the logo of ActionAid, it primarily targets the women, while the majority of men normally avoid such programmes. Most men in local communities claim that there is no point in participating in a programme sponsored by ActionAid since they have nothing to gain from your programmes because most projects are primarily for women. Therefore, they usually question the purpose of participating in these programmes. This contradicts the values of equity and gender equality, which makes our work difficult at the grass-roots.

Moving on from a broader understanding of partnership, this study also found contrasting and complementing views on accountability that, in many ways, shape the basis of partnership between the INGO and local NGOs in Nigeria. To illustrate, the Deputy Country Director of the AAN claimed that

sometimes differences of opinions regarding accountability and transparency have led to ending partnership with some local organisations. The AAN seemingly focuses on strengthening the transparency and accountability for themselves as well as the partner organisations to secure a long-term engagement and mutual benefits, as a member of Advocacy and Campaign Department from the AAN observed:

In our notion of partnership, different contexts demand a different approach and local complexities make it impossible to dictate local partners. We look at the capacity of partner NGOs and design an appropriate training programme to strengthen our engagements, particularly on the issues related to transparency and accountability. I mean when weaknesses are noticed; we only support our partners to assist them to take ownership of the development issues. In our experience, we achieve better outcomes when people themselves identify development needs and possible ways forward to address those needs. That is the basis of our partnership.

The Head of Partnership and Local Rights Programme or Conflict Support Programme of the AAN who coordinated the assessment of their engagement at the Partnership Forum stated that:

Because of the nature of what we do (such as working on policies, and the government), we cannot afford to have systems and processes that are not transparent and accountable. We must leave

our programmes open to everybody to take ownership of it. We need to ensure that our system should be able to withstand any searchlight. We must be able to understand this and continue to reflect on this in our work.

The Programme Officers of JDPC claimed that they also share similar views with the AAN. Their views were comprised of a strong conviction and commitment to redress the imbalances in relation to power, those are deemed to be inherent in traditional INGO-local NGO partnership due to different statuses of the partners. As one local NGO official claimed that their choice of INGO partner(s) depends on if they share common values. He asserted that the JDPC is a faith-based organisation established by the Catholic Church to promote justice and human dignity in every community they work. Therefore, they look for organisations that have a shared belief in those values. In the words of one Programme Officer of the JDPC:

Our choice of partners including foreign organisations depends on how our mission and vision are related to collaborating organisations. JDPC was established by the Catholic Church. This church has basic principles and we look for organisations that share these values. Once we come to terms regarding values and understanding of what partnership means we start to negotiate how we will work together for the benefit of the grass-roots people. We do not give room for our partners to dictate our actions and they cannot tamper with our

values and that has led to the end of partnerships with some organisation in the past.

While the above, again, manifest some agreements about the basis of partnership (ownership), balance of power (if one partner dictate over others), shared principle etc. competing narratives were also found about transparency and accountability in partnership. To illustrate, the Executive Director of the CCEPE (who represented one of the evaluation groups), challenged the inability of ActionAid to be more transparent and more participatory in their budgeting processes in a comment to back up the low rating of their assessment on mutual respect (see above). He argued that more transparency and participatory budgeting would help local partners to prepare their own budgets in line with what is available from the ActionAid as their main funder. To him, lack of control by the partner organisations in budgeting is synonymous to a lack of mutual respect for partners and contradictory to the stated principles of partnership. The Executive Director of the CCEPE, however, claimed that although ActionAid is their main funder, they do not think their relationship is dominated by one partner (the AAN). He insists that they collaborate with the INGO through their expertise stemming from the knowledge of the local context and close connections with the people in rural communities. He further claimed that there should be no room for superiority in partnership based on the values of equality and mutual respect between partners in development planning and processes. For him, when there is a gap in skills,

AAN has been supportive to bridge the knowledge gaps through various capacity building programmes and by designing development projects jointly.

This section demonstrates that based on the individual experiences there have been some broad consensus among the AAN and its local partners about mutual respect, accountability, shared values, common goals and ownership elements of NGO partnership. There have been some critical voices as well revealing how partnership is practiced but noticeably the officials of the local NGOs raised these and views representing the AAN have been consistently positive. The next section evaluates the views expressed in this section more critically focusing on the issues of power and (in)equality as described by the respondents.

4. Power and equality in Partnership within result-oriented development approach

Preceding section (section-3) highlights some tensions among the partners about unequal power and domination within existing practises of NGO partnerships. Empirical evidence presented above suggests that all parties seem to show some awareness on these issues but, at the same time, deny that these are extant in their relationships. In this section, further analyses are offered to investigate whether funding ability has had an influence in determining the nature of the partnership. Previous studies suggest that

partnership between INGOs and local NGOs are often tainted by the imbalance of power and ability to influence the local development process and agenda (see section-2). This can be gleaned from the view of the AAN's Head of Partnership and Local Rights Programme or Conflict Support Programme who claimed that even in a situation where funding plays a key part of the relationship, the values of partnership, however, can reduce the power imbalances that dominates conventional donor-recipient relationships. He insisted that the aspirations of the AAN to demonstrate its core values (one that can be influenced by a rights-based approach, see section-1 for more details) of partnership in practice provide the basis for challenging any perceived negative attitude from their staff that can skew power and influence in AAN's favour. She further asserted that once they identify their local partners, the organisation strives to have a shared understanding on various issues and ensures that they operate on the principle of mutual respect, not a master-servant relationship and funding ability does not confer an advantage to them. Moreover, the Deputy Country Director of the AAN also observed that they are under moral obligation to build the capacities of local actors for a free, active and meaningful participation in collaborative development projects. Complimenting with this view, the Impact Assessment and Shared Learning Manager from the JDPC stated:

Our relationship with ActionAid is based on equal rights in partnership. In partnership, there should not be, ideally, a partner

with greater influence or power than the other; we go there with equal power. With ActionAid we share mutual respect and accountability, solidarity with the poor as values in common and these are the driving forces of our partnership. Though ActionAid is our major funder we also offer many things into the partnership such as the reach within the state and rural community through our influence, our expertise and organisational capability.

It is argued that partnership based on equity and equality encourages local actors to explore and access locally available funds. As the Deputy Director of the JDPC asserted that declining development funding encouraged them to focus more on exploring locally available funds. They claimed that with the assistance of the AAN, it is yielding better outcomes because they often apply for funding together with ActionAid mainly to increase their capacity to do so in the future, which the JDPC and other local partners found as empowering¹³.

The principles and values of partnership as stated above, therefore in theory, have the potential to challenge conventional donor-recipient

¹³ Some of the AAN's local partners are membership-based organisations and have ways of raising funds from their members. For example, JDPC is a Catholic organisation and funded by the church in the dioceses. A participant from the intermediate organisation claimed that donations from the members of different Catholic Church in the area form the main source of funds for their work at the grass-roots, which compensated for the limited funding from foreign official and private international and local donors. He claimed that their access to alternative sources of funding enhance their power and influence in the engagements with ActionAid and their CBO partners.

relationships and influence of the INGOs because of their status as donors. Partnership based on shared values and equality can encourage downward accountability to local actors and hence can be emancipatory in the relationship between INGOs and local development actors. Downward accountability here perceived as a condition where INGOs' southern partners are empowered to speak up against the short-comings of their Northern partners or funders despite some sceptics argue that partnership between donor and recipient NGOs might be uneven (see section-2 for more information). This (downward accountability) represents a working relationship where local NGOs are genuinely listened to, where necessary actions are taken in a give and take scenario, and where there is evidence of learning through reflection for long-term improvement to tackle the problems. For instance, in the ActionAid Partnership Forum 2014, to demonstrate accountability based on their commitment to partnership, local partner NGOs were given the scope to assess how the members of staff of the INGO lived out the key values and principles of their relationship with local actors (see section-3). Before the evaluation exercise, the Deputy Country Director of the AAN encouraged partners to be honest and frank in commenting on the outcome of the evaluation. In her words:

This is not just an exercise for us, we are a learning organisation, and your feedback will help us to address these gaps as you all have experienced our relationship as partners. If we are to maintain

legitimacy and moral standing in these accountability demands, then we must walk the talk! – and maintain the highest standards of accountability. ... We will have to consciously work for changes within ourselves, the way we work with others, and the way the organisation works so as to live our principles and values.

On the empowerment of their local partners, she also stated:

Our partnership focuses on strengthening the capacity of partners. Partners are encouraged to identify and discuss any gap in their organisational capacity crucial to carrying out their work. Organisations in partnership must be committed to joint learning and development to promote equality in their engagement. We will continue to support the system of strengthening our partner NGOs in all areas of our work and relationship and you are all encouraged to do the same with your CBOs.

While the INGO, in this case, allowed their partners to make a meaningful contribution in a partnership, the process, however, is certainly not a one-way traffic. A firm-standing on national level NGOs' own values and some form of financial stability certainly add up to this process and contribute to a more equitable partnership and increased accountability. As the Deputy Director of the JDPC stated:

We will reject funds with a prospective partner if we notice anything that is not coherent with our values. We stop such partnerships before we even start to discuss what the partner will fund. In fact, we rejected two funds recently. Once you mention JDPC in this state the people know we stand by our values, notwithstanding we are not the richest NGOs around. We will reject funds that are against equal rights. Our values derived from human dignity conferred by God, because the value is greater than finance. That is the root of our belief in partnership. If anything goes against human dignity we do not allow that in our partnership.

Therefore, it is contended in this paper that all participants' commitment to partnership and translating its values into practice can possibly rebalance the skewed power relation (as outlined in different literature, see section-2 for more information) between INGOs and their local partners, as well as generate some sense of empowerment for local actors to have more influence on development agendas. Such intention to live out the ideals of partnership by the INGOs are hinged on their commitment to utilise various aspects of partnerships to deepen their engagement with their local partners. As the AAN's Adviser on Partnership and Local Rights Programme or Conflict Support Programme insisted that:

We previously interacted directly with the beneficiaries, but now we work with our partners who understand the local issues and context better. We believe we cannot carry out our work without our partners. Working with partners is the key approach to achieving our aims.

Moreover, it is also argued here that an opportunity to assess the partnership in a reasonably conducive atmosphere to evaluate, challenge and provide feedback to all partners are healthy for effective partnership between INGOs and local NGOs. In this research, it is observed that local NGOs were able to openly express their displeasure (through low scoring) because they were given the option to speak up on the issues related to what makes partnerships more effective and meaningful. Majority of the participants were pleased with the response of the coordinator of the Partnership Forum and encouraged other to bare their minds on other areas of contentions. However, while this cannot be said definitively, but the presence of the researcher in the Partnership Forum might have influenced the responses of the participants. It is noteworthy that the empirical evidence presented in this paper may not represent a general trend for INGO-NGO partnership, different results may be obtained in other context and with different organisations. Nevertheless, it is clear that a commitment to theoretical ideals of partnership and its implementation in practice can possibly promote a change of values and behaviour by INGOs and local NGOs; as they aspire to inculcate the values and principles of the

partnership in their day-to-day relationships (Elbers, 2012). Therefore, this can be argued here that transforming partnership from policy or theoretical level into practice would require a change in orientation and behaviour of members of staff of INGOs in this hierarchical relationship. When this is done this can potentially promote a transformation for the local NGOs, and based on the experiences of meaningful partnerships where INGOs demonstrate their willingness to be held accountable it could then create a feeling of empowerment for the local NGOs (as demonstrated in this paper). In time, with some support, the local NGOs can promote the same within their own communities and advance a model to replicate in their engagement with the government.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the implications of the partnership between an INGO (ActionAid Nigeria) and its local NGO partners. From the perspectives of the participants, empirical observations have shown that broadly there is a common understanding of the key principles and values of partnership between the AAN and their local partners in Nigeria. While some competing narratives indicate some gaps between theoretical ideals and actual practice, the study also suggests that an effective partnership can possibly balance the skewed power and influence that are conventionally tilted in favour of INGOs because of their role as funders. In addition, meaningful partnership (where values, rights and other principles are generally in line with the actual practice) may be empowering for local NGOs to have more

influence on the development of agendas and processes. It could equip local partners with the necessary skills and confidence to promote tangible improvement in the way aid is delivered in the global South. Also, the willingness of both the INGO donor and its local NGO partners to promote mutual accountability shed new lights on how NGO partnership can work for positive change that could be empowering for local development actors and other intended beneficiaries. In addition, a conducive atmosphere in implementing the shared principles of partnership between INGOs and their local partners enhances downward accountability to local stakeholders – a lesson that seems to have wider relevance for effective delivery of aid. However, this paper does not suggest that the specific case presented in this paper represents a general picture of INGOs-SNGOs partnership. This is because these findings may not be the case in other contexts or with different organisations

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