Partnerships between international Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGDOs) and their partners in developing countries are a key characteristic of private development aid. They stand out from more businesslike types of collaboration because they are said to be grounded in values that promote equity. International NGDOs derive an important part of their legitimacy from the claim that they are able to have equal relations with Southern partners. This ability, it is argued, contributes to aid effectiveness and efficiency by improved local participation, increased ownership and tailor made development projects (Fowler 2000, Lister 2000, Crawford 2003).

Partnership has become a highly contested notion, however, resulting in increased criticism on private development aid as a means to address issues of poverty and injustice. In the literature it is argued in practice that partnerships are characterized by donor-recipient behavior and power asymmetries. Consequently, doubts have been raised on the effectiveness, efficiency and the legitimacy of private development aid (Lister 2000, Fowler 2000, Fernando 2007). Similar concerns have been put at the heart of the development policy debate with the signing of the Paris Declaration which focuses strongly on local ownership and mutual accountability (OECD 2005).

Comprehensive empirical evidence on partnership relations, however, is not only scarce but also one-sided in its theoretical perspective. The few existing studies have analyzed partnerships mainly from a resource dependence theory perspective (see Hudock 1995, Lister 2000, Ebrahim 2005). The drawback of existing studies is that they largely overlook the structural, or institutional, frameworks that underlie both day-to-day and long-term decision-making practices. Consequently, they fail to capture much of the dynamics that characterize partnership decision-making. In addition, they offer few opportunities to those international NGDOs wishing to institutionally redesign their partnerships to make them more equitable.

The study examines the partnership relations of three international NGDOs - Action Aid, ICCO and Christian Aid - and their local partners in Ghana, India and Nicaragua by examining the institutional rules that regulate decision-making. As such this study employs a comparative approach at both the organizational level and the country level. It employs a conceptual framework which is new to the empirical study of partnerships yielding findings new to existing partnership research. The article’s main question is the following: What are the institutional rules that make up the partnerships of ICCO, Action Aid and Christian Aid, what are their main similarities and differences, and how do they enable or constrain partners’ influence in decision-making?

The article analyses the institutional design of partnership decision-making using the concept of “rules of the game”. This concept, which comes from the new institutionalism in organizational sociology, departs from the idea that human behavior and actions takes place within socially constructed frameworks. These frameworks are conceptualized as “rules” which define the structural possibilities and constraints regarding actors’ capacity to act. In policy arrangements, rules are of particular importance because they regulate the decision-making and solidify prevailing power relations (see Giddens 1984, Ostrom & Crawford 2005, March & Olsen 1989, Cohen 1989).

To examine the partnership rules of Action Aid, ICCO and Christian Aid, fieldwork was conducted in the Netherlands, Ghana, India and Nicaragua, making it a multiple case study (Yin 2003). In the data-collection, which was conducted over a period of eight months in 2008, a specific distinction was made between formal and informal rules. For the analysis of the formal rules a range of documents were...
analyzed including contracts and policy papers. To examine the informal rules a total of 96 interviews were conducted with agency-staff and partner-representatives. All interviews were recorded and afterwards transcribed for analysis. Both documents and interview transcripts were analyzed through selective coding using the software package ATLAS.TI.

The study advances three main findings. First, power inequalities between agencies and partners are deeply embedded in the institutional rules. Partners lack formal rights that guarantee their participation in decision-making. Furthermore, all partnership decision-making takes place within overlapping frameworks of rules which have been unilaterally established by the international NGDOs. These rules contain the requirements that partners have to meet on such areas as project-design, project-implementation and accountability and effectively limit the scope of the actions they are allowed to take. Second, although partners lack formal decision-making rights they still have considerable influence due to the presence of partnership values (informal rules) that promote equity. A lot, however, depends on individual project-officers of the international NGDOs who are responsible for interpreting and applying the rules. Their actions are characterized by a degree of subjectivity and some project-officers are dominant or flexible than others. Third, partnership values alone are insufficient to guarantee equal partnerships. As long as partnerships are based on resource dependency, partners’ influence cannot be guaranteed without giving them formal decision-making rights. As such, the study concludes that partnerships need to become rights based if they are to become more equitable.

References


