



UNIVERSITY OF  
**BATH**

# **Dissertation for the Degree of MSc International Development**

**Freedom From Development: Towards a transformative  
agenda in North-South NGO relations**

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## **Abstract**

The paper seeks to understand the ways in which the project of Development, through instrumental funding and operational modalities, preferentially channeled via International Non Government Organisations (INGOs), maintains Northern power, exacerbates dependency and undermines the autonomy, ownership and leadership of Southern civil society actors, especially Southern NGOs, to directly represent and respond to their constituents' needs and aspirations.

It positions the enquiry from an ethical belief that local actors are more capable and legitimately placed to lead local development; that they do, in all events, do the work of it. Their sovereignty, however, is not sufficiently recognised and respected within the INGO partnerships on which they largely depend for funds, nor are they credited with the results that depend largely on their knowledge, skills and connectivity within local communities where development is enacted.

The discussion therefore explores alternative approaches and practices that can deliver a more transformative agenda for change: to address power asymmetries; support and nurture Southern autonomy and capacity; and engender the reflexive space and intentionality to generate common will and solidarity towards shared, co-created futures.

The paper analyses three case studies of INGOs that have recognised their legitimacy, accountability and impact is predicated on Southern ownership and have consequently shifted power to the south. A conceptual framework enables

the analysis of these case studies to explore specific elements that dynamically interplay in the process of shifting power: intent (conscious decision), self awareness (reflexivity) and self determination (capacity), and draws conclusions towards a transformative agenda.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1.1 The call for change

In 2014 the Southern based civil society organisation Civicus published an online letter critiquing those working in civil society, e.g. Non Government Organisations (NGOs), for becoming *'part of the problem'* they seek to solve, existing in order to help change the status quo but trading in *'incremental change...trapped in the internal bureaucracy and comfort of our brands and organisations'*. They call for the *'re-balancing of the power dynamics towards the less resourced sections of civil society and away from large international civil society organisations'* (CIVICUS, 2014).

One year later the Maliasili Initiative published a report with Well Grounded (2015:46) outlining the ongoing challenges faced by Southern NGOs (SNGOs), and promoting dialogue and greater reflection on the part of International NGOs (INGOs) on their operational definitions of 'partnerships'. Also in 2015, the southern humanitarian platform, ADESO, demanded more power and voice to southern actors, *"there is no global platform of SNGOs focusing on the issues that matter most to them"* (Ramalingam, 2015:11).

This clamour for greater voice and power sharing is not new (Dichter, 1989). Some would argue that this cry has not changed after decades of aid flow to the global South, is yet to be fully heard, and that the project of International Development,

with its underlying power dynamics embedded in its colonial roots, has yet to attend to its own radical transformation.

One way such transformation might be measured is by trying to locate in the sector those INGOs that have divested or transferred power, handed over their assets and resources to their southern partners in the realisation of the eternal promise to 'do ourselves out of a job', or to 'walk the talk'. In attempting to explore this idea, very few INGOs presented case studies for review, highlighting how rare and radical a decision it is to divest, transition or transfer power from North to South within the sector.

However, as is the case with my own experience (see below), an important caveat is that there are doubtless examples of transition which are not yet written up, still in process, or have not drawn attention from academic researchers e.g. Afrikids. Additionally, there is very little southern voice in the debate, and few SNGOs or civil society organisations sharing their viewpoints on exit<sup>1</sup> or just how the aid industry should function (Rocha and Rogerson, 2006).

Another caveat is that this is a substantive subject, impossible to address in a full and sufficiently detailed way within this paper. The aim is therefore to focus discussion on the issue of power, and attempt a small contribution to the wider debate on North-South (N-S) NGO relations.

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NGOS, as part of civil society, have the potential to effect structural change in society, through transformation of social, political, and market relations. However, the technocratic focus of development aid has reformed NGOs into donor's clients, focused on service delivery and the promotion of democracy (Banks et al, 2015). In this, and despite decades of discourse critiquing the power asymmetry in the western paradigm of development, the issue of power remains widely talked about but largely unaddressed.

The established power asymmetry embedded in N-S NGO relations in particular has seen 'little change'; powerful INGOs continue to compete for political space and resources with their southern counterparts (Hailey, 2014:30).

This paper therefore seeks to explore some of the barriers that prevent such a shift of power to the South, such that SNGOs may become more autonomous and thereby better able to self-determine development agendas, implement and manifest their own vision for societal well being more directly in accordance with the needs and aspirations of their local constituents. Such autonomy would, arguably, engender increased local ownership and ensure more sustainable development.

My personal interest in this issue has evolved over a decade, since I led the sustainability strategy of a UK based charity working in Madagascar, Andrew Lees Trust (ALT UK), to divest its assets and resources to its Malagasy team and support the establishment of the sovereign local entity, Andry Lalana Tohana (ALT Mg).



The building of capacity for local people to determine, lead and deliver their local development was an ethical component of the Trust's mission from its inception.

The transition and exit of ALT UK from Madagascar from 2006-2010 was not without difficulty. However, more difficult has been to witness and try to support ALT MG in subsequent years, confronted with multiple challenges in developing their fledgling SNGO, including: navigating discriminatory grant application processes (e.g. expected to attend a workshop in the capital, a three day drive or expensive flight away, in order to be eligible to apply for World Bank funding); competing for local funds against highly resourced INGOs; struggling to maintain power and political space in 'partnership' with new INGOs encroaching their operating zones; managing budget rollercoasters due to delayed release of funds, especially with UN projects; and, at least in one instance, negatively impacted by reporting openly about budgetary challenges to a friendly UK Foundation.

These struggles have been a painful reminder that the sector is frequently failing in its duty of care to Southern civil society actors; that much of its practice risks to be driven or blinded by self interest, sometimes by fear, and that powerful institutions and INGOs whose remit is to support and help grow Southern civil society frequently do the opposite by undermining and demoralising SNGOs with bureaucratic, technocratic approaches and discriminatory processes and attitudes.

### 1.1.2 Structure

The discussion will first position the project of International Development, and the power relationships that have influenced the sector, within a historical context. It will then explore the nature of N-S NGO relations and how these situate power, in particular within N-S partnerships; it will discuss the funding and managerial modalities and practices that maintain Northern hegemonic positions and present barriers to SNGO autonomy, including supply driven capacity building.

The following chapter explores alternative approaches and perspectives towards a more transformative agenda of N-S relations. It begins with recognising that power imbalance is a root cause of underdevelopment, poverty and injustice and therefore requires attention in and of itself. It places SNGOs at the heart of ownership of Southern development, recognising their sovereignty, and the need to nurture their autonomy and capacity from a different set of priorities.

It then explores the idea that in order for change to happen in the N-S power dynamic, and in development, northern actors have to undertake the 'inner work' of reflection, to face their shadow, the unseen beliefs, attitudes and norms that maintain power asymmetry, and to let go; to do this innovative approaches are discussed, together with an understanding of complexity, wherein change can happen on a transformational level.

An analysis of cases studies follows, and investigates the change process of three INGOs that have divested power to the south; a conceptual framework, proposed by this paper, focuses on specific aspects that supported transition. The final chapter seeks to reposition the N-S power relationship in light of the example provided by the case studies, and to promote a new solidarity.

### 1.1.3 Methodology

The research began with a desk review of available literature of peer reviewed articles and research; also of grey literature and empirical evidence from INGOs, civil society organisations, think tanks and websites. An analysis of three case studies, written by academics/development practitioners with particular interest in NGOs, is presented using a conceptual framework that has been designed specifically to focus on elements relevant to the process of shifting power, and with a qualitative approach to findings.

A series of conversations have been undertaken to deepen the enquiry, including with some case study authors. Gratitude is extended to all who graciously gave their time to discuss and answer questions, including: Anne Garbutt, Rachel Hayman, Rick James and John Hailey (INTRAC); Doug Reeler (CDRA); and Micheline Ravololonarisoa (Ex. ACORD).

<sup>1</sup>*Southern perspective on 'responsible exit' is an outstanding research priority. Conversation with Rachel Hayman, INTRAC Aug 2016.*

## **Chapter 2. Northern Hegemony in Development**

### 2.1.1 Roots of International Development, continuity of power

There is wide recognition that the root of development is situated in the colonial past (Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2008). Despite Truman's promise that his programme of modernisation and technical assistance for 'underdeveloped areas' had no place for '*the old imperialism*' (Truman, 1949), the roots of the aid project were planted in American economic self-interests post WW2; particularly to block the advance of communism in newly independent colonies (Rostow 1966; Hoogvelt, 2001).

Those US economists who drove the post war development programme were also influential in setting up institutions that would go on to reinforce northern hegemony: the World Bank, and IMF (Ikenberry, 1992). These same institutions continue to influence development in the global South through instrumental funding of the aid programme. Over the past seventy years, billions of dollars of aid have flowed from developed western powers, either through bilateral aid or through multilateral agreements in an effort to bring humanitarian relief and development assistance to communities in the global south (OECD, 2016).

The issue of financial flow has been inextricably tied up with the question of power and who sets the development agenda. In this, with its roots in an imperialist past, the flow of aid and its accompanying conditionality has been perceived as complicit in maintaining a northern hegemonic discourse that places poor

countries in need of assistance, incapable of directing their own social change (Rist, 2008; Escobar, 1995; Gulrajani, 2010).

Southern writers and activists such as Maathi (2009) and Moyo (2010) have critiqued the flow of aid as a failed project that has created more dependency and subjugation than it has delivered liberty from oppression or poverty. Southern civil society organisations too have concerns about the impact of aid, its ability to corrupt government, or weaken the state and the 'crippling' effect brought about by dependency over the longer term (Olaniyan, 2011; Rocha and Rogerson, 2006). Most importantly that it has taken the control of the development agenda out of the hands of those it purports to serve: the communities of the global South.

Others support this contention by highlighting that the very notion of underdevelopment has perpetuated a discourse that maintains the status quo (Gulrajani, 2010:202) and establishes a system and networks of power (Escobar, 1995); in particular that these have the effect of dampening agency and autonomy of local people (Gulrajani 2010; Moyo, 2010). Poverty reduction justifies development intervention and supports the position of aid industry 'experts', elites for whom foreign aid is a source of power (Guljarani, 2010).

### 2.1.2 The rise of the NGO

It is with the prominence of non-government organisations (NGOs) in the aid industry that the cultivation of 'elite' experts has proliferated, and with them, a

power base that maintains northern dominance over the southern development landscape.

NGOs are understood to be an important part of civil society, alongside churches, community associations, interest groups, unions and media; they operate, according to Korten (1990), on an independent, not for profit basis and evolve across four types of activity with an emphasis on voluntarism and humanitarian action: welfare or development services, community development, capacity building, and advocacy (Michael, 2004:3).

NGOs are particularly important as actors situated in civil society, outside of the state and business, with the potential to propose development alternatives, to counter hegemonic powers, to reform, '*intervene in and modify*' wider societal development (Mitlin et al, 2007).

Up until the 1960s, humanitarian agencies were frequently small, northern based entities, combining philanthropic action with advocacy on a specific issue, e.g. the abolition of slavery, promotion of peace (Lewis 2005). Between the 1960-80s, NGOs consolidated, whilst becoming more critical of geopolitical arrangements, and engaging in alternative arrangements to state, market and civil society (Mitlin et al, 2007; Bebbington, 2006).

The exponential growth of NGOs in the 1980s, when structural adjustment programmes reduced government expenditure, ushered in wider NGO service delivery to the poor (Banks et al, 2015). As direct conduits of aid, NGOs were

considered more efficient and advantageously positioned for closer relations with the 'beneficiaries', to ensure empowerment through participation and to strengthen local institutions (Michael 2004, cites Fowler, 1988).

However, these arrangements have made NGOs less accountable through formal governance mechanisms between citizens and state, and focused them to act more directly in response to northern, donor agendas, e.g. of the World Bank; this can undermine autonomy and ability to act more controversially for social change (Attack, 1999; Bebbington 2008).

Southern NGOs (SNGOs), also grew in number in the 1980s as a result of the decentralisation of government services, although arguably their power to be autonomous, to define agendas and drive southern development both at national level and at international policy level is still in question.

Some notable exceptions in Asia and Latin America, with the rise of local organisations such as BRAC and Madres de Plaza de Mayo, has served only to highlight the deficit of powerful local organisations elsewhere, especially in Africa. BRAC in Bangladesh, for example, exemplifies a powerful southern NGO by its size and reach as well as its financial acuity, innovation and programme diversity, all of which has made it attractive to donors and provides it with levels of autonomy and political leverage; not least since it has developed capacity to generate its own funds, and therefore able to assume more risk and withstand failures (Michael, 2004).

Such exceptions point to the rule: for the most part, and especially in Africa, it is INGOs operating both in their own countries and overseas, that command both the financial and political space of the aid sector. Northern NGOs (NNGOs) that are not necessarily operational in the South, but undertake advocacy and lobbying to provide funds for the global South, also occupy a position of power and resource in terms of donors and development policy and agendas (Michael, 2004).

With the growth of the Southern NGOs in the 1980-90s, International and Northern NGOs recognised the need to review and reinvent their role, build collaborations across north-south boundaries and shift from an operational emphasis to more of a funding role (Smillie & Hemlich, 1999). Emphasis changed as SNGO leaders demanded change away from patron-client relationships (Drabek, 1987) towards partnership, with the role of INGOs adjusting to that of a donor to Southern partners, providing technical support, accompaniment, or capacity building (Lewis 1998).

It is within this dynamic that current tensions of North-South NGO relations play out and questions arise, notably: the equality of power sharing, and the legitimacy and accountability of INGOs in relation to their southern counterparts and the communities they serve.



### 2.1.3 Legitimacy – who speaks for whom

There are normative questions about the legitimacy of NGOs in the development process, particularly of INGOs assuming state responsibilities, such as service provision and welfare within the southern context: *“Who has the right to assert leadership, to organise people, and to allocate resources in the development enterprise?”* (Bratton, 1989:570).

The question of leadership and representation is pertinent because it speaks of acceptance in society of certain institutions *‘and their ability to exercise power and authority effectively’* (Brinkerhoff, 2005). In this, Gordenker and Weiss (1995:553) remark that *“NGOs themselves are not necessarily democratic, which raises the question of who represents what to whom....NGOs do not function the way representative governments do.”*

Most NGOs are described *‘service organisations that help others’* (Attack cites Bratton, 1989:571) and their legitimacy rests *‘on the premise they exist to serve third parties, persons who are not themselves members of their organisation’* (Attack 1999, cites Korten 1990:96).

Edwards and Hulme (1995) posit that NGOs do not have to be controlled by their membership in order to be legitimate; however they argue they do have to be *accountable* in order for any claims of legitimacy to be sustained; a measure of representativeness for northern NGOS can be achieved, they suggest, through

transparent relationship and genuine partnerships with their southern constituents and partners.

It is largely through partnership that INGOs attempt to legitimise their remit in the global south. The collaboration with their Southern partners affords greater closeness to the target communities, local networks and knowledge (Smith, 2015). However, the authenticity of these partnerships, to what extent the N-S NGO relationship is transparent or equitable, is a matter of debate, and concern.

#### 2.1.4 Partnership – an unequal relationship

Partnership can be a way of providing solidarity, especially if there is mutual respect, shared goals and responsibility, balance of power, trust, and willingness to negotiate (Elbers & Schulpen 2013; Lister, 2000). However, as Hart (2016:4) argues, *'partnerships are rarely 'authentic'* (Fowler, 1998) and, instead of strengthening local SNGOs through equal partnership, INGOS are more likely to simply sub contract SNGOs (Hart, 2016; INTRAC, 1998; Dichter, 2014).

Sub contracting has an undermining effect on SNGOs since project accountability tends to be driven upwards to donors rather than downwards to the community.

*“ There has been a real reversal from the trends in the 70s and 80s, which emphasised consulting of local groups and trying to understand their perspectives, the internal logic of how they see the problems, and*

*what solutions they see. Today there seems to be more emphasis on understanding the perspective of the donors”*

*(Saveirio Kratli, in Buckley & Ward, 2015)*

Rusca & Schwartz (2012) capture a clear example of these tensions in a research study of Water Aid projects in Lilongwe and Maputo, where they demonstrate that the INGO, driven by concerns of upward accountability, focuses its delivery of water services in an area where they are most likely to get the best, most successful results, rather than delivering them to the most needy or most under-resourced communities. They also choose a second site to deliver water services driven by its potential to secure good partnership and participation for promised project outcomes, the consequence of which is to reinforce existing hegemonic relations and institutionalise pre-existing corruption.

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that southern NGOs might view the prospect for real partnership pessimistically (Brehm, 2001). Southern NGOs bring a different perspective to partnership; they place more emphasis on the quality of the relationship, rather than on the work or financial arrangements, which are seen to be a serious constraint towards equality and solidarity (Brehm, 2004).

*“We do not need intermediaries to channel money for us – first because we lose some of the funds; second because the intermediary puts its own objectives in front of the funding. I’ve seen many organisations being penalised because the intermediary didn’t agree with the project approach....We are seeing this trend more and more –*

*international NGOs interfering with national NGOs, acting as a second donor” (Alda Salomao, in Buckley & Ward, 2015)*

The current relationship trends towards continued dependence of the SNGO acting as a sub contract, and/or operating within disadvantageous and unequal partnership arrangements, forced to change their own objectives and goals to meet funding opportunities and partner agendas. SNGOs dependent on northern donors, especially those in partnerships with INGOs, are hampered in their ability to coherently represent their communities (Maliasili, 2015; Gerei, 2015; Fowler, 2002; Wallace, 1997; Smith, 2015).

Some southern analysts see this trend as particularly disempowering of SNGOs, placing them in the position of compradors, agents of foreign imperialism (Shivji, 2007; Ohemeng, 2005); the ownership of development tainted by the systemic and structural influence of historical power relations, played out in N-S NGO relationships:

*“That ...(new kind of) elite (in Africa) is more umbilically connected to the elite in the alien homes of the NGOs than to its own people....the Westernised African elite is an NGO elite” Olaniyan (2011).*

### 2.1.5 Managerialism - maintaining power through structural modalities

Reinforcing the inequality in N-S NGO partnership is the onerous internal systems, the '*policies, procedure and cultures associated with financial and management control*' (Ashman, 2001:75) that result in greater influence held by the INGO than the SNGO partner.

The process and means of delivering development, the linear methods and causal reasoning based on western business logic, and the emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of aid has embedded a pervasive managerialism across the sector (Brinkerhoff, 2008). Managerialism is predicated on the notion that a rational, technically focused approach can fix the problems of underdevelopment, will engineer change and steer aid in '*orderly manner*', and by so doing it reinforces a mechanistic view of the world, and normative beliefs in the superiority of rational science (Gulrajani 2011:206).

Managerial processes demand significant capacity, and INGOs are ostensibly better equipped to manage them, favouring them as conduits of aid and thereby reinforcing Northern hegemony, dependency and the authority of a professional elite (Shivji, 2007; Bawa, 2013; Hearn, 2007; Ohemeng, 2005; Gulrajani, 2011).

The emphasis on results and efficiency, reinforce upward accountability to the donor. Upward accountability means the rules are set by the holder of funds in order to ensure donor compliance. Agencies want to know their funds are well spent and arguably their legitimacy is partly dependent on such accountability.

The rules governing the relationship are therefore set by INGOs and power asymmetries are institutionalised around the rules. In this respect, North-South partnerships, are of essence unequal (Elbers and Schulpen, 2012; Brehm, 2001). As a consequence, the leadership and operational focus of SNGOs is undermined (Maliasili, 2015; Gerei, 2015; Fowler, 2002; Wallace, 1997; Smith, 2015).

The proliferation of managerialism in development, together with '*the hierarchies and systems of authority, with a powerful managerial elite at its apex*' (Gulrajani, 2011:205) has the effect of separating aid from its structural and political relationships. Development becomes an exercise in technical transfer that enables western donors to promote their agendas and visions of modernity. In so doing, they undermine local ownership of development, the ability of SNGOs to radically address underlying causes of poverty and barriers to social change through connectivity with citizens' concerns (Booth, 2008; Gerei, 2015; Brinkerhoff, 2008; Gulrajani, 2011; Dar and Cooke, 2008; Nelson and Dorsey, 2008; Wallace, 1997). In this regard, INGOs become, as CIVICUS (2014) has suggested, 'part of the problem' they are purporting to solve.

## **2.2 Barriers to SNGO autonomy**

### **2.2.1. Capacity in the supply chain**

In an effort to redefine their relationship with SNGOs some INGOs have moved away from the donor-recipient models of partnership (Lewis, 1998) and moved towards 'capacity building', with notable examples e.g. CAFOD. However, there is

concern some INGOs may be occupying the capacity building arena in order to justify continued presence and access to funding (James, 2010).

In this, it is disconcerting to reflect that despite decades of emphasis on capacity development, it is still largely 'supply driven'; that is to say, it is not southern leadership that determines or is necessarily in receipt of capacity development, but it is increasingly driven by what development partners do for their own interests, and upward accountability (Greijn et al, 2015), most frequently an exercise to mitigate risk, enhance compliance and contractual obligations to the funder, such as report writing (INTRAC, 1998; Huddock, 1999; Dichter, 2014; Maliasili, 2015).

This reflects the critique that official agencies fail to understand SNGO's capacity needs beyond the technical or sector specific elements; they do not strengthen the institutional and operating capacity of SNGOs for the longer term, or invest in them towards becoming more autonomous, self-reliant organisations (Brehm, 2001). Consequently, SNGOs remain largely dependent on northern donors and INGOs and have little opportunity to develop or become independent and sustainable in their own right (INTRAC, 1998).

*"The big donors are telling us they want us to sustain ourselves, but no one is willing to invest in helping us stand by ourselves. The initial capital is not there. (Mulugeta Gebru, in Buckley & Ward, 2015)*

As a sub-contract to an INGO, the financial issues alone precludes an SNGO's ability to develop independent, sustainable operations; as do the barriers created by reporting exigencies of INGOs attempting to transfer power (Wallace, 1997; Dichter, 2014; Maliasili, 2015). This impacts directly on SNGO's ability to sustain the organisation, especially to maintain staff (INTRAC, 1998).

*“For most local employees, there's a tendency to offer a third of the remuneration that an ex pat would get. That leads to unstable institutions.”* (Daisy Kambalame, in Buckley and Ward, 2015)

Unstable SNGOs result in local educated elites seeking higher paid, secure positions in overseas or national offices of INGOs or donors; a brain drain that undermines SNGO institutional capacity and deprives local civil society of leadership and ownership (Carr and MacLachlan, 2007); as such it threatens long-term organisational development and sustainability.

### 2.2.1 Southern voice

Lister (2000) suggests that an examination of N-S relationship issues may help *‘confront the gap between what (agencies) say they are doing and what they actually do’* (Lister, 2000:237), and could make explicit any danger that partnership could be used as co-option.



However, such an examination would demand a significant input of southern voice in order to be meaningful and to rebalance current asymmetrical power relations inherent in the discourse itself; a voice that, in current debates on the way aid functions, is noticeably absent (Rocha and Rogerson, 2006). Language is a barrier, as is terminology and lack of financial resource

*“Northern organisations are the ones who have the means to promote research, discussion and diffusion on these issues”* (Southern actor, in Campodonico and Valerrama 2005:2).

Without the southern voice, any examination of co-option through partnership or other forms of disempowerment risks to intensify and reproduce the very dynamic and relations that create the imbalance and inequity in the first place, thereby contributing to further constraining the possibilities of genuine engagement on a more equal footing (Lister, 2000, cites Postma, 1994; Kaplan, 1996).

### 2.2.2 Turkeys don't vote for Christmas

Even if southern voices emerge and contest the status quo, it is not assured that the power balance would become more equitable. The enthusiasm for INGOs to divest power is not self-evident, despite rhetoric towards such a strategy (Hailey, 2014). Largely because it requires them to move into a position they are likely to find less attractive for their own survival; *'the empowerment of some , most of the*

*time, entails disempowerment of others ...usually the current holders of power'*  
(Schuftan, 1996:260).

Indeed, evidence points to the contrary: as donors have been more ready to fund directly to the South, many INGOs have relocated to take up local grant opportunities, thereby placing themselves in direct competition with southern actors (INTRAC, 1998). Rocha and Rogerson, (2006: vii) report that Southern civil society organisations perceive INGOs to be competing with them unfairly for resources, and undermining the *“growth and effectiveness of an independent and autonomous civil society sector”*; and some SNGOs find cooperation with INGOs threatening to their mission and autonomy (Ashman, 2001).

In this regard, the current paradigm of development assistance, with its inherent power asymmetry, preferential funding and managerialist practices, unequal partnership arrangements, and supply driven capacity building has the effect of constraining SNGOs and impeding their ability to represent their constituents and become autonomous and sustainable.

## **Chapter 3. A Transformative Agenda**

### 3.1 Introduction

If the current paradigm is constraining and disempowering of SNGOs, and fails to recognise their strengths, capacity and sovereign right to the political space, this chapter seeks to discuss alternative perspectives and practices with a transformative agenda to N-S NGO relations.

In particular it places SNGO sovereignty and autonomy as the focus of development co-operation, and reflexive practice as the basis for improving relations and capacity towards new priorities. It explores change theories and models that support a different praxis, aimed to uncover and counter the habitual and hidden patterns of power, the beliefs attitudes and practices that act as a barrier to transformative change, and open up a space where co-created futures might emerge.

#### 3.1.1 Acknowledging the survival instinct

A point of departure is, of necessity, the nature of INGOs survival, the ongoing demand for their services, managerial expertise and interventions predicated on a world where poverty and underdevelopment persists (Gulrajani, 2011); in this, arises the issue of whether self-preservation, maintaining the status quo, risks to undermine the very motivation and ethics of foreign aid.

Freire saw that those who sought to improve situations of the oppressed without tackling the root causes of oppression were merely attempting to soften its impact, he called this '*false charity*' or '*false generosity*' (Orbach, 2011, cites Freire 1970:40). He suggests that emancipation could never be achieved by this route, since those with power had an interest in maintaining the existing power relations and subordination.

The issue of power is central to development work. The eradication of poverty and injustice, especially when applying participatory or rights based approaches, demands the awareness of power imbalances at the root cause of poverty and exclusion (Chambers, 1983, 1997; Kesby, 2005). Such awareness, argues Cooke & Kothari (2001) demands high levels of reflexivity so that development practitioners are conscious of power dynamics in order to mitigate them (Eyben and Ladbury, 1994), where failing to do so risks exacerbating them (Williams 2004; Nelson & Wright, 1995;).

The same logic arguably applies to unequal partnership relations that risk co-opting SNGOs into northern agendas, and undermining their capacity to act autonomously to address local agendas (Gerei, 2015: Gulrajani, 2011). For this reason, the problem of power cannot be ignored. Maintaining the status quo threatens to close the space where real alternatives can be imagined and nurtured (Escobar, 1995, 2004: Mohan & Stokke, 2000).

There is growing evidence that strong national civil society institutions are key to achieving sustainable development (Ashman, 2001, cites Edwards, 1999). It is also

evident that INGOs recognise the integral importance of their SNGO counterparts, their skills and knowledge, and their connectivity and capacity to represent local communities which ensures local ownership, vital for sustainable outcomes, and without which their programmes would fail and their remit and legitimacy would be compromised.

What is less evident is recognition of their sovereign status and real commitment and intention to foster SNGO autonomy; and while not all SNGOs may be immediately representative of their constituents, staffed as many are by local educated elites focused with their own levels of self interest on maintaining funding relations with northern partners (Mohan & Stokke, 2000), it remains all the more vital to examine how SNGO sovereignty and autonomy can be strengthened, and the role of INGOs refocused to facilitate insiders struggle to achieve that end.

Indeed, James et al (2015) posits that sharing or divesting power to the south should become a donor requirement, and be evident in any theory of change. This would suggest a paradigm shift: a self-awareness and commitment of practitioners and donors in the north to divest power, coupled with recognition of SNGOs as autonomous, sovereign entities (Bawa, 2013), deserving of the political space, and demanding new legitimacy and redirection of resources (Pearce, 2010).

### 3.1.2 Power rightfully held

Reeler (2008) posits *'if development is about shifting or transforming power there has to be a clear concept of where power can rightfully be held – sovereign local organisations and social movements are an obvious location'* (Reeler, 2008:1).

Recognising sovereignty and autonomy is important not only because it influences how relationships and partnerships are formed, i.e. on a more equal footing, but also it places local SNGOs position in the political space more firmly on the agenda. De Valk (2009) posits that *"Respecting and fostering local autonomy is an essential ethical component of development cooperation"* (de Valk 2009:35).

Definitions of autonomy, though widely debated, draw on certain commonalities from community, individual and organisational levels, for example: the ability to define and self-determine goals and objectives, control resources, and direct the processes that affect [their] lives without undue external pressure; autonomy of an organisation relates also to its ability to maintain relationships with other actors as equals (Brehm, 2004).

Sovereignty is a term used more widely in relation to local ownership and control of food e.g. food sovereignty espoused by La Via Campesina (Desmarais, 2007); it is synonymous with the idea of the right to autonomous self-reliance, of local ownership, cultural diversity, freedom of choice and freedom from exploitation and externally imposed controls.

Reeler (2008:2) suggests that sovereignty, as a concept is particularly powerful when applied to an organisation and elicits a number of qualities, including that it: *'strives to know and work with its own purposes; is an authentic expression of the free will and voice of its constituents... and can cooperate with fellow travellers without losing its sense of self'*.

Autonomy might therefore be considered the defining characteristic of a sovereign organisation. Autonomy requires both *"consciousness (awareness, conceptual clarity and the intent to be autonomous) and capacity (skills, organisational capacity and resources to plan and act autonomously)"* (Orbach, 2011:202).

If autonomy requires conscious awareness, and the capacity to self-determine, then these are key areas of concern for SNGOs wishing to establish their sovereignty and to become more sustainable; as such they demand a re-ordering of current 'supply driven' capacity development and re-prioritising of the criteria by which capacity is defined.

## **3.2 Redefining capacity**

### 3.2.1 upside down priorities

Contrary to the dominant focus of capacity building on skills, competence and material resource, especially the financial focus, it is the ability to self-determine and self-define that is considered a primary, crucial element in establishing NGO power and capacity (Michael, 2004; Kaplan, 2000). These have been identified as

core elements for creating a sustainable organisation, and from which other important ingredients flow including wealth, relationships, and influence (Michael, 2004).

This recognises that the struggle to establish the right to define and create a future entails the taking '*control of the first level of power, the ability to determine ones owns wants and needs, and thus, one's very understanding of the world*' (Orbach, 2011, cites Reason, 1998).

Kaplan (2000) offers a framework to prioritise these elements. Developed by the Community Development Research Association (CDRA), it establishes a hierarchy of criteria that defines whether an organisation has capacity, validated across both community and individual levels, which places the 'hard' material, tangible aspects of capacity at the bottom of the hierarchy e.g. material resources, and intangible, less observable or 'soft' elements, those which are hard to measure, at the top e.g. a specific understanding of the world, attitude and vision, such as might comprise the characteristics that determine the identity of an organisation.

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A <b>conceptual framework</b> which reflects the organisations understanding of the world.</li><li>2. An '<b>organizational 'attitude'</b> that incorporates the confidence to act in and on the world in a way that the organization believes can be effective and have an impact, and an acceptance of the social and physical conditions 'out there'.</li><li>3. Clear organizational <b>vision and strategy</b>, and a sense of purpose and will, that flow out of the understanding and responsibility mentioned previously</li><li>4. Defined and differentiated organizational <b>structures and procedures</b> that reflect and support vision and strategy</li><li>5. Relevant <b>individual skills, abilities and competencies</b></li><li>6. Sufficient and appropriate <b>material resources</b></li></ol> |
|---|

Table 1. CDRA Hierarchy of Capacity



This would suggest that capacity building needs to be turned on its head, to prioritise wants and needs, and to focus on developing a set of intangible elements first, i.e. a view of the world, a sense of purpose, and identity, such that structure, financial other and resources, competencies and assets can accumulate around them.

Placing importance on the 'soft' dimensions of capacity, points towards the growing consensus that capacity is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Greijn et al, 2015:8). Commonalities of understanding with CDRA, ECDPM (2011), and Fowler and Ubels (2010) highlight that those practitioners engaged in capacity development need to be acutely aware of the kinds of frameworks, assumptions and the lens they employ to 'read' an organisation, and in doing so need to be particularly *self aware*. In particular, aware of where power is located and how it is applied. This demands high levels of reflection and dialogue (Hart, 2016).

In this, James's (2010) question about why the sector knows what is needed in capacity building but still largely does not do it, is perhaps answered by Kaplan (1996) who remarks that the challenge of strengthening SNGO capabilities, sustainability and independence may be less due to a commitment of funds or policies, but more due to the focus, intentionality and engagement of the sector as a whole to address the issue of the North-South relationship.

### 3.2.2 Facing the shadow

This pushes the question back to understanding the ‘*deep-rooted, almost hidden*’ patterns of power that cause and perpetuate underdevelopment: the domain of personal attitudes, beliefs, practices, principles and norms (James, 2010, cites Scharmer, 2006:21).

Kaplan (1996) suggests that to address these hidden patterns means facing the shadow, those unacknowledged elements, which have not entered into consciousness (Johnson, 1993; Lichtenstein, 1997), wherein the sector may unravel the unspoken and hidden aspects of the N-S relationship.

Confronting the hidden patterns, or shadow, requires time and commitment to the inner work of reflection. It also demands introspection on the frameworks, systems, discourse and ideologies which have embedded power asymmetries at individual, collective, organisational and societal levels, and a willingness to challenge them, transform them, let them go.

Such contestation challenges the assumption that ‘*better management will prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills*’ (Gulrajani, 2011:204). Rather, real change demands a process of *challenging values*, not merely a transfer of assets or skills, and the recognition that any amount of tools and mechanisms alone are insufficient without dialogue processes and political perspectives within a given context (Greijn et al, 2015).

The question arises as to how a process of inner reflection and dialogue can support change in the external, complex world, and bring about transformation in the multi layered, constantly moving phenomena and relationships in which development takes place (Boulton et al, 2015; Gulrajani, 2011).

### **3.3 Reflexivity: the capacity for change**

#### 3.3.1 In search of common will

In examining the main models of organisational learning and change that have dominated practice: restructuring, redesigning, reframing and regenerating, Scharmer (2000:8) notes that 70% of corporate re-engineering fails because of failure to change underlying mental models that have been used to determine the business core processes. Such blockages, created by mental models, are a reflection of habitual thinking, and deep cultural assumptions.

Scharmer goes on to suggest that in order to generate greater flexibility in mental models, and other organisational variables such as action, structure, process, it is necessary to go beyond culture and organisational learning and focus on deep intention, purpose (shared vision) and will, such that it enables an organisation to redefine its purpose and uncover ‘common will’ (Scharmer, 2000:9)

‘*Common will*’ (Scharmer, 2000:28) can be formed when a group is able to engage and uncover its layers of present reality, and develop a shared image and sense of its future purpose.

To do this, Scharmer proposes a methodology using Theory U, which moves participants from a habitual place of listening, i.e. from what you know already, to listening and understanding with a higher quality of attention “*sensing phenomena from within*” (2000:12); having moved into a different state of awareness, where judgment is suspended, a moment of surrender, of letting go is possible and something new can emerge. This shift of consciousness occurs ‘...without conscious control, without the sense of me doing it’ (Scharmer 2000:14, cites Rosch, 1999) it is here that ‘Presencing’ of new forms can be envisioned, can quicken and crystalise, be enacted and become embodied, (Scharmer, 2000:18).

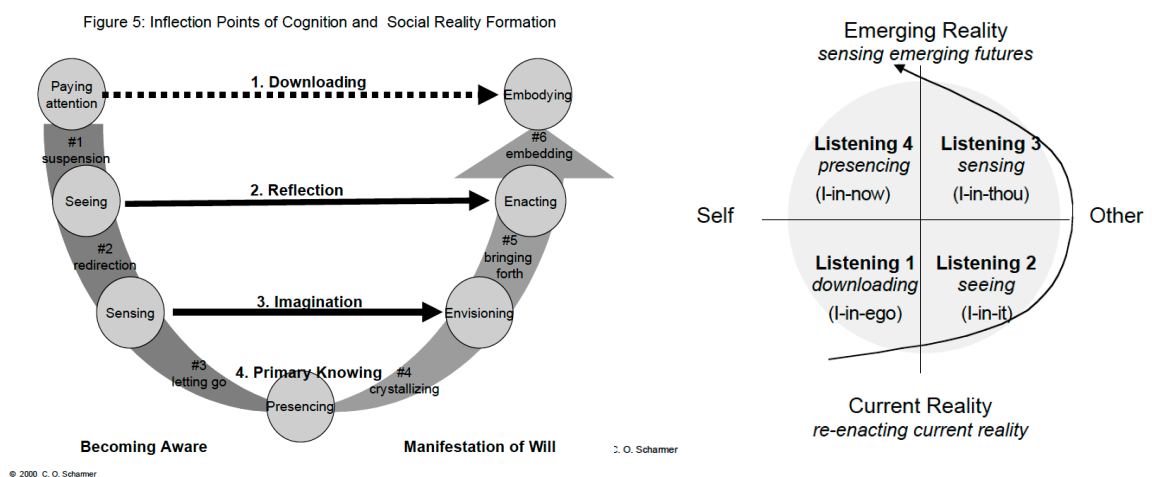


Figure 1. Elements of Scharmer’s U Theory

### 3.3.2 Emerging futures – through the eye of the needle

Scharmer (2002:2) believes that being open to new possibilities requires such “*inversion of the mental-emotional-intentional field structure*”; this ‘inner work’ is perhaps more reminiscent of the creative process, or of eastern contemplation,

than conventional lines of determinism normally associated with development strategy and planning.

Nevertheless, it is in the context of leaders facing disruptive and revolutionary change, in a world with increasingly complex patterns and driving forces such as globalisation, digitisation, networking, as well as spiritualisation (Scharmer, 2000:3, cites Conlin, 1999) that Scharmer places his Theory U as a 'technology of freedom' (2002; 2000).

As the '*higher Self*' becomes a vehicle to '*sense, enact and embody the future as it emerges*' (Jawarski & Scharmer, 2000), it allows the individual or organisation's "*highest future possibility*" to 'emerge' into the present. Any action emerging from the state of inner awareness is of essence compassionate since it is '*based on wholes larger than oneself*' (Scharmer 2000:14), and emerges from '*where mind and world are not separate*' (Rosch, 1999).

It is by crossing through the 'eye of the needle', of letting go between one reality and another with intention and will, that transformation of identity '*from victim to co-creator*' can occur (Scharmer, 2000:29); the essence of this process is "*transformation of the social substance*", a form of birthing, of metamorphosis from the old social body to the new, as a collective or co-created phenomena.

Unsurprisingly, Scharmer sees this as 'the road less travelled', a reference to the work of psychiatrist Peck (1993), partly in reference to three principle resistances to change: judgment, cynicism and fear. Importantly, the moment when change can

occur, the highest point of leverage known as ‘unfreezing’ (Scharmer 2000:10, cites Schein, 1989), is at the point of letting go.

### 3.3.3 Change in a complex world

These ideas resonate and harmonise with complexity theory, and in understanding that change is episodic; that timing is important, and change happens at seen and unseen levels so that even when a system appears stuck, persistence may help unlock attitudes towards creating new perspectives, or “*unfreezing the past*” (Boulton et al, 2015:43).

Indeed, complexity means we can never be sure of what will happen next – it emphasises the limits to our knowledge and ability to predict, and opens up the possibility of “*unknown unknowns*” and of “*tipping*” into new forms where there is no reliable way back (Boulton et al, 2015:10).

The idea of a ‘tipping point’, may arouse feelings of fear and resistance, suggesting as it does a ‘*critical threshold at which the system shifts from one state another*’ (Boulton et al, 2015 cites Scheffer, 2009:53), something irreversible. Boulton et al (2015:41) suggest it is more likely to be a ‘*qualitative change*’ in which patterns, relationships and dimensions change.

Complexity moves focus away from the rational, linear and managerialist modalities of development practice, and places emphasis instead on the holistic, and interconnected; it demands flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability; as

with Theory U, it reinforces the need for interaction and dialogue, reflexive listening and sensing, both on an individual and collective basis, and the courage to embrace the unknown, chaos even.

The evident polarity between classic managerialism and transformative approaches like complexity and Theory U highlights what Scharmer (2002:2) optimises as the clash in organisations and larger social systems “ *between those who want to lead through a technology of control, and those who seek to do this through a technology of freedom*”.

#### 3.3.4 Dancing with chaos and order

The tension between control and freedom is not of necessity a choice of one over the other. The very act of working with both, of holding the tension between polarities, is suggestive of the possibility or conditions for change and transformation.

Westoby and Kaplan’s (2013:226/227) ‘ecological’ approach, recognises both ‘developmental’ and ‘dialogical’ approaches, and advocates a practice of “*dancing between contingency and necessity, between chaos and order*”, where change emerges from the tensions between them, along the fault line of polarities, a “*fragile meeting between intention and accident*”.

Lichtenstein discusses similar ideas in the “*chaotic logic*’ of transformation” where dynamic interdependent systems of predictability and unpredictability, stability and instability, reach a critical threshold out of which a new system may emerge, shifting the system is what he senses, ‘*goes beyond theory and rational action*” and, he argues, is phenomenally best described as ‘*grace, magic or miracle*’ (Lichtenstein, 1997:404).

What these approaches and perspectives offer is a an opening up of thinking and space to rebalance the linear, mechanistic and managerialist modalities of development practice; they suggest it is in developing and deepening the praxis of reflexivity, embracing complexity, dancing between order and chaos, and focusing on intention and common will, that innovation and transformational change is possible.



## Chapter 4. Towards Southern Power

### 4.1 Introduction

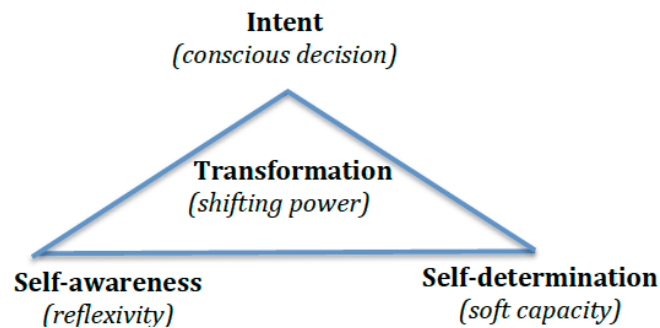
The following chapter explores the ways in which three Northern-based INGOs embarked on a process of significant change to shift power to the south. It will aim to gain understanding of the processes of self-awareness with which this decision was reached and the how 'soft' aspects of capacity e.g. identity, contributed and were contested; also, what part was played by internal reflection, dialogue and exchange in facilitating transition. The three case studies are: **ACORD**, **Action Aid**, and **EveryChild**.

#### 4.1.1 Conceptual framework

For the purpose of analysing the case studies, this paper is proposing to adopt a contextual framework designed to focus on three areas, which are being suggested as relevant to the process of change, and reflective of those discussed above:

- To what extent organisations were aware of power imbalances and made a conscious decision to let go and shift power to the south (**intention**).
- How were 'soft' aspects of capacity important to the process of organisational change, particularly identity (**self-determination**);
- To what extent the organisations cultivated space for reflective practice (**self-awareness**) as an important capacity in itself, by which changes to individual and collective attitudes, beliefs and norms could be explored, contested, and transformed, and thereby contribute to transition.

The framework recognises the relationship between these elements is multi-layered and non-linear, and that they overlap or interact with each other.



*Table 2. Dynamic interplay of elements in transforming power relations*

#### 4.1.2 Caveats

The subject and the case studies are extensive, and consequently the enquiry is unable to be exhaustive. Importantly, there are not as yet any southern driven analysis or evaluations of how the organisational change processes outlined in these studies were experienced or perceived by Southern actors. This analysis is therefore conscious of its own wider critique of insufficient Southern voice. It has attempted where possible, however, to include anecdotes and quotes available from Southern actors. In particular, the reflections from Micheline Ravololonarisoa, Regional Programme Officer for West Africa, ACORD 1997-2000 / Programming Director ACORD, 2000-2002, shared during a phone conversation with the author on 5th September 2016.

### 4.1.3 Case studies

**ACORD** transitioned from a northern, Pan-European NGO, launched in the mid seventies to a southern based African led alliance by 2010 (Fowler, 2012). ACORD formed initially to maximise the capabilities and reach of a group of NGOs in response to severe drought in the Sahel. Evolution from a northern consortium into an international NGO based in Africa, with senior staff and governance based in Africa, staffed permanently by Africans was approved in 1999.

**ACTIONAID** was founded in 1972 as a UK based charity focused on child welfare and education and funded principally through child sponsorship. By the late 1990s, ActionAid had a number of sister organisations established across Europe but the UK supervised all country programmes. The organisation then acted as an Alliance but this was decommissioned in 2003 to favour an internationalisation process and the building of a federation, ActionAid International (AAI) (Jayawickrama and Ebrahim, 2013).

**EVERYCHILD** Began as a merger between two London based NGOs in 2001. It worked in 27 different countries with support from institutional funds and grew rapidly to 2010 in partnership with local NGOs and country offices. In order to best to support it's locally based offices and partners and increase global impact it decided to transfer assets and resources to an international network, Family for Every Child (Famly) in 2011, and close EveryChild by 2017 (Hailey, 2014).

## **4.2 Intent – conscious decision**

### 4.2.1 Commonalities of intent

Firstly, in all three case studies, the decision to shift power to the South was made consciously and with intent. Secondly, in all cases there was an ideological shift, as a result of introspection around programmatic concerns, particularly towards a rights based approach, and/or questions of impact, that both informed and catalysed the decision to shift power to the South. All three agencies were clearly preoccupied with the question of power asymmetry between North and South and how it affected their legitimacy, accountability, and ability to deliver their mission effectively. Thirdly, the decision demanded a conscious letting go of power by those who held it, to then join the resulting international bodies on an equal footing, as in ACORD or ActionAid, or to close and exit completely as with EveryChild.

### 4.2.2. Faultlines of legitimacy - an introspection

For **ACORD** it was the shift to a rights based approach in the 80s, with emphasis on local ownership and greater agency of ‘beneficiaries’ to shape the agenda and become agents of change, that led to internal introspection about power imbalances and reflections around legitimacy and accountability that catalysed change (Fowler, 2012). Growing numbers of allied African NGOs catalysed debate about the nature and authenticity of ACORD’s ‘partnership’. One barrier to southern co-governance, and power re-distribution was the lack of representation:

*“The most damning indictments of all (is) the lack of representation of any African individuals or organisations within the consortium structure” (Report: Is there an ACORD for the 1990s? p8).*

Micheline Ravololonarisoa, Regional Programme Officer for West Africa, ACORD 1997-2000 and Programming Director ACORD, 2000-2002, recalls in 2016:

*“First there is a process of awareness, which comes out of the realisation that ACORD is known for the work done by its African partners in the Sahel; the London office was just an instrument that allowed the work to be visible, but the HQ had all the power to decide what could and could not be done; the intention to shift power arose out of the awareness this was not sustainable.”*

It was tackling these issues that, in 1989, the organisation committed to support the *‘emergence of strong, autonomous local structures in areas of Africa, where they are weak or non –existent’* (Fowler 2012:64).

Further soul searching in the 1990s catalysed by the Research and Policy Programme (RAPP) consolidated dilemmas about legitimacy: *“Does ACORD as an agency have a legitimate role to play in a process which essentially belongs to someone else?”*(Former ACORD staff member, Judy el Bushra; RAPP planning document, undated, Fowler, 2012:38); and important shifts occurred as a result of the debate about what Africanisation meant, instigated by the Change Process Task Force in 1997.

A newly radicalised stance towards globalisation, with strategy towards social justice and working in alliance with social movements, and emphasis on advocacy committed the organisation to move the leadership, management and identity of ACORD from the UK to Africa in 1999, with an international secretariat based in Nairobi (Fowler, 2012).

*“The debates that sought to link ACORD’S micro interventions to global macro policies that impacted on the micro, were an outcome of the change process itself and marked decisively ACORD’s evolution and future direction. This was reflected in the choice of a human rights based approach that put program emphasis on advocacy for rights and justice. This shift of approach strengthened the legitimacy of ACORD’s African constituencies to be their own agents of change rather than just be implementers of a Northern agenda”* Micheline Ravololonarisoa, 2016.

The progressive agenda depended on “ *the willingness of the current membership to hand over a certain degree of their power*”, would call on members to fight for this idea as well as *‘fixing the limits to the role of the North in determining activities in the south,’* and vice versa. (Is there an ACORD for the 1990s? P12).

For **ActionAid** too, a shift towards a human rights based approach demanded new capacity, and its approach to participation lent itself to internal introspection on power imbalances internally as much as externally and the need to be accountable to the poor (Ebrahim & Gordon, 2013). The arrival of a new CEO from the south in

1998, Salil Shetty, ensured the Trustees realised their efforts to diversify the Board, and helped them and senior staff articulate the importance of legitimacy.

What mattered was not funds but ability to influence through ‘moral and intellectual power’; a ‘foreign NGO’ would be unable to advance the vision and aspirations towards engaging the perspectives of the poor, being directly accountable to them, or holding governments to account for obligations to their citizens (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013: 2). A fundamental change was needed to become more downwardly accountable, to the ‘rights holders’ (Ebrahim and Gordon 2013:4).

A ‘battle of ideas’ followed, led by a critical mass of senior staff, mainly Southern, Country Directors and certain Trustees, who drove the agenda for change and challenged the organisation with the radical idea of *‘letting go of its control’* (Jayawickrama and Ebrahim, 2013:3).

The internationalisation process that began in 2003, was not simply a restructuring but a political shift that would make power sharing more equitable, bring members closer together, increase accountability, enable expansion and improve impact (Jayawickrama and Ebrahim, 2013; Ebrahim and Gordon, 2013). It addressed the disjoint between mission and governance, notably that development projects from the north were *‘not sufficient to eradicate poverty and often are not sustainable’* (ActionAid MOU, 2003) and a global movement led by poor people who could act across North South divisions would provide the solution.

ActionAid conceived that its contribution would be the founding ActionAid International (AAI), with an international secretariat taking the central role, based in Johannesburg, reflecting the commitment of AAI to root itself in the south.

*‘Trustees...at that time had to give up their control, their ownership of the organisation – not just to hand over the assets of ActionAid – but to forgo their ability in the future to direct it’* Ken Burnett, CEO ActionAid 2003.

In **EveryChild**, it was also ideological, the result of an internal search to address the need for more culturally embedded solutions, sustainable impacts, as well as enhanced capacity to advocate for children’s rights, that drove the decision towards shifting power. In this, it saw the solution as a network of national NGOs who shared a similar vision about children’s rights and welfare. The model adopted by EveryChild benefitted from learning from similar frameworks, e.g. International HIV Alliance, to structure its international secretariat (Hailey, 2014).

Between 2011-2014 the organisation committed to work with its partners in co-creating the ‘Family for EveryChild’, a sovereign entity accountable to its members and which would see the exit and closure of EveryChild by 2017. This significant decision to end EveryChild was taken subsequent to dramatic changes in its thinking, described as a ‘leap of faith’, in recognition that its continuation might negatively impede the development of the alliance and maintain old north-south power dynamics that the organisation was keen to transform (Hailey, 2014:6).



### 4.2.3 Leadership for change

In **ACORD**, impetus came from Country Directors and southern actors to push the power agenda in a 'bottom up' claim making for southern governance, supported by visionary and dedicated Trustees. Micheline Ravololonarisoa (2016) recalls:

*"At the beginning, when the debate on this issue of power imbalance in ACORD'S structure and programs was raised, there was a lot of resistance and some degree of resentment to 'this ungrateful African woman'; I was looked at in a funny way until other staff from the field from Africa, and some progressive members of the Board, raised the same issue and gave support to the process in addressing it".*

In **Action Aid**, it was also senior Southern staff, especially Country Directors and certain Trustees, who pushed the agenda to 'let go' of power. One Southern perspective offers that:

*"had the Board not pushed for it, internationalisation would not have happened"* Irene Ovonji-Odida, Chair of AAI 2009.

Similarly for **EveryChild**, The change would not have occurred without the Board's 'confidence to take tough, even courageous decisions' (Hailey, 2014:17) delivered through exemplary in-country leadership and quality of staff (James et al, 2015:20). However, exit was decided at Board level; as one Country Director expressed:

*“Although I was consulted, the decision had already been made in London. Our influence was really ‘how’ exit should happen, not whether it should happen”.* (James et al 2015:5).

### **4.3 Self-determination: soft’ capacity**

#### 4.3.1 finding new identity

As can be seen above, inextricably linked to the decision to divest power, is the issue of identity: the organisation’s sense of itself, how it sees the world and goes about expressing and acting on that as a unique and self-defined entity.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, issues like identity, vision and culture are considered ‘soft’ aspects of capacity. The transformation of these organisations was in a sense both a direct result of capacity – the ability to reflect on and come to a clear and coherent vision about who they were and what they wanted to achieve, and at the same time a contestation of it in terms of what it meant to all those concerned and how it *could* be achieved. The process of change was iterative and contested over a period of time.

Fowler (2012:83) reflects that changing identity is possibly the most ‘deep and difficult’ that change can get, since it requires *‘altering part of the identity of those who make up the organisation’*. In this he also highlights the importance of trust. It is clear that without trust the process of transformation may meet with unsolvable barriers and resistance.

In **ACORD** (1985) early Board resolutions towards shifting gravity towards Africa were constrained by reservations ranging from the *'fact that African NGOs are often linked to national interests and could pose a problem'*, to attitudes about southern capacity *"African NGOS have not yet acquired the broad experience which all EEA members should possess"* (Fowler, 2012:25).

This initial reluctance to co-governance could have contributed to 'bottom up' resistance and claim making from members of the African staff, notes Fowler (2012). Indeed, tensions between African staff and London secretariat around grant making and contracting conditions from donors exacerbated what was later regarded as a 'crisis' in North-South relations (Fowler 2102:63). *"The change process was born out of a deep sense of angst"* Executive Director memo, ACORD, 1999.

The fissure between the identity and structure of ACORD was in tension and exposed. Micheline Ravalolonarisoa (2016) explains:

*"There were three layers: identity, ways of working, organisational structure. The issue of identity was around "African-ness": who is African and what it is to be African? Do those who work for Africa have a legitimate claim of an African identity? Was ACORD's way of working allowing agency for transformation by its African constituency? What would be the form and structure of an African led organisation, or an African organisation led by Africans? Two*

*different understandings - one is about identity and one is about the nature of the organisation and what it should be.*

What ultimately shaped ACORD's identity is its 500 plus African staff and partnerships with local communities; it is this that enables it to '*conceive and develop actions which facilitate self-determination and social justice*' (Fowler 2012:79) and thereby fulfill its vision and remit.

#### 4.3.2 Claim making from the grassroots

Although restructuring of **ACORD** was agreed in 1999, it was still not fully defined by 2003/4 and motivations were mixed over programmatic direction. Fowler (2012:99) reports that a '*big fight took place*' as London was still perceived as the centre for decision-making and therefore still holding the power; a rift opened up as Country Directors were increasingly funding their own programmes and saw Nairobi '*surviving on their backs.*'

With gravity shifting towards Africa, the space traditionally held by the UK was challenged, authority tested, and the Board faced a 'power grab' (Fowler, 2012:100). Nairobi must not replicate London; ACORD must become more democratic. Those longstanding staff that understood the African agenda and had passionately bred a form of organisational 'capital', especially Country Directors, had '*earned*' the authority to advocate for leadership from the field by the field' (Fowler 2012:101).

When Country Directors staked their claim for managing the organisation at a learning Forum in Kigali, in 2004, it was regarded by some as a form of 'mutiny', an expression of disaffection '*bordering on anarchy*'. (Fowler, 2012:102).

Fowler (2012:103) notes that lines of authority were re-established by the new African Chair, and the positioning of Africans in key positions of power contributed to resolving governance issues "*Africanisation is best treated as an inside–outside process of staff self development that cannot be 'decentralised ' as such. The energy required must come from a motivation to be responsible for the power that comes with real 'ownership'".*

In this, there is a strong suggestion of identity as a capacity issue, of self-determination i.e. 'staff self-development', driven by the agency of those claiming power and pushing for ownership and new organisational identity.

*"It was important to assert the African identity and be in Africa for the organisation to be influenced by ideas as they are being conceived from an African perspective and not from a northern perspective,"*

Micheline Ravololonarisoa (2016).

The shift of power to the South was predicated on ensuring just such a sense of ownership and empowerment.

*"There are many (staff) who rejoined ACORD because they felt ACORD is empowering staff at all levels to make decisions in their work which*

*they say is not the case in many organisations” Kassech Abegaz, ACORD Addis Ababa, 2011).*

### 4.3.3. A bumpy ride

Nevertheless, despite agreed vision towards southern ownership in **ACORD**, there were broad internal disagreements about identity ranging from the linguistic e.g. predominance of the English language, through to the strategic and programmatic, *“People do not eat advocacy”,* (Country Director quoted by Fowler, 2012:96); also, how personal political engagements were meant to tarry with staff becoming ‘active citizens’ in the new international federation. More profoundly, there were Southern actors who did not want change to happen at all.

*Micheline Ravololonarisao remembers: ‘Some African staff voted against the process of change at the Naivasha consultative meeting in 2000, because it meant the withdrawal of the North’s financial support. These were the very same staff that found themselves in Nairobi confronted with huge financial problems that hampered the management of the new secretariat. Financial income did not match staff expectations. The money did not come’.*

Indeed, ACORD was beleaguered by years of deficit financing, which at times undermined and disrupted its process of change. On this the ACORD CEO, Ousainou Ngum, reflects (in Buckley & Ward, 2015:60):

*'Rather than allowing this (change) to happen naturally, was to impose a structure on it...that was put in place without regard to available financial resources...so basically nothing worked.'*

This highlights the issue of what material supports and accompaniment are required to support a shift in power and build 'soft' capacity around the profound issues of identity and ownership, and the insecurity that unfolds in the change process.

In **ActionAid**, similar problems arise around identity. Shifting power aimed to improve local ownership and empowerment, addressing legitimacy and accountability issues, so that ActionAid partners could assert their national identity and occupy greater political space; for example, Uganda's involvement in the Black Monday campaign:

*"Corruption could not have been broached in such a public way if ActionAid was perceived as a 'foreign NGO" (Arthur Larok, Country Director Uganda, Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013:9).*

However, Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, (2013:10) note that not every country programme that transitions to associate then affiliate member of ActionAid International (AAI) automatically embodies a rooted local identity. They see that more typically it is a local-international 'hybrid' identity, and that local identity is often harder won over longer periods of time. An independent review of AAI in 2004 identified a number of problems of staff ability 'to express the dual identity of

*being associated with a national as well as an international organisation at the same time” (Taking Stock 11, 2004, Ebrahim and Gordon 2013:9).*

This problem suggests tensions around self-direction and self-interest versus international compliance and cohesion, an inevitable friction in negotiations about money, influence, power, decision making that emerge from what has become AAI’s two-tier governance system. Indeed the researchers note that the *‘governance space feels crowded and the balance of power is hard to achieve’*, since national-international, governance-management boundaries often blur, which leads to *‘confusion and contestation’* (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013:10).

Although powers have been devolved to the membership, and members can propose motions and shape the future of AAI, *“sometimes decisions made at international level are seen as being against the sovereignty of national organisations* (Daniela Costa, interview, Ebrahim and Gordon, 2013:9). Tensions arise in relation to northern advocacy versus Southern programmatic needs:

*“We were not consulted about the closure of country programs. We were informed. Its clear that our northern expansion is costing us money and it feels as though that money is being taken from the South to fund the North”* (African Country Director, Ebrahim and Gordon, 2013:13).



Motions set forth for the 2010 general assembly highlight continuing contestation in decision-making processes and self-determination, and revisit old power imbalances and identity issues.

In **EveryChild** there was no debate with Southern partners as to whether exit should happen, only how. In this respect the internal tensions over identity are perhaps less evident than in the other case studies. Nevertheless tensions emerge. Russia did not own the post 2012 exit process due to a breakdown in trust, created during a previous 'localisation' process that had suffered from poor communication and time pressures. They did not see the exit decision as theirs "*it is their process, their milestones, their agenda*" (James et al, 2015:5).

Additionally, EveryChild's decision to exit rather than 'localise' was questioned by some staff. It is interesting that the argument for improved sustainability was central to focusing the exit on maintaining child services, but exit has thrown into question some country offices' sustainability, and consequently the continuity of their programmes. James et al (2015:17) point out that most of the previously localised EveryChild offices are functioning five years on, so questions remain as to whether localisation might have been a better option.

#### 4.3.4 Planning for change

Although Southern partners were not engaged in the decision to exit, their fears about what it could mean were recognised. Consequently, **EveryChild** supported

partners by implementing Responsible Exit Principles (REP) to guide and assist the process. Some partners immediately adjusted, took ownership by developing their own sustainability and exit plans, and led their in-country change process (James et al, 2015).

Providing REPs focused exit on sustaining the vision of children's wellbeing. Communication was structured from *"one about exit to one about sustainability"*. (James et al, 2015:5); in this regard the change process was maintained cohesively through capitalising on shared values and vision, an aspirational approach to the issue of identity that allowed for country and context specific adaptation and planning whilst maintaining overall mission. EveryChild staff visited partners, but only to facilitate discussion. Decisions and priorities were left to the partners.

In this sense the individual identity of partners was not fundamentally impacted. Partners were helped to become more autonomous and capacity development was significantly lacking in self-interest, as is more usually the case in INGO's capacity building programmes (James and Hailey, 2007). In India, for example, the partner determined the supports they required, and remarked that the leadership programme *'gave partners the opportunity to explore alternatives and take ownership of their organisations and their work. They felt prouder and stronger'* (James et al, 2015:42).

In this respect, EveryChild's exit process is seen to have catalysed partner's self-motivation and self-determination as well as grown their confidence. EveryChild's departure was:

*'...Like the end of a tarmac road. The road continues. It will be slower and bumpier, but we will get there all the same'*. (Malawian community leader, James et al, 2015:11).

The struggle for survival might be considered healthy, leading to more resilient and sustainable organisations. It could be argued that exit was a strategy for recognising local identity, and promoting local autonomy and decision-making processes: *'Exit forces you not to be lazy and just play lip service to sustainability'*(respondent in James et al, 2015:22). However, the question of security looms where some programmes and services require financial inputs and are facing uncertainty.

#### 4.3.5. Organisational identity over time

It is perhaps important to note that both **ACORD** and **ActionAid** were institutions with long standing histories and established identities when they embarked on change. The change process took many years during which staff left and with them institutional memory. New staff did not always embody the '**ACORD** -way' of doing things, of solidarity and activism, the usual risk taking associated with working in difficult circumstances, notes Fowler (2012:95). In **ActionAid** the ten guiding principles, which form the 'DNA' of the organisation and orient the federation, are frequently forgotten (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013).

In its shorter transition, there is a sense that **EveryChild's** exit posed less of a problem to organisational identity, not least as EveryChild planned to close. Importantly, EveryChild was not encumbered by a long narrative history or emotional attachment to a 'mythical' sense of its own identity; change was part of EveryChild's culture, making it more readily disposed to a significant change process (Hailey, 2014:19).

## **4.4 Self-awareness: reflexivity**

### 4.4.1 Creating space for reflection and dialogue

The change process clearly demands significant capacity, not just in material resources to support the process over time, but also the 'soft' capacity to self-determine and self-define around issues of identity. As has been discussed in Chapter 3, reflexivity is essential to nurture such capacity, and for opening the space for transformational change; it is therefore important in the change process that time and space is provided for reflection, dialogue and learning.

All three organisations committed to creating space for learning, reflection and dialogue, including traditional learning mechanisms such as research units, workshops, meetings, assemblies, but also broader forms of communication, task forces and learning arenas that supported debate and learning towards transition. Arguably, these spaces for dialogue, as well as interpersonal communications, were vital in generating and sharing vision, shaping understandings, and creating 'common will' to manifest change and transition.

#### 4.4.2 Back to the future

When **ACORD** experienced internal crisis, a confluence of financial instability, leadership and governance issues, it engaged Community Development Research Association (CDRA) to assist in addressing the relational aspects. Working alongside Olive Consultancy, CDRA resisted expectations to produce recommendations. Instead they brought the organisation back to its own internal deliberation, insights and collective responsibility to resolve the issues. The process exposed serious differences in understanding and interpretation about what the new ACORD meant. New insights had to come from within, through honest reflection and self-sought solutions (Fowler, 2012).

The contradictions that emerged from that process influenced issues of identity that could not easily be resolved e.g. being part of the aid system while criticising it. Reconciling paradoxes and holding them was fostered as a mutual and enduring shared responsibility: *'an emerging transformation in peoples understanding of themselves and others as holding common responsibility for the organisation's well being and clarity'*, CDRA report on outcome of ACORD's organisational review, May 2005.

Generating 'common will' (Scharmer, 2000) might be attributed to what happened at Pan African Workshops in 2002, when ACORD clarified it would be African led, responsive to African needs and accountable to an agenda set by people involved

in Africa's social movements. It was what Fowler (2102:92) calls a seminal moment, '*a moment of discovery*', which marked a '*personal and collective turning point*' in the appreciation of the history of the organisation, the change process and what it could bring to the continent.

*"I have never seen this happen before. Something very special is going on in ACORD (participant quote in "the implications of globalisation on Africa's development" PAWS Report June 2012, Fowler 2012:93).*

When it was understood that there was little difference between anti-globalisation and anti-colonialism in addressing western hegemony, and that '*the new ACORD would no longer be brought to the continent from outside*', re-conceptualising the form and model of ACORD was '*unleashed by the process of change as much as by the conscious efforts to guide it*' (Fowler, 2012:93).

Such moments of awareness, of transitioning from past concepts to co-creating new ones, of arriving at shared vision and 'common will' (Scharmer, 2000), are not attained without significant internal process and investment in dialogue and reflection. Micheline Ravololonarisoa (2016) reflects:

*"Under which model of new structure and management does the South regain control and have agency of its own development - rather than have the superimposition of a Northern management model which we knew was tainted with a paternalistic approach? The search for this new form of organisation took a long time".*

Fowler (2012:119) notes that it was a four year journey which reviewed the ACORD governance that enabled serious dialogue about African ownership and African-led internationalism, in which '*a process of bottom up claim making, boiling tensions and conflict all played a creative part*'.

Consultation and dialogue reflected ACORD's participatory values and was clearly important in keeping staff and members enfranchised throughout the change process, and helped to address fears. As Fowler (2012:88) notes "*though the anxiety and risks of change might or might not have been reduced, the process made clear that those involved were co-designing a new ACORD, not simply implementing something from above*".

For **EveryChild**, there is also a sense of a moment of organisational awakening or realisation that led to the decision to exit from country programmes, a 'leap of faith; the decision to create one, international Family was a 'light bulb moment' (Hailey, 2014:6). However, accompanying such moments, is the investment in reflection, dialogue and exchange to support and promote change over time. For example, James et al (2015:20) note that a previously established two way process of partnership evaluation to air difficulties and disagreements had produced '*high levels of trust with many partners meant we could address challenges linked to exit constructively*' (staff member).

#### 4.4.3 Learning as action

**EveryChild** also paid attention to lessons from its past, as espoused by complexity theory. Its previous country exit/localisation experiences had highlighted staff member *“how incredibly difficult it was to leave and how easy it was to do badly”* (Staff member, James et al, 2015:6). These experiences informed EveryChild to invest greater time and resource in the exit planning and to be more transparent, communicative and collaborative. Additional to REP, was a strong emphasis on documentation and sharing of good practice, a *‘relentless monitoring and learning’* (James et al 2015:9) including six monthly reflection meetings by the UK team and constant monitoring of partners’ sustainability plans.

Relationship building was critical to ensuring smooth transition. The partners appear to have appreciated the approach, despite the risks to their own security and survival:

*“EveryChild has listened more than any of our other donors and have taken on board our suggestions”, and ‘they did things that no other donors have previously done’; also, they did “not duck difficult conversations”* (Partner feedback, James et al, 2015:15/18/19).

The flexibility and adaptability of EveryChild staff was also considered a striking element in the change process (Hailey, 2014; James et al, 2015), all of which suggests transformational approaches to process and relationships.



In **ActionAid** many different platforms were created for dialogue, learning and exchange. The introduction of an Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS) in 2000 was perceived as a radical departure for ActionAid to address downward accountability, as well as *'enhancing transparency and critical learning and reflection'* (Ebrahim and Gordon 2013:4).

ALPS sought not just to reduce reporting and shift emphasis away from the managerial to the reflective and relational, it offered space for dialogue. This was supported by annual country participatory review and reflection considered *"absolutely fundamental, ... and they were the groundbreaking, revolutionary idea at the time* (senior staff member, Ebrahim and Gordon, 2013:5). Parallel to ALPS, the discussion about re-organising ActionAid took place over 40 country programmes.

#### 4.4.4 Shortchanging change

Despite the significant commitments to organisational learning and reflection in **ActionAid**, Jayawickrama & Ebrahim (2013) suggest that the transition of country programmes to evolve into full 'affiliates' by 2008, as agreed in the 2003 MOU, has not materialised due to the time, resources and capacity needs required for the transformation process. A particularly important challenge, identified by Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, (2013) is the lack of systematic process or unit to foster and co-ordinate learning across the organisation. *"ALPS was created to reduce reporting and improve learning. That's still the problem"* Laurie Adams, Head of International Assessment and Shared Learning Unit (IASL), AAI 2009.

Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, (2013:16) remark there is ‘ *no space for drawing out key lessons, sharing important information, identifying best practices, and creating spaces for collective reflection and debate*’. The reliance on goodwill and trust in the federation model of relationships demands significant dialogue and in this Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, (2013) recommend high level visioning, generative discussion and steering by the Board.

For **ACORD** too, it appears some aspects of dialogue were also lacking.

Micheline Ravololonarisoa (2016):

*‘Some staff thought that a collective debate among African staff, on what needs to be done, would undermine the relationship with the Northern partner. So the space for such independent discussion was never there. Everything has always been under the sponsorship of the Northern partners’.*

These demands for more dialogue, reflection and generative discussion, to create trust and deal with identity and power issues, highlight the importance of resourcing and prioritising these vital elements in organisational change. They also indicate the complex conundrums and inevitable paradoxes within the process of shifting power relations, and point to the understanding shared by Fowler (2012:120) that “*keeping irresolution on the table can feed critical self reflection, itself a form of organisational capacity*’.

## **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

### 5.1 Reframing sustainability

The current paradigm of official aid and development assistance maintains a northern hegemony with its roots in a colonial past. As the development project has progressed, so too have the expanded roles of INGOs and with them the dominance of Northern actors and their accompanying agendas and approaches to change. These, it may be argued, continue to create barriers to Southern actors' autonomy, especially that of SNGOs.

If development is to be sustainable, then arguably it must be locally owned. In order to achieve this, a vibrant civil society is vital to ensure local agendas are voiced and prioritised, government and local leadership is held to account for service provision, and existing hegemonies are challenged. SNGOs are important actors in countering hegemonic forces but their ability to flourish may depend on greater autonomy so they are better able to reflect and directly respond to the needs and aspirations of their communities (Bebbington, 2008; Smith, 2015; Blaney, 1996; Civicus, 2014).

In order to achieve this a number of issues need to be addressed. Firstly, the lack of Southern voices cannot be ignored. The need to listen to, understand and respond to Southern perspectives in analysing the advance of development and its modus operandi is an urgent and overdue priority.

*“The political justification (to shift power) is there, the support and accompaniment must be looked into carefully. This process must not be seen as mere technical fix...New forms of solidarity need to be created, solidarity that engages both parties to dialogue around the issues as equals, not as donor and recipient. Most of the time crucial engagement as equals is not there and development discourse is still heavily dominated by the Northern paradigm”, Micheline Ravalolonarisoa (2016).*

Secondly, Development co-operation needs to respect and intentionally foster the autonomy of Southern NGOs (de Valk, 2009; Bawa, 2013) and ensure that divesting power and redistributing resources to Southern actors is a priority for donors and agencies, written into their theory of change (James, 2015; Pearce, 2010).

Thirdly, recognition that shifting power to the South reduces the distance, both cultural, psychological and physical, between those for whom development is sought and those that deliver it; it ensures operational practices become ‘*embedded in local realities*’, embodied in the experience and knowledge of those involved (Guljarani, 2011: 212) and discourages aid professionals from the instinct of self-preservation (Guljarani, 2011) so that power and resources can be redistributed.

### 5.3 The road less travelled

In the three case studies, there is evidence of conscious intent and courage to change and shift power South; to contest inherent N-S power imbalances and their undermining effect on the values and mission of development. The organisations have attempted to address the post colonial legacy of Northern hegemony; ACORD and ActionAid have decoupled money from power in new, democratic power sharing structures; and EveryChild, in recognising the potential of its very existence to hamper Southern autonomy, has decided to close.

In doing so all three embarked on significant internal processes of reflection, dialogue and learning, all of which has supported the building of 'soft' capacity. Elements such as self-determination and identity, together with relational elements like trust, have been developed through largely non-managerial, non-linear, iterative approaches in a task of co-creation, not without contestation, uncertainty and insecurity.

Nevertheless, the case studies offer important insights, lessons and models as to why and how a shift in power might be considered. They provide a narrative for alternative visions for equality in North and South relationships and, although further evaluation of the outcomes of these processes is still pending (e.g. with EveryChild's 2016 evaluation), and a Southern driven evaluation of transitions/exit is yet to be undertaken, their example radically challenges the current paradigm and promotes deeper debate about N-S relations and Southern autonomy. They have taken a road less travelled.

The story of transformation does not end with N-S NGO transition; that is just a beginning. As has been the case for Andry Lalana Tohana in Madagascar, Southern actors have to maintain their autonomy and operations in the face of ongoing challenges within the local social context, national political frameworks, and the wider international aid architecture, all of which are slow and often less willing to embrace or support change.

The theories and methods offered by Scharmer and others to address change from a transformative perspective support the 'inner work' of reflection and dialogue, and offer a praxis to co-create new relationships and visions of the future. As such they may offer a way to find freedom from the existing paradigm of development. In particular, to create space and freedom for Southern actors to voice their own definitions, agendas and modalities for change. From such a place, perhaps a new interdependence has the possibility to emerge, where shared agendas and mutual goals can find solidarity between North and South.

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