What underlies the shift to a modality of partnership in educational development cooperation?

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Abstract   This paper situates the philosophy and politics of partnership in educational development cooperation in the context of wider epistemological and axiological shifts in contemporary social theory. Partnerships in development cooperation are considered also in the light of the alleged failure of international development assistance, a claim that has received much attention with the publication of, among others, William Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good* (2006) and of Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (2008). Partnership as a development strategy offers one response to these claims, but if shared development objectives and policies, shared ownership, shared decisions about where aid is targeted, shared rights, shared responsibilities, and shared implementation strategies still leave the education development community facing challenges as big as ever, it might be time, the paper concludes, to consider whether the concept of partnership hasn't been expanded too far as a modality in development cooperation.[i]

Partnership, rather than, say, the imposition by Northern agencies of 'established best practice' in a local Southern context, in terms dictated by the former has, since about the mid-eighties, become a central, if not *the* central, concept in the development field. This is no less true of the field of educational development. As a development strategy, the concept of partnership includes notions of shared development objectives and policies, shared ownership, shared decisions about where aid is targeted, shared rights, shared responsibilities, and shared implementation strategies. The central question I ask in this paper has to do with what lies behind this shift to a modality of partnership in educational development cooperation. I respond to that question by situating the philosophy and politics of partnership in the context of wider epistemological and axiological shifts in contemporary social theory. Partnership as a modality in educational development cooperation is considered also in the light of the alleged failure of international development assistance. I conclude with a critical assessment of partnership as a development modality, asking whether the concept hasn't been stretched too far in perhaps rather excessive obeisance to prevailing social imaginaries, as Charles Taylor (2004) refers to the ways of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, involving common understandings that make every-day practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy. One such social imaginary in late modern societies is constituted by and associated with an increased recognition of plurality, of diverse claims to what might be the right or the best

course of action, of scepticism toward claims to the absolute truth of any 'established best practice'.

Of the 'education for development' regime that prevailed from perhaps as early as the fifties, through the sixties and seventies and into the mid-eighties, key features included its "fairly limited range of actors" and its "fixed array of aid modalities" (Mundy, 2006, p. 18). Dominant among this limited range of actors were UNESCO and the World Bank. As Joel Samoff has pointed out with regard to the aid modalities that prevailed, Southern governments were constructed merely as the targets of this regime, and as little more than recipients of its aid: "With the foreign funding came ideas and values, advice and directives on how education systems ought to be managed and targeted" (Samoff, 2003, p. 440). External resources exerted a substantial "direct and indirect influence on policy and programs" (*ibid*.). As external agencies provided

> funding and development advice, their perspectives … shaped approaches, methodologies, and the definition of [educational] missions and more generally the scientific enterprise. Throughout Africa, [for example], unable to find local support, education researchers became contracted consultants. As they did so, those imported understandings of research, from framing questions to gathering data to interpretive strategies, were internalized and institutionalized, no longer foreign imports but now the apparently unexceptional everyday routines [of educational discourse, research and practice] (*ibid*.).

If post-colonial theory is about understanding the socio-cultural conditions of societies recently independent of a colonial empire, then this is surely the quintessence, albeit by way of an African example, of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a primary text in the field, of how the colonizer simultaneously constructs the colonized as Other and yet seeks to render him in the ways of the Empire. Later in the paper I situate the shift away from the dominance of Northern ways of knowing within the context of the postmodern turn, but this shift is equally to be understood in terms of post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques.

Avoiding the uncritical and wholehearted acceptance of the prescriptions of external agencies is not, however, that simple: as Pearlette Louisy (2001, p. 435) has pointed out,

> It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative inquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others.

Mundy and Murphy (2001, p. 95) point out additionally that, "although the number of nongovernmental organizations with an interest in education rapidly expanded in this [post-World War II] period, these organizations also remained highly fragmented and marginalized within what emerged as a fairly expansive arena for intergovernmental relations in education". As a consequence, "few non-governmental actors were involved or recognized within the official regime: they remained outside its conferences and conventions" (Mundy, 2006, p. 18).

The official discourse of 'education for development' was in this manner largely unidirectional (North to South) in nature and exclusionary in its perspective on actors outside of government. Perhaps those in the North, or in the West, might have thought they had the answers to the problems faced by the developing world. US President Truman's perspectives and exhortations of 1949 are in many respects typical:

> For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of [the world's poor].... I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life.... What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing.... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge (Truman, H. [1949] in Escobar, A. [1995], p. 3).

Since those more optimistic times we have, in truth, had to confront significant disappointment in the failure of large amounts of international development assistance and aid. The 'education for development' regime has not been as successful as might have been hoped. In highlighting some of the failures of the development community for the purposes of this paper, I want, nevertheless, to stress the virtues in such a sceptical perspective. It has been said that one can recognize a truly democratic society by the complaints of its citizens to the effect that it is not yet democratic enough. There is, in other words, always unfinished business in the deepening and widening of democratic participation. Analogously, perhaps one can recognize the most committed development community by the complaints of its members about its failures. There is always unfinished business in the business of development.

Many substantial and well-known criticisms of international development assistance have consequently been offered in the years since the turn of the century. These include, in order of publication, William Easterly's *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' adventures and misadventures in the tropics* (2001); Thomas Dichter's *Despite Good Intentions: Why development assistance to the Third World has failed* (2003); David Ellerman's *Helping People Help Themselves: From the World Bank to an alternative philosophy of development assistance* (2005); Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good* (2006); Jonathan Glennie's *The Trouble with Aid: Why less could mean more for Africa* (2008); and Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (2008).

One of the most well-known and controversial of these is Moyo's *Dead Aid.* Her reasons why aid is dead as a strategy might, at the risk of over-simplification, be summarized, following Kenneth King (2009), thus:

A key reason why aid fails as a strategy is that it lends itself too easily to, and in fact aids, corruption. Corrupt governments have an increased interest in reducing transparency and in protecting their corrupt interests by weakening the rule of law and undermining civil liberties in their societies. Societies with these characteristics are unattractive to both

domestic and foreign investment. Reduced investment, in turn, reduces jobs and increases poverty. And with growing poverty, donors give more aid, only to continue the vicious cycle.

To this core argument, Moyo adds a number of supplementary propositions. By lending itself so easily to corruption, aid "erodes the essential fabric of trust that is needed between people in any functioning society" (2008, p. 59). She further claims that "foreign aid foments conflict", and is an "underlying cause of social unrest, and possibly even civil war" (2008, p. 59). Aid, she claims, also contributes to reducing savings and domestic investment, and can contribute to the weakening of the export sector (2008, p. 62). Poor countries, she suggests, frequently lack the capacity to deploy aid effectively (2008, pp. 64-5); and aid dependency contributes to laziness and a lack of imagination on the part of African policy-makers (2008, p. 66).

Partnerships in development cooperation have accordingly been offered as one response in the light of these alleged failures of international development assistance. As I mentioned earlier, partnership, rather than, say, the imposition by Northern agencies of 'established best practice' in a local Southern context, in terms dictated by the former has, since about the mid-eighties, become a central, if not *the* central, concept in the development field. "Efforts to strengthen … partnerships between the North and the South have been prioritised, with development agency policies increasingly encouraging collaboration in … projects between … bodies located in both the North and the South (Barrett, Crossley & Dachi, 2011, p. 27). The UK's Department for International Development, for example, holds that "genuine partnerships between poorer countries … and the donor community are needed if poverty is to be addressed effectively and in a coherent way" (DFID, 1997, p. 37). Similarly, the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO, 1998) has articulated its support for "genuine research partnerships aimed at mutual benefit", committing itself to the assessment and articulation of research needs and priorities "by researchers, policy-makers and end users in developing countries". And, in similar vein, the Norwegian government has also stressed the importance of effective research partnerships in the fight against poverty.

Louisy's claim to the effect that "It has proven very difficult sometimes to persuade development agencies that the contexts and circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, for example, do not necessarily apply to the Caribbean region" (2001, p. 436) reminds us of at least one aspect of the rationale behind the concept of partnerships in development cooperation: that Southern voices need to be taken seriously, not least for the very good reason of helping to prevent the uncritical and inappropriate transfer of policies from one context to another, probably very different, context. As Michael Crossley has frequently reminded us, "context matters in educational research and international development" (2010, p. 421). Another aspect of the rationale behind partnership as a modality lies in collaboration of this nature focusing on "the priority needs of low-income countries, while simultaneously strengthening the institutional and national research capacity of the Southern partners and reducing their dependency on Northern research organizations and expertise" (Barrett, Crossley & Dachi, 2011, p. 27).

The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE, 1998) has identified inequalities between donors and recipients as a major source of problems in

the implementation of development projects, and created a set of *Guidelines for Research in Partnership with Developing Countries*, based on the following 11 principles:

(1) Decide on the objectives together
(2) Build up mutual trust
(3) Share information; develop networks
(4) Share responsibility
(5) Create transparency
(6) Monitor and evaluate the collaboration
(7) Disseminate the results
(8) Apply the results
(9) Share profits equitably
(10) Increase research capacity
(11) Build on the achievements

These 11 principles overlap substantially with the 10 principles set down by the Africa Unit (2010) of the British Council as key to the success and sustainability of partnerships, with the principle of shared ownership topping its list.

From a philosophical or social-theoretical perspective, it is no accident that the conceptual shift towards partnership as a modality in educational development cooperation gained most momentum during the late eighties and has been sustained since then. It was in 1984 that Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979) was published in English as *The Postmodern Condition*. The eminent contemporary social theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, suggests that an important aspect of the postmodern approach to knowledge lies in "the rejection of … the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory" (Bauman, 1993, p. 4). This rejection is partly a consequence of the perspectives that are typically associated with an increasingly globalized society: that ours is a plural world, with a diversity of claims to truth and goodness – hence the abandonment, or at least the softening, of the coercive and regulatory perspectives associated with modernity. While the thought and practice of modernity may have been, to paraphrase Bauman, animated by the belief in the possibility of finding, through the exercise of reason and rationality, universal and non-ambivalent codes of practice and solutions to social problems, what is *post*modern is the "*disbelief* in such a possibility" (Bauman, 1993, pp. 9, 10). The shifts in the development field from external imposition and prescription to partnerships in development cooperation reflect and contribute to these intellectual shifts in contemporary social theory.

One factor contributing to these shifts is of course the proliferation of information and communications technology. Access to 'the best' information is accordingly no longer the privilege of wealthy or powerful individuals or agencies in the North (and, after all, with our contemporary sensibilities, we are no longer convinced that it ever was 'the best' information). That these technologies have also enabled people to communicate with each other more directly has contributed to a flattening of hierarchies and an expansion of networks. More widely available access to and sharing of information have thus further entrenched partnership as the dominant motif in development cooperation.

But it would be naïve to assume that these shifts in perspective have been predicated solely on the processes associated with increasing rates of globalization and on the proliferation of information and communications technology. Our recognition of plurality, of diverse claims to what might be the right or the best course of action, is also a consequence of a scepticism consequent on what we have witnessed in the twentieth century. In an age of high modernity, when we had available to us the constitutional arrangements of liberalism and democracy, we have witnessed a scale of terror never seen before, made possible by the technology and bureaucracy of modernity, which allowed the rationally planned, large-scale executions and systematic destruction of lives in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in China under Mao, in the genocide of Auschwitz and Birkenau, and in the engineering of an entire society along ethnic lines in apartheid South Africa. These are some of the factors that contributed to the 'postmodern turn', and to the concomitant scepticism towards such Enlightenment tenets as the view that our knowledge of society is holistic and cumulative, and that we can attain universal, objective and rational social scientific knowledge of society, upon which we can act to produce emancipation and social upliftment.

Such scepticism typified the development community as well. As early as 1969, some ten years before the publication of Lyotard's *Report on Knowledge* (the subtitle of his *Postmodern Condition*), the World Bank commissioned Lester Pearson to consider, in the face of the continuing poor performance of many developing countries, the sources of the growing doubt about the efficacy of development aid and, indeed, the doubt about the very development aims upon which such aid was predicated. Pearson's report was in some ways to the field of development what Lyotard's *Report on Knowledge* was to the wider fields of sociology, philosophy and social theory. Pearson's recommendations to establish better partnerships between agencies in the developed countries and institutions in developing countries reflected – and pre-figured – the epistemological shifts identified by Lyotard in our decreasing confidence in the universal efficacy of our 'rationally-grounded' solutions. Recall that a key feature of the postmodern perspective is that in an era when the range of our epistemological, moral and practical choices and the consequences of our actions are more far-reaching than ever before, we are unable to rely on a universal epistemological or ethical code that would yield unambiguously good solutions. This is why we have so little faith in what we used to be certain was right, good and true. In our humility that has followed our own collapse of faith, we have learned to become more sensitive to different ways of doing things. And if we now have so little faith in what we used to know to be the right thing to do, how much less faith do we have in the applicability of our (now more tenuously held) beliefs and practices in other economic, political, social and cultural contexts? The possibility of defending principles and solutions that have practical and normative reach across all such contexts – a question that ought to be seriously considered by any institute or agency associated with, say, UNESCO, EADI, the UNDP – was, to its credit, seriously considered by the World Bank back in 1969.

One of Pearson's recommendations, reported by Richard Sack (1999, p. 9), was that

> [i]t is necessary to create the building blocks towards mutual trust and respect and the establishment of better partnerships between the developed and developing countries. This requires dialogue about the ends and means, and the meaning of

development. The Report raised process to the same level of importance as objectives, and recognized the importance of what we now call 'ownership'.

Senegal's President Abdou Diouf's opening remarks to the 1997 meeting in Dakar of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) typify this approach:

> In order to progress from the aid relationship to partnership, the first step lies in redefining the status and roles of those involved in a way that truly recognizes and accepts the equal dignity and responsibility of both partners, above and beyond differences in their cultures and levels of development. The type of partnership we should promote cannot be founded on a vertical relationship based on authority, constraint, the imposition of an imbalance of power, substituted sovereignty and the transposition of models, or, on the other side of the coin, paternalism and condescension. Instead, it should be founded on conditions such as authentic dialogue in a horizontal relationship in which the actors recognize each other as equals and participate in an exchange considered mutually useful and enriching by both parties…. This is necessary in order to achieve … a common understanding of development goals and strategies.

Such partnerships, with their shared sense of 'ownership', envisage not only shared rights on both sides, but also, as President Diouf indicated, shared responsibilities. That responsibility has, of course, to be shared in failure as much as in success. And it is, in part, in the face of some continuing failures, despite the recent dominance of a paradigm of partnership in development cooperation, that the likes of Easterly, Dichter, Ellerman, Glennie and Moyo have asked critical questions about the modalities of international development assistance, about the very nature of aid itself. Barrett, Crossley & Dachi (2011, p. 29) have asked "to what extent can ownership be genuinely shared", and have identified, in their assessment of the Research Programme Consortium for Implementing Education Quality in Low-Income Countries (EdQual), funded by the UK's Department for International Development, and in their summary of the literature, problems related to

> the fair division of roles, where, for example, Northern partners have too often commanded all leadership, planning and management roles; the unequal sharing of rewards, benefits and esteem; … [and] managing tensions between research capacity building (process) goals and research product deadlines (*ibid*.).

It is frequently the case that, while Northern partner agencies tend to be more focused on targets, outputs, products and deadlines, Southern partners tend to place more emphasis on the process itself, on the building of capacity in the South and on the building of long-term relationships with colleagues and institutions in the North.

While both the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries and the British Council's Africa Unit set down collective decision-making as an ideal in determining the objectives of development cooperation projects, Barrett, Crossley and Dachi (2011, p. 32) go on to remind us that "decision-making for funded research … always takes place within the parameters of terms of reference set by the funding body". Parallel to this issue of power being almost inexorably linked to money are the inevitable

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compromises made between the needs identified by the Southern partner and the strategic interests and priorities of the Northern funding agency – to say nothing of the expertise available in the Northern partner institution to meet those needs. Expertise in the writing of development cooperation proposals is also frequently less developed in Southern institutions, which can of course lead easily to project design being overly strongly led by Northern institutions (see Barrett, Crossley & Dachi, 2011, pp. 33, 39). In sum, as Crossley and Holmes recognize, "successful cross-cultural partnerships are difficult to achieve, depending as they do on a high level of cultural awareness and an understanding of the subtle political and economic dynamics of changing North-South relationships" (2001, p. 400). As Leon Tikly (1999) has warned from a post-colonial perspective on the question, issues relating to colonial history, economic power, culture, language, class and ethnicity are almost always involved, but seldom openly discussed and addressed. Also at this most fundamental level, genuine North-South partnerships are challenging because they require all partners to define the very concepts of 'development', 'partnership' and 'research', even "before specific research needs and priorities are assessed" (Crossley & Holmes, 2001, p. 401).

If, then, shared development objectives and policies, shared ownership, shared decisions about where aid is targeted, shared rights, shared responsibilities, and shared implementation strategies still leave us facing challenges in development as big as we have ever faced, is it time to consider the extent to which we have expanded the concept of partnership? In his editorial introduction to a special issue of NORRAG News dedicated to this theme, Kenneth King (2008) notes that partnership is frequently even a condition of Northern researchers working in the South. Some Northern agencies, he reminds us, expect Southern institutions to take the lead in choosing their Northern partners. And even graduate students are frequently under pressure from Northern funding agencies to have Southern 'partners' for their research.

Following the critiques offered by the likes of Easterly, Dichter, Ellerman, Glennie and Moyo, we could say that a degree of modesty might be appropriate in development cooperation, but false modesty, especially on the part of Northern agencies, donors, NGOs and researchers, is surely to be guarded against. There are most worthwhile principles to be found guiding much Northern development work: principles that, for example, espouse fairness, transparency, accountability, and the moral responsibility to target efforts at the poorest of the poor. To compromise, say, the latter, so as to allow some Southern governments to spend the development aid which they receive in budget support merely where it will make the most difference to their EFA numbers, rather than where it might be needed most (as Keith Lewin [2008] has described), is, to continue the metaphor, false modesty indeed on the part of Northern donors in partnership cooperation. Reticence on the part of the latter in demanding more moral accountability with regard to the spending of SWAp budgetary support is indeed inappropriate. Conditionalities on aid, particularly those set in place to enhance aid effectiveness, minimize corruption and prevent diversion of funds, directly or otherwise, to military expenditure and the like, remain as important as they ever were.

Also inappropriate is a complete shrinking from any notion of 'best practice' on the part of Northern agencies. I admit that I have elsewhere (see Mason, 2007) offered arguments

challenging the degree of confidence we tend to have in ideas and ideals of universal best practice. But, at the same time, I acknowledged in that paper the worth, even if at a high level of generality, of claims such as "Best practice assumes the existence and enforcement of procedures to minimize corruption in any development work", or, "Any development work should aim to maximize the life chances of those most at risk in the prevailing context". If insistence on these ideals on the part of Northern agencies represents a skewing of the power relationships in any development cooperation partnership, then that is surely an appropriate imbalance of the scales.

In guarding against false modesty in development cooperation, Northern donors in particular should not shrink from the fact that, while the concept of partnership commonly implies an equal distribution of rights and responsibilities among those party to the arrangement, this need not necessarily be the case, and is indeed frequently not the case empirically either. It is no doubt hard to construct an equal partnership when one party, for example, controls the purse strings. The arguments in this domain have of course been well rehearsed, whether they have to do with colonial histories and the moral obligations of restitution, the venal politics of aid when the real barriers to development lie in restrictions on trade, or with the construction and destruction of the Third World as argued by Arturo Escobar (1995). It should accordingly be no surprise that we have of late been witness to the increasing prevalence of South-South partnerships (see, for example, Chisholm & Steiner-Khamsi, 2009), a shift that raises the potential for a move beyond the often difficult ethical, political and epistemological issues of North-South partnerships. But that is the topic of another paper. The truth, if it is to be found, of this most sensitive aspect of development assistance, probably lies, as it might do in other issues of partnership cooperation, not in the detail of a particular context, nor in the abstract ideals of perfect equality, but in both, and, inevitably, in the tensions between them.

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