Building inclusive development partnerships: some reflections and questions for practitioners

Barry Smith, Regional Director, Southern Africa,
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The rhetoric of 'partnership' is all the rage in development. It is a commonplace that no one sector, or set of actors, can take exclusive responsibility for meeting the challenges of entrenched poverty and social exclusion. But we need to get beyond the conventional discourse of fuzzy, 'feel-good' partnerships – or of 'public-private partnerships' that often amount to little more than technical models or variations on the privatization of public services. A wider and more inclusive notion of 'partnership' and 'the public interest' is needed, premised on the requirement for broader public accountability, transparency, good governance and 'power-sharing' between stakeholders and sectors.

In South Africa, the constitution outlines a compelling vision of a more just and giving society, entrenching basic civic, socio-economic and cultural rights. It also proposes a leading role for a robust, democratic and truly developmental state. Internationally, the Millennium Development Goals highlight the importance of an effective, accountable public sector and pro-poor public policy. They aspire to provide governments with a powerful rallying point around which dynamic, long term and values-driven partnerships can be forged.

With its pivotal resources of finance, technical capacity, management expertise and innovation, business is seen by many as having a major role to play in effective partnerships. Emerging business imperatives around 'corporate citizenship,' 'transformation' and 'broad-based economic empowerment' may offer a bridgehead for transforming conventional notions of 'public-private partnership.'

Citizens' organizations, including community-based organizations, NGOs and social movements, have a pivotal role in giving voice to the poor, mobilizing resources and collective action, and taking forward agendas for pro-poor change. They perform a fundamental public service by ensuring independent monitoring of both government and business performance in relation to poverty and social justice objectives. 'Civil society strengthening' is not by itself a sufficient strategy for poverty reduction; but it is a necessary strategy for the achievement of more effective and inclusive collaboration to shift the systems that entrench poverty.

But partnerships – multi-sector or multi-stakeholder – are not in themselves an answer to the ills of a globalized, vastly unqual world. It is stating the obvious to say that conventional development partnership models will not always or necessarily reduce poverty or increase equity. Partnerships are not a substitute for politics, leadership, citizen action and long-term development processes. New possibilities for social justice will continue to emerge from popular mobilization, socio-economic upheavals, creative development processes and the everyday struggles of politics, ideas and the economy.

- As partnership practitioners, how can we avoid becoming 'partnership fundamentalists' and pursue a more nuanced, practice-based and flexible approach in the context of global interdependence and complexity?
- How do we answer the questions, 'partnerships for what?' and 'what special kind or quality of partnership?' in a principled and developmental way?

'Inclusive partnerships,' that give real voice and power to the poor and excluded, may be part of the solution, but they are a tall order. There is much work and thinking to be done about how the less powerful in such partnerships can secure the space, decision-making influence and resources needed to be more than 'guests at the table.'

- In bridging divides or promoting partnerships, how do we deal with the power issues and dynamics, so that partnerships don't end up as another kind of technocratic or top-down process?
- How can we envisage and nurture partnership in which interdependency is surfaced decisively and power is shared on a more equitable basis?
- Could we, as utopian as it may sound, foster partnerships that forge higher levels of trust, mutual accountability and shared purpose that could mediate unequal power relations – and tap their creative tensions?

Amartya Sen is famous for his theories about the importance of 'capabilities' i.e. crudely, it is not enough for people to have rights and duties – important as this may be. Rights and legitimate entitlements can only realized if citizens have the means – civic freedoms, access to resources, opportunities, protections, skills, organizations, etc – to claim and act on them. The 'capabilities' approach could be a powerful tool in developing our strategy and theory of change around partnership-building.

- How do we promote or facilitate the capabilities of the poor and excluded to act effectively in partnerships?
- What are those capabilities?
- How can development practitioners be more effective in strengthening the capabilities of citizens and civil society organizations to form partnerships among themselves and with other sectors?

In order to be effective and carry their own constituencies with them in partnerships, the poor and excluded need to be organized and have their own, authentic voice. One of the key roles and added values of development practitioners can be to facilitate processes that strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations – including organizations of the poor and excluded – to engage first in more powerful multi-stakeholder partnerships within civil society, and beyond that in multi-sector initiatives.

Non-government grantmakers, development trusts and private philanthropists, because of there relative independence, are well placed to take risks, invest in the capacities and innovations of civil society and the poor, to fund organization development, advocacy, policy formation, etc. Social justice grantmakers and development facilitators can help to prepare the ground for, and particularly to strengthen the hand of the poor and excluded to participate in, multi-sector partnerships.

- How then can we strengthen a practice of social justice grantmaking and facilitation that seeks to build the necessary bridges and level the playing field for meaningful participation by the poor and excluded in partnerships for development?
- How can we promote partnerships that tackle the very significant barriers to equity such as unfair trade regimes, debilitating debt burdens, lack of civic rights and

freedoms, lack of accountability and democracy in public and private institutions, corruption, gender injustice, lack of social protection and safety nets, etc.?
- How can we improve the flow of knowledge and resources to strengthen the organizations and leadership of the poor and excluded to be effective, legitimate and accountable partners on behalf of their constituencies? – so far both the aid system and its philanthropic elements have failed to make a significant impact in this field.
- How can we contribute, globally and locally, to new forms of partnership around development support that escape the pathologies and silos of the existing aid system?

One of the risks in a focus on partnerships is that we may get sucked into a current fad with its own lowest common denominator impulses. Governments, business and aid agencies are all into partnerships at present. Inevitably, many if not most development partnerships will mimic technocratic, 'public-private partnerships' models that reproduce the power, accountability and governance imbalances that prevail throughout development institutions.

- How could we model a radically different approach that would democratize development partnerships, and ensure the space for equitable participation by civil society, the poor and excluded?
- How could a larger commitment to human rights and obligations be reflected in the rights and obligations framework for multi-stakeholder partnerships?

Some development partnerships are being formed to exploit the opportunities of the market to reduce poverty and increase equity. This is particularly true of some forms of 'new philanthropy,' that are currently in the spotlight as private and corporate philanthropy flex their muscles on the development scene. As Sen observes, 'market mechanisms are as good as the company they keep.' Many partnership enthusiasts are particularly keen on the possibilities of innovative market-based approaches, engagement with business, micro-enterprise, social entrepreneurship, and so forth. But the problem is that a very narrow paradigm of 'market orthodoxy' prevails, that does not take into account the failure of dominant market forms to reduce poverty and inequality.

We need to be willing to keep a critical distance from 'market fundamentalism.' There is a diversity of market models to explore if we can get beyond market orthodoxy. Without doubt, the functioning and outcomes of market mechanisms depend very heavily on good public policy and regulation of markets. Markets are more likely to operate for the public good in a framework of good governance, democracy, rights and social security protections, rule of law, public investment in infrastructure and employment, etc. It is not obvious that more market-based development innovations will be less likely than traditional aid models to siphon off much of the financial, material and 'feel good' benefit to the rich and powerful.

- How can we explore and test partnerships that build in governance, regulatory and accountability mechanisms that ensure maximum benefit from market-based innovations for the poor and excluded?
- How can such partnerships test models that promote good corporate governance and citizenship, more predictable, 'fair trade' marketplaces, decent labour and employment conditions, access to markets, etc.?
- How can we avoid partnerships that get devalued into marketing opportunities for business, showcases for corporate or government good works, play grounds for well-meaning but amateur or unaccountable social entrepreneurs, or, at worst, that merely provide cover for the increased privatization of public goods?

From a perspective of social justice, we should be as interested in 'multi-stakeholder'

partnership-building within civil society, or among the poor and excluded, as we would be in multi-sector partnerships. Obviously, civil society and the poor are not an amorphous mass, and often need to collaborate more effectively in order to act against poverty and exclusion, or to engage in multi-sector initiatives. Innovation and ferment for change often comes from the periphery of society, and the most effective advocates and exemplars of anti-poverty policy or action are usually organized coalitions in civil society and of the poor themselves. Thus, the emphasis should be on 'multi-stakeholder partnerships,' that would allow for inclusive inter-sector <u>and</u> intra-sector partnership building.

- How can we engage concurrently with both multi-sector collaboration and partnership building work within civil society, on principles of inclusion and social justice?
- How might we, for example, be useful in assisting emerging social movements around land, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, trade, debt, etc., to form powerful partnerships and strategic alliances within civil society that can amplify the voices, claims, ideas and policy innovations of their constituencies?

When it comes to methodologies and the marketplace in ideas, the development world is severely imbalanced in favour of methods and ideas from the North – the aid or philanthropy giving countries. The global South has been bombarded with projects, technical solutions, and methodologies from the North that promise to deliver. A vast industry in the North is paid well to develop and impose 'solutions' on the South. But the results have overall been poor, and there is understandable methodology fatigue and suspicion.

- In developing our methodology toolbox around partnerships, how can we build on indigenous knowledge, cultures, skills, innovations, ideas, development processes and experience in the South?

Finally, some may worry, with good reason, that an 'inclusive partnerships strategy' may risk the co-option of the poor and excluded in a corporatist, elite accommodation model of development. Or some may think that partnerships could close down the space for debate and contending ideas through some enforced partnership consensus. Effective development partnerships should not require agreement on everything – or, indeed, joint action on everything. They may modify but need not compromise fundamentally the independence of the partners, nor their independent voice.

Unfortunately, the experience of many civil society organizations in partnerships with government and business is that they are required to suspend critical voices, tone down public advocacy and tow the line of the more powerful partners. Sometimes the representatives of the poor and excluded in multi-sector partnerships drift away from their own constituencies and become 'partnership bureaucrats.' We need to reflect on these perceptions and risks, and how they may be managed.

- In promoting partnerships, how can we ensure that we are not silencing or 'dumbing down' the voices of civil society and the poor?
- How can inclusive development partnerships protect the space for critical voices, contention of ideas and public advocacy on behalf of the poor and excluded?