

Research Application Summary

Embracing partnership principles in regional and international research collaboration: Theory and practice

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Abstract

The landscape of development on the African continent is fast changing. There are many more educated Africans in various disciplines today than it were three decades ago. New problems have also emerged that need locally sourced solutions. New more user friendly tools in the information, communication and technology are quickly changing the way business is done. Partners and collaborators on the continent are demanding their voices to be heard more loudly than before in the transactions of collaboration and partnerships. This calls for the need to replace old models of partnership with new ones that emphasize the principles and practice of respectful, sustainable and equitable partnerships. This paper discusses some of these principles and points out challenges likely to be encountered and attempts to provide suggestions on how best to make this happen.

Key words: African, alliances, equity, partnerships, principles practices, sustainable

Résumé

Le paysage du développement sur le continent africain évolue rapidement. Il y a aujourd'hui beaucoup plus d'Africains instruits dans diverses disciplines qu'il y a trois décennies. De nouveaux problèmes sont également apparus qui nécessitent des solutions locales. De nouveaux outils plus conviviaux dans les domaines de l'information, de la communication et de la technologie changent rapidement la façon dont les affaires sont menées. Les partenaires et collaborateurs du continent exigent que leur voix soit entendue plus fort qu'auparavant dans les transactions de collaboration et de partenariat. Cela implique la nécessité de remplacer les anciens modèles de partenariat par de nouveaux qui mettent l'accent sur les principes et la pratique de partenariats respectueux, durables et équitables. Ce document discute de certains de ces principes, souligne les défis susceptibles d'être rencontrés et tente de fournir des suggestions sur la meilleure façon d'y parvenir.

Mots clés: Africain, alliances, équité, partenariats, principes pratiques, durable

Background

The Alliance for African Partnership (AAP) is an Michigan State University (MSU) Presidential Initiative that was rolled out in May 2016. The AAP was founded in large part on a collective

agreement among MSU and African institution stakeholders that are engaged in the global landscape of development – especially for Africa. In May 2016, Michigan State University consulted with 16 African leaders across a range of backgrounds and expertise to create this new type of partnership (AAP, 2017). The premise of this convening was that a change needs to occur in the structure of prevailing development-oriented trends. This change will lead to more sustainable and mutually beneficial forms of collaboration, resulting in more effective outcomes for society. The Alliance is a collaborative and cross- disciplinary platform to address today’s global challenges in a way that is sustainable, effective, and equitable.

In AAP, our thesis or theory of change is that true partnerships are essential for effective, impactful and long term collaboration across institutions and across borders. The high level multidisciplinary team of 16 experts from the diverse regions of Africa joined an almost equal number of Africanist faculty at MSU to co-create the principles of true partnerships that would guide future development and implementation of partnership activities between MSU and Africa. The motivation around this initiative emanates from the fact that the landscape for higher education research and global development is changing (globalization, increased human capacity on the continent, ICT, climate change, rising incomes, changing attitudes in relationships across nations, etc.) making the traditional models of partnership outdated if not irrelevant (Jayne *et al.*, 2016). From the outset, key characteristics of partnerships were identified as innovativeness, sustainability and equity.

Objectives of this paper

This brief paper aims to: i) seize the opportunity of this large and distinguished diverse fraternity of the Regional Universities Forum for capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) to share the principles of partnership identified at the first convening of AAP and consequently provide space for discussing how they relate to the business the RUFORUM community of practice does, and, ii) to share experiences drawing from, and reflecting on the author’s experience of over three decades of doing, managing and administering agricultural research in the eastern and southern Africa. The author provides examples of the extent to which these principles have been mainstreamed and some of the challenges that are usually encountered.

Principles of partnership in relation to APP and other similar initiatives

Mutual respect. This refers to listening carefully and with a positive mental attitude to the ideas of others in the partnership and having a sense of constructively building on ideas of others (Lough, 2017). Activities should be initiated on a collaborative and consultative approach throughout the project period and even beyond for other joint projects. The reasoning behind this is that everyone desires respect. This is based on the idea that everyone is

worthy and recognizes everyone’s right to self-determination. If we embrace this principle, then, we will treat our partners with respect and honor their opinions and views. True partnership is impossible without mutual respect. In the context of being respected, it also follows that everyone must be heard. This principle is based on the statement “seek first to understand” (Covey, 2011). As we listen to others, differences in educational qualification, social status and appearance should not matter. Respect also carries the recognition that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes that all people have many resources, past successes, abilities, talents, dreams, etc., that provide the raw materials for future success.

Co-creation. This includes defining the problem together, developing solutions, detecting practice changes, aligning organizational supports, and nurturing shared responsibility, accountability, and ownership for implementation (Boothroyd *et al.*, 2017). It involves endeavoring to develop an idea together from the beginning. Further, it calls for a common agenda setting from the outset. The principle cautions on avoiding “cooking” an idea half way and then bringing it to the table for consideration and endorsement by others. It ensures that ample time is given to members to ask questions and understand the details engraved in the idea or activity. Similarly, it calls for avoiding over dominance in fleshing out ideas and subsequent decision making on what is to be done. The undertaking has to be founded on clarity of purpose, with clear contributions to society. It has to be based on engagement of partners at the beginning in which objectives, activities, resource mobilization and resource allocation plans are jointly developed.

Mutual trust. This is as a central concept to understanding human and organizational relations within the fields of business and management, economics, psychology, social psychology, politics, and sociology. Cook *et al.* (2005) argue that a series of risk-taking behaviors is indispensable to building a trust relation. It is risky because at first instance the partners may not know each other. Partners have to endeavor to always dismiss the sense of suspicion as they look at or listen to one another in the business they do. There is a need to make a deliberate attempt to continuously strive to have the belief that those we are dealing with are honest. At all times we should strive to waive the “sniffing” attitude about the ideas of others. In the true world, in some collaborative partnerships, a partner may find himself or herself being a “helper” or “donor” in that relationship. Thus, as “helpers or donors” we become involved with people because of their problems; these problems then become filters that obscure our ability to see strengths in others. Without trust, it will be hard to have a successful collaboration. It might be doable, but it will not be as easy and as rewarding as it will be with the right level of trust between the partners. Trust starts with you; trust in the other partner and trust in their capabilities. You need to have faith and give them the benefit of the doubt. Don’t think that they can’t do a particular task in the collaboration, but have faith that they will perform it well. In case of doubt, you can always guide them in doing the task. Helping each other out in difficult, or first time, situations, will increase trustworthiness between the partners (Simmons, 2017).

Our premise is that partnerships are more effective and sustainable if they resist the tendency to exercise differential power. Power differentials create obstacles to partnership. Since

society confers power upon the helper, it is the helper’s responsibility to create a partnership with a client. As helpers or donors, clients do not owe us their cooperation. We must earn it (Appalachian Family Innovation, 2003).

Mutual benefit and reciprocity. This ensures that benefits and losses are shared equally across members in the partnership. It should not necessarily be for example that the one who has contributed the most resources should reap a disproportionate share of the outcome. A small but real example—team members should be visiting each other’s continent (USA to Africa and Africa to USA) in proposal development and analysis of data and should not always be a one-way street!. Authorship of papers must also be balanced. It should not be for example, that in a project, some are data collectors, some are analysts and some are paper writers.

The partnership balances power among partners and enables resources among partners to be shared. Lough (2017) cautions on the dire need to consider how to determine equal or fair distribution of benefits between stakeholders when some benefits are material and some are intangible.

Accountability and responsibility. Partners agree upon mission, values, goals, measurable outcomes and accountability (Seifer and Connors, 2007). It ensures that work to be done by either party is clear in the team and that each member takes utmost responsibility to deliver as planned. There should be joint investment and ownership by all partners. The act of accountability serves to assist partners along the journey to achievement of set goals. It requires acceptance of responsibility for set actions and to stay true to the commitments (Nikitani, 2009) Accountability manages the power relations between actors which interact or affect each other directly or indirectly. It can be understood as ‘giving an account’ to another party who has a stake in what has been done. It evokes a sense of taking responsibility, but it also holds the meaning of being held responsible by others – being ‘held to account’ (Cornwall *et al.*, 2000)

Transparency. Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communication and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations (Himmelman, 2017).. Transparency is about avoiding opaqueness across members, ensuring that members have the right information at the right time and avoiding concealing information which needs to get out to members, etc. It also calls for embracing a governance structure that reinforces accountability and maintains clear auditing, a structured work plan and metrics, and also personnel and resources that are appropriate, well focused, and culturally sensitive. We will need to clearly define objectives and goals and should be specific in its focus. A clear organizational structure is essential. This could include a leadership team and other implementing personnel, a steering committee, and/or an advisory board with representatives from diverse stakeholders. Adopting transparency measures is perhaps one of the best tools for cultivating trust in a partnership. It is AAP conviction that partnerships are more effective and sustainable if they resist the tendency to exercise differential power. Power differentials create obstacles to partnership. Communicating expectations and assumptions in an open meeting or forum can set the scene for behavior protocols and how we want to work in a partnership. How and who we choose to communicate with will determine whether the partners can trust each other. Successful partnerships are often those that design behavior protocols (laying out expectations of how issues will be dealt with) which could include but not limited to things such as dealing with finances, publication authorship, monitoring and evaluation, reporting requirements, etc.

Flexibility. Working in social impact means that change is constant. Roles and responsibilities shift often. Funding changes ,team members move on and some fall sick for a long time (Putnam, 2013). New assignments for members may come on and team members may be mandated to take on new contracts and duties resulting in their level of effort being reduced. Thus, whereas focus is key in the business we do, the motive should be “focus but allow flexibility when it is necessary”. If a partner has just come from a heart surgery, we should not expect him/her to strictly adhere to the deadline in submitting a progress report! If the research area has just turned into a war zone, we should not expect the team to submit technical progress report on time.

Nurturing multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. Multi-disciplinarity is a common buzz word and sounding very positive because it reflects a phenomenon of individuals from a diversity of disciplines who have agreed to join forces to work on a common problem of interest to the entire team (Choi and Pak, 2006).But as one would anticipate gathering different disciplines does not necessarily mean working together because each one within the team members may still be working only within his or her disciplinary boundaries. It is for this reason that inter-disciplinarity becomes a very valuable addition. This is characterized by integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of approaches (Vermeij, n.d.) The approach here becomes that of analyzing,

synthesizing and harmonizing links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. It is further underpinned by each individual making an effort to have a basic understanding of the disciplines of the others in the team and the recognition of the contribution of that discipline to the problem at hand.

What has worked and what has not worked: Experiences from the Eastern and Southern Africa

Too often we talk of smart partnerships, referring to those that embrace key principles of relationships highlighted in the above. But rarely do we stop and think hard about how to make smart or true partnerships happen in practice. And how do we sustain them once they are formed? And how do we begin to rectify the situation when we see, for example, that trust or respect is in danger?

Principles are easy to state but practicing them is a different ball game all together. It is important, therefore, that along the way partners create an environment that will, in addition to the commitment of partners to the principles, always remind members about embracing them. It would be useful for collaborating partners to develop a template that will facilitate monitoring and tracking application of these partnership principles.

What does it take for partners to really embrace the partnership principles? What measures can we put in place to ensure that the principles are adhered to consistently? What do we do for non-compliance? These are tough questions and there are no easy answers. It takes a sense of commitment and dedication on the part of each member of the partnership to embrace these principles. Having worked extensively in the eastern and southern African region, the author draws a few examples of how practicing the partnership principles has fared in the region.

Partnership is a process. It takes time to achieve a functional partnership. A partner may be slower than expected to accomplish an agreed task. Instead of expressing frustration or reprimanding (partly due to differential power), it would be better to step back and ask what exactly is making the partner fail to comply? And together, a solution may be found. In a partnership capacity strengthening project, one senior member who was failing to keep the delivery deadlines came to me and said, “Although I am thankful for all the help that this project is providing to our institution, I should tell you that by the time you came up with this project, my plate was already full. Thus, what I have to do in this project as assigned by my superiors is over and above my allocated time. And after all there is no real incentive to work extra hours on the project. So please do not be surprised if your proposed deliverables come late.”

A lesson learned here is that some of the partners we work with may not have been really ready to work with us. Or maybe those that are expected to work with us are not the signatories in the partnership. We should therefore, be keen in nurturing the partnership all the way through the project and especially at the beginning.

The role of mindsets in nurturing partnerships. Mindset is an important factor that potentially influences relationships in partnerships. Mindset has been variously defined as established attitudes held by someone, beliefs about oneself and one's most basic qualities (Simmons, 2017) It involves things like intelligence, talents, personality, etc. How we respond to challenges and setbacks is often determined by our mindset. Collaboration requires a “we” focused behavior rather than an “I” focused behavior.

People with an “I” focus will always look at their own benefit. However, when in a partnership, you will need to look for the synergy (ibid) According to Argyris (2004), there are two dominant mindsets in organizations: the productive mindset and the defensive mindset. The productive mindset seeks out valid

knowledge that is testable. The productive reasoning mindset creates informed choices and makes reasoning transparent. The defensive mindset, on the other hand, is self-protective and self-deceptive. When this mindset is active, people or organizations only seek out information that will protect them. Truth can be shut out when it is seen as threatening. While elements of our personality—such as sensitivity to mistakes and setbacks—can make us predisposed towards holding a certain mindset, we are able to develop and reshape our mindset through our interactions.

Dweck (2006) provides another category which is important in understanding and nurturing partnerships. According to her, there are two categories—growth mindset versus fixed mindset—that can group individuals based on their behavior, specifically their reaction to failure. Those with a “fixed mindset” believe that abilities are mostly innate and interpret failure as the lack of necessary basic abilities, while those with a “growth mindset” believe that they can acquire any given ability provided they invest effort or study. Based on the above classifications it is clear that promoting true partnerships would favor productive and growth mindsets as opposed to defensive and fixed mindsets. When we encounter a problem in partnerships, we should not immediately begin blaming the other side. Patterson *et al.* (2013) caution that we must work on ourselves first because the problem may well be on our side.

More examples of practical shortcomings of regional and global partnerships

Mutual respect. No question, “respect” is most often interlinked with a number of factors such as authority/ deferential power, attitudes, cultural values, customs and traditions. We therefore all need to be mindful of these as we strive to embrace the concept of mutual respect in our partnerships. Below are a few quotes to illustrate situations where this concept has been compromised:

“We (Chief Executive Officers—CEOs) have been invited here by the Vice Chancellor of this university to discuss common ground areas in the partnership we aspire to create. But unexpectedly, the CEO left immediately after the opening ceremony and left us with his subordinates. It should be clear that we have a lot of work at our home stations too. We interpret this as insubordination”.

Here is another example reported as being lack of respect: “As a co-principal investigator (co-PI), I always contribute to periodic technical progress reports. But to my surprise, always I find that my contribution is not captured in the reports that are compiled by my colleague co-PI”.

Co-creation. The dividing line though, between “co- creation and self-creation” can be very thin in practice. In most cases an idea note or concept note starts from an individual. The following observation was made by a team member in a partnership: “A number of concept notes and proposals are initiated in the West and later brought to Africa to seek partnership. It is rare that concept notes get co-created”.

Mutual trust. Sometimes, partners may reach consensus and agree on the direction a particular course should take. A few days, weeks or months later one or more partners decide to change course, reverse or backslide completely to the initial base. Harmonization of agricultural policies (in the case of seeds especially in the 1990s) in the eastern and southern African region is a typical case in point. Partners (in these case governments) have found it very hard to stay course with decisions their representatives make in the harmonization of seed policies and regulations.

Mutual benefit and reciprocity. Typically research partnerships are of mixed teams in terms of skills, experience and age. The thrust of mixed team is to provide opportunity for the more experienced to

hold the hand of the less experienced and at the same time motivate them to catch up. In practice this does not necessarily proceed smoothly. The following are statements from team members in research partnerships:

- a. “He is always a lead author in in each paper we write irrespective of whether he was the main contributor or not”.
- b. “All meetings are planned to take place in Africa so that they can travel but not us. This way, there is no way we can go abroad”.

Accountability and responsibility. For any partnership rules of the game are set at project commencement—e.g. reporting frequency, transferring money for research on time, organizing project implementation towards impact, etc. Too often, some individuals decide to understand that partnership is a free ride and one can do what he/she wants. The following serves to illustrate some of the challenges faced in this area:

Here is a message sent by a partner as a result of receiving feedback of a six-month delayed technical progress report which was asking him to provide more clarity on what he had done and reminding with him to be on schedule”If we are partners we need to discuss the deadline together. It is not very fair that one side decides of the deadline and imposes it to the other ignoring the constraints being faced on the ground. You cannot stay abroad and decide what we have to do without any discussion. We are not your children. And neither is anyone our mentor. It is not because you send us money that you decide everything and we have to obey your schedule. You don’t know in what conditions we are working. The project is mainly ours and not yours. We are doing our best to put the project in good tracks and we will achieve what we want it to be. We are working hard to do the report and the planned activities. Getting your money is not our main goal. We want to be respected and we will not accept to receive any order from anyone because we don’t need any money from anyone to do what we are doing. If you want to continue to work with us we are ready for this but we want you to respect us as we respect you. Our institution is ready to refund you and you can stop sending us money”

The following is a summary progress report on grantee teams of project X:

“It appears that barely one project progress report has reported against set indicators despite the heavy emphasis laid on this point at project commencement. It looks like there is an inverse relationship between experienced researchers and following of laid out reporting style”.

Delay of research funds can be a serious setback of research progress. The following illustrates what happened in one project this year:

“Note that there were no activities in this partner country during the reporting period because of a lengthy delay in transferring the second tranche of funds to one of the partners University. The wire transfer was rejected twice, despite having successfully transferred funds in the first portion of the budget. I believe that the wire transfer was eventually successful in June 2018, and the group will resume its research activities”.

Transparency. Lack of transparency is closely associated with weak trust and respect amongst partners. It is also very much related to moving the goal posts on key issues like financing, lack of elaboration on important budget line items, and no explanation given to some activities not agreed on at project inception. In one project a team member did ask: “We are spending a lot of money on attending

conferences and other continental events. Do we have a process in place guiding which meetings to attend and which ones not to?”

Flexibility. A Principal Investigator in a project is hospitalized and later undergoes heart surgery. Consequently a six-month report is delayed by a month. It would be unethical to demand a report from such a person. Thus the following were some e-mail exchanges:” I am very sorry that I have failed to report on time because of my heart surgery hospitalization”. Response—”Dear —, please do not think about the report at the moment. Your life is more important and should receive top priority. Please communicate to us when you really feel that you have satisfactorily recovered”.

Multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity and cross-boundaries. The meaning of multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity was explained before and so here cross-boundaries is added to refer to all essential components such as geography, discipline, culture, generation and gender in addressing a problem at hand. Monson and Minde (2018) write “we need to reflect further on what it takes to engage cross-culturally with careful attention to differences of language, culture, race, gender and age. We have already come up against some challenges in this area, for example with the concept in Africa of the “big man.” Some on our team believe that we must be attentive to patriarchal hierarchy within African institutions. Others caution against reinforcing hierarchies at a time when there is a great need for integration of women and youth into development agendas”.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the foregoing that partnerships are not a soft option but hard work. Partnerships take time to develop because we are dealing with human beings whose mindsets may take some time to evolve. Partnerships must be realistic and aim for what can be achieved. They should not be too ambitious. Partnerships if successful, can achieve more than individual agencies working alone.

True partnerships do not simply happen, and so it is not enough to just declare them. Partnerships must be “cultivated” over time with sincere commitment, dedication, and determination. Putting a mechanism/guide in place to assist the monitoring of the extent to which these principles are put into practice and providing space for mid-course corrections

(probably inbuilt in the project monitoring and evaluation framework) as project implementation forges ahead, would be extremely useful.

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