

## PARTNERSHIP ? WHAT PARTNERSHIP? WHERE?

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Remember that small boy who spoke up independently to say, "But the Emperor has no clothes!" That's what is needed right now: plain speaking that is oblivious of politically correct conventions. **For International Aid has become, alas, a black industry, wrongly overwhelmed with donors' policies, assessments, monitoring and evaluations. Moreover today's aid is bogged down with "donor speak" rhetoric, certainly not reflecting the donors' original, p.c., promise of meaningful partnerships. To expedite aid delivery and to maximise aid's impact on the peoples of the Third World, today's aid recipients need, and deserve, real partnerships that really work. This will necessitate a global revolution in donor rhetoric and in donor thinking.**

**International aid has become lost in abstractions.** It is obsessed with a search for consistency and replication. Alas, in the real world "One Size Does NOT Fit All." Efforts to transfer models from place to place continue to consume scarce aid resources (money, time and people), even though, on reflection, we all know that every aid project on the ground faces unique difficulties, opportunities and potentials. Yet the rhetoric of "development assistance" carries us all along, for example, to emphasise models rather than flexible pragmatic, one-off, solutions to "get it done," on the ground, now. Alas, where straight talk should dominate, instead abstract "donor speak" proliferates. No wonder aid recipients distrust "donor speak."

**Aid language should reflect partnership, but it rarely does so.** One of several prevalent non-words that I detest is "Sector," as in "We give aid in the Education Sector." What an appalling substitute that is for saying what is meant, whether it is "We build schools," "We help teachers," or "We help teachers teach other teachers." Or more rarely, "We help teachers to rewrite our teaching curriculum," or even more rarely "We help them to rewrite their own curricula."

Aid that works on the ground is not about abstractions. So aid language should not be

using abstractions that are unnecessary, distracting, unhelpful, especially where English is not the sole language of the recipients on the ground! Use plain English. Use short verbs. Use four letter words. Make a "New Speak" that addresses, and reflects, the realities.

Another appalling word is "Advisor." It is, I suppose, a marginal improvement from yesteryear's "Expert," where "x" was the unknown factor and "Spurt" was "a Drip Under High Pressure." But I detest the word "Advisor" because it presupposes that what the local recipients need is advice. In the real world, intelligence and even knowledge and experience are not lacking locally, wherever you are. The people on the ground usually know what suits local conditions best. **The poor do not need advice on how to get out of their poverty: they need resources to do it for themselves.**

Astonishingly, far too many "Empowerment" and "Capacity Building" projects overlook and ignore the human resources of the people on the ground, and balk at giving them trust and genuine partnership. The effect is often quite insulting and is certainly NOT the best way to generate local enthusiasm and commitment. Let me be specific. Usually what is really needed to launch and sustain any small project is a tiny one hundred or one thousand dollar honorarium to sustain the local secretary, trainer or treasurer. But funding token salaries, or funding a tiny petty-cash slush fund, on trust, is exactly what the donors refuse to pay. Whether in a Manila slum, or in a Pacific village, some startup and admin costs are unavoidable and can only come from outside. To deny this in practice often suggests a lack of trust, and of true commitment, by the donor. This, like the persistent lack of plain speaking in identifying, planning, and implementing projects in local terms, rather than donors' terms, can be insulting and is nothing like a proper, trusting, partnership.

Long ago, when Adam and I and Rip van Winkle and some other old farts were at University together, we were taught that, by

definition, a peasant is someone who will not change traditional behaviour even when shown a better future. What an astonishing insult that is! Monocultural in the extreme! What I learned in Peru was that a peasant is someone whose traditions warn against soft options and short term "solutions." Peasants distrust foreigners, whether Greeks or Kiwis, who bring gifts and promise projects for a few years. What, after all, is three or ten short years in the life span of a peasant family of centuries' standing, or in a country where drought, famines, cyclones and other natural disasters recur every decade or so? True aid partnership is not for the length of externally set, short-term contracts, but until the desired objective is achieved, that is, achieved locally and sustainably.

I could go on - and on, and on. Another area where international aid overlooks and all too often insults partnership is in its obsession with single issues, short term, and evaluations. It is as if we donors cannot learn that a gift is a gift, not to be repeated if it is abused, but also not ours to evaluate in a vacuum without regard for the original intended beneficiary to whom, let it not be forgotten, the rhetoric promised a partnership. **So ask not, did all of it work? Ask instead, did any of it work? And work in whose view, and by whose time frame?**

The practical example I will quote here is of the forests planted under NZODA in Samoa. When two once-in-a-hundred-year cyclones struck within one decade, most of the trees were flattened. The media said short-sightedly that New Zealand's aid money had been wasted. I think that's just nonsense. For in the process, the Samoans had established that one otherwise successful forest tree, *Eucalyptus deglupta*, was not suitable for them long term, not even for utility timber. And they had established that Samoans normally shy of gardening could plant trees and that for tree care women were much better than men. And that rural villagers wanted to work for wages, and that at village levels Samoan cultural values could adapt in Samoan ways to run self-monitoring commercial employment contracts. Add to that the experience forestry officials gained in Apia of running a forest administration, practically if not perfectly, then I for one don't believe that New Zealand aid money had been wasted, not in the long term anyway. **Now, if our talk of partnership is not just rhetoric, then let's have partnership in evaluations, evaluating not just in the donor's terms but in local recipients' terms too!**

There is another point about **obsessive pre-occupation with donor-driven evaluations**. In Africa, in northern Tanzania, I saw a young Massey graduate distraught that a thoughtless local, in this case a stray wild elephant, had trampled the meticulous field seed trials that he had intended to be his masters degree thesis. But an older Massey farm graduate calmed him with the comment that actually the exact statistics would not matter much, since any beneficial result worth following up further in the field must be self-evident to everyone, including abundantly self-evident to the illiterate local tribespeople. They might choose to copy his very good crop, but they would never choose to experiment on improvements they could not see for themselves. Lately the same principle has been called KISS - "Keep it simple, stupid." My dictum would be to dismiss any evaluation that is Short Term, omits the Opinions of the local People, and is not worked out in Partnership with the whole range of local recipients. I'd call that STOPP.

**Despite all the talk of Partnership, donors continue alas to ignore the inequalities and realities of scale, obligation, absorption capacities, and financial accounting facilities**, both nationally and individually. I can't cover all of these either in this short talk, and so I will mention only a few specific Pacific problems that arise from the difference in scale between donors and recipients. It is said that the Japanese aid system cannot handle individual projects smaller than one million dollars US. Most projects that size in the Pacific get bogged down in capitals and don't penetrate to local or village levels. (Remember that old dictum, "Small IS Beautiful!") The answer is not of course to outlaw large projects, or heaven forbid to discourage the large donors. Rather it is to recognise that small projects necessitate high overhead costs. To "work small" requires higher per unit costs than to "work big". Aid admin costs in the Pacific have to be higher than elsewhere. They should be measured against the local outcomes, not by standards set by larger aid donors in the OECD to cover large project disbursements and overheads. On admin costs, one size does NOT fit us all. (In my experience, NZODA always tried to do its admin "on the cheap" - in part to match the unrealistic uniformity of low per unit overheads of big agencies. So let me say clearly, smaller, better aid may need more staff, at home and in the field, not less!)

**We need to recognise too that most Pacific recipient countries cannot afford our aid, in**

**that donors' admin requirements often draw from their slender trained human resources far more than they can afford.**

Less than one hundredth of 1 percent of New Zealand's total public administration monies goes on administering our modest sized aid programme, but in small Pacific Islands often a very substantial percentage, sometimes even over 1 percent, of all government resources, money and staff, has to go to keeping in sweet with the flood of donors that arrive week after week all requiring attention, politeness and time. So hard-pressed local aid staff cannot spend enough time on local efficiency, effectiveness and indigenous development. In foreign capitals, even Canberra and Wellington, there are whole departmental buildings crammed with administrators that funnel down on tiny so-called "counterpart" entities in Pacific mini-states. Resources are so unequal that the present partnerships are unequal and, sometimes, unworkable. Almost all need constant improvement.

Until donors earmark resources to be given to PIC aid agencies on trust to run their aid absorption, PIC administrations cannot sustain these unequal partnerships, not least including donor-acceptable financial accounting. Till then, donors must be prepared to hear devoted PIC aid administrators say sadly, "Oh, I'd like nothing more than to advance your project, but I can't right now because this week I have to be prepared to see donors from the EC, and Belgium, and Chile, and China, and all". The aid partnership is not equal while donors demand cooperation but fail to help fund recipients to be better, less unequal, partners. It's in the Bible, well sort of, in the dictum "If your brother asks for bread, don't give him a stone". Well I say not without stone-consuming capacities too!

So I am preaching revolution: **a revolution of thinking, and a revolution in trust and partnership.** Of donors listening as well as talking. Of donors not declaring aid policy and funding unilaterally from capitals, such as announcing gratuitously regional programmes of distance education when the recipient nations have not yet decided that distance education is a priority for them from that donor. If the partnership principle is to be made to work, a revolution in donor thinking and practice is essential, particularly if donors do indeed want to honour their rhetoric to make their aid partnerships more equal. So trust and fund local people to identify their needs. Involve them in the whole process of identifying, planning, implementing and

evaluating what needs to be done, and how best to do it most cheaply. Trust local people as partners, and use them, not expatriate foreign consultants.

Its time I got down to a **specific proposal for revitalising aid partnerships.** It entails little if any additional cost. It's a simple proposal too, on which within the next decade the New Zealand Government could take a lead as startling and as effective as its lead on nuclear disarmament issues over the past decade or so.

To go back to the small boy's non-p.c. observation that the Emperor had no clothes, there is an astonishingly obvious yet unspeakable truth, namely that the world's aid recipient countries don't actually receive more than a small fraction of the vast sums announced by aid donor countries with such pride and pomp! Of course when loans are rescheduled, recipient countries get nothing at all except a paper reprieve with the debts to be carried over to their as yet unborn great-grandchildren. But there is more, much more, to it than that. **For globally about ninety per cent of all aid is spent not in the country of the recipient but in the country of the donor.**

You heard right. It is not secret but it's not widely known, in donor countries. In recipient countries though, this is more obvious because governments keep their aid tallies in separate accounts, outside their national accounts, simply because they never receive in country anything like the totals announced in the donor capitals.

In Queensland in 1998, the Australian Foreign Minister announced with some pride that that year over 90 percent of all official Australian aid had been spent, safely, within Australia. I don't know the present New Zealand figure, but I expect that over 85 percent is spent within New Zealand. That would include all the costs of overseas students studying here, part of the New Zealand salaries of advisers stationed abroad, consultancy fees, etc. and all the goods and services purchased in New Zealand, and the freight to ship them overseas. That is not that unreasonable if you take the case of the design of a major building within an aid project. The cost of the architects' plans, the monitoring and overseeing costs, the materials and freight may well all be paid within New Zealand legitimately. Often the only money spent in country is for local labour!

**What I ask is: “Is a 90%--10% split a genuine partnership?” Alas NO!**

I am not suggesting something anywhere nearly as radical as requiring that all aid is spent in the country it is allocated to. Oh no, 100 percent of what is announced is certainly unspeakable and unrealistic. But I am suggesting, as loudly I hope as the Emperor's unwelcome small boy, **that the present 90 percent / 10 percent split is just not good enough.**

**I propose NZAID aim at something nearer to a split with 70 percent spent in NZ and at least 30 percent spent in-country. This would seem to me to be a realistic target to set for the New Zealand Government to achieve within this decade,** to announce internationally, and to invite the whole of the global aid industry to aspire to too. At first, steps like paying New Zealand advisors and contractors entirely in local currencies overseas might seem like stage gimmicks. But I believe that in the longer term, a shift towards stiff targets that **maximise expenditure in country** can only enhance our credibility and standing, and of course improve the effectiveness of the aid involved. Improve our aid first, and then later maybe other aid donors will do so too.

**If we really believe our own rhetoric about partnership, then we owe it to our partners to make our expenditure less inequitable, and more evenly spent, and to revolutionise in-country expenditure within this decade!**