POWER AND COLLABORATION IN INTERORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS: PARADOX OR COMPROMISE?
LESSONS LEARNED FOR NORTH-SOUTH PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN NGOS.

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Abstract

Interorganizational relationships, such as partnerships, are very much part of today’s economic agenda. Some authors have argued that they have become a new form of coordination of economic activity, alternative to hierarchy and competition (Hollingsworth et Boyer, 1997). In fact, from the early nineties we assist to the emergence of public-private partnerships which have reinforced national corporations’ performance in international markets (Petrella, 1989), have increased governments’ capacity to implement social policy (Favreau et Fréchette, 2002; Vaillancourt; 1996), and have even supported community economic development (Loizides, 1995; Peter et Sundblad; 1994). Recent research about this interorganizational phenomenon has focused on public-private partnerships (Hardy, 1994; Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Rodriguez, Langley, Béland and Denis, 2007), and on the role of trust in building the relationship (Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda, 2007; Ferrin, Bligh and Kohles, 2007). Drawing from institutional analysis and collaboration theory (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2000), we develop a theoretical model to understand power relationships within interorganizational cooperation, in a sector that has often been neglected by management studies: non-government organisations (NGO), operating within North-South cooperation (Navarro-Flores, 2006).

Partnerships within international cooperation have been encouraged by funding agencies as an attempt to reinforce local autonomy and ownership of development programmes. However, for the most critical observers, this represents a paradox because it masks neoliberal attempts to assimilate developing countries to global market and denies the inequality between North and South exacerbated by globalization (Hately and Malhotra, 1997). We argue that, in spite of the growing gap between North and South, international development actors within NGOs have managed to construct partnerships, neither by denying nor masking power relationship, but by adopting mechanisms to negotiate power within cooperation.

By contextualizing the organizations in their own socio-political environment (North and South), we are able to examine power relationships across three different levels of analysis: macro or institutional level, meso or interorganizational level, and micro or interpersonal level. By doing this, we provide greater precision on how power is acquired and used by actors in the North and in the South, as well as a comprehensive view of how power is negotiated within the relationship. We conclude with a new definition of partnership as a compromise, embracing power differences and mechanisms to negotiate inequality.

Bibliography:


