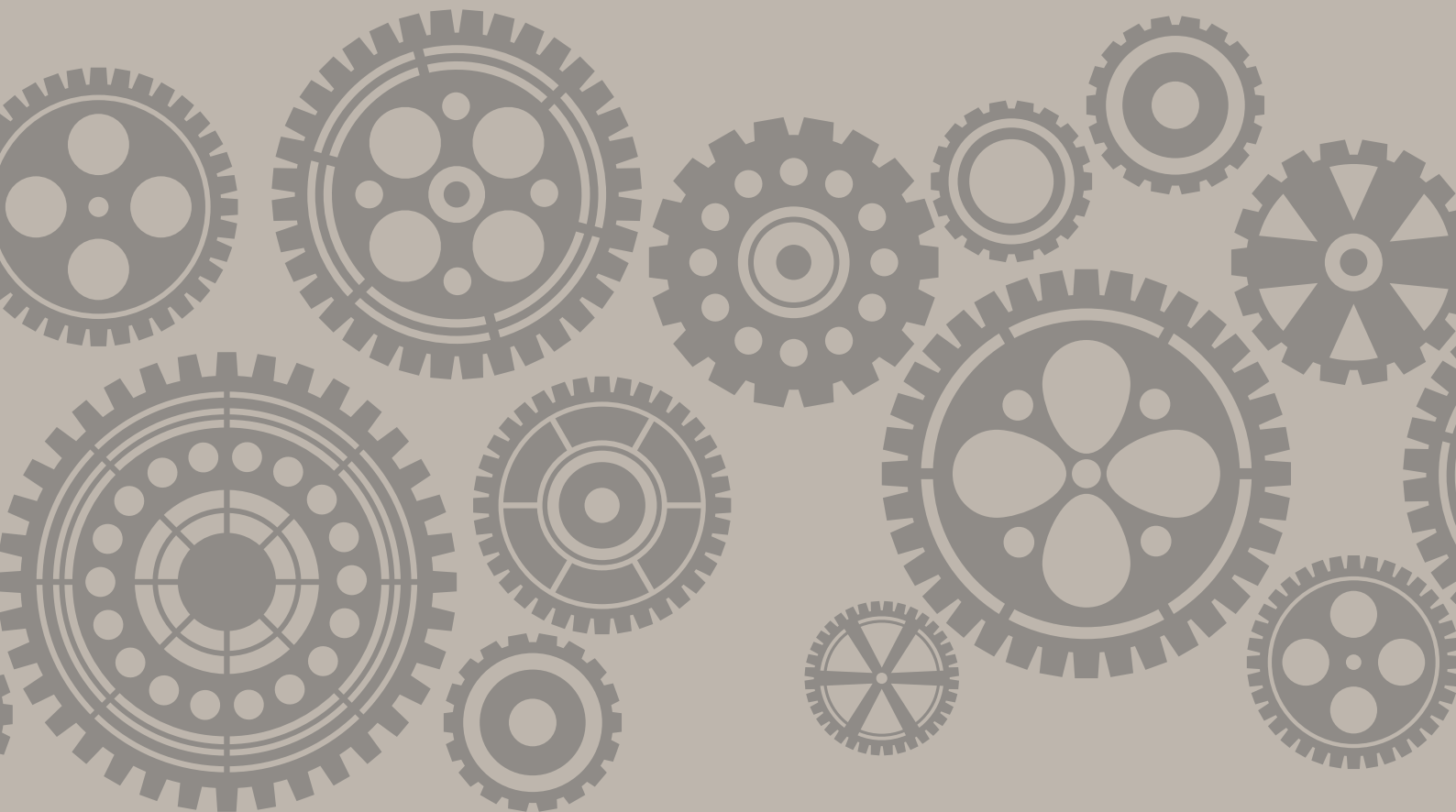




## **THE NORTH-SOUTH PARTNERSHIP TESTED BY EVERYDAY LIFE:** A RICH, COMPLEX, MULTI-FACETTED DYNAMIC

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### CONTEXT: THE PARTNERSHIP, A CONCEPT MORE COMPLEX THAN JUST “YOU + I = WE”

In the development cooperation sector, as in many others, partnership has become an indispensable term and practice. Any project, any action implemented will of necessity contain a partnership dimension. But what does this concept of “partnership” cover and, in particular, how is this concept translated and defined in the day-to-day management of a project? Is it a uniform whole and a way of working with standards based on set principles and values? Or is it rather a mobile, dynamic concept whose basic principles are defined by as many forms as there are organisations and social, economic and political contexts?

These are some of the questions that Avocats Sans Frontières and COTA have been considering since 2014. Through this article, the two organisations hope to draw lessons and obtain food for thought from their actual experiences and so participate in the debate.

#### Avocats Sans Frontières and the Barreau de Bujumbura (Bujumbura Bar Association): an almost “natural” partnership

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) and the Bar Association of the Bujumbura Court of Appeal (the Bar Association) began working together in the early 2000s. ASF activities are centred around the provision of access to justice for everyone<sup>1</sup>. In order to do this, ASF in Burundi very quickly focused on the provision of a legal aid service to the most vulnerable populations, and it is in this context that ASF uses lawyers registered with the Bujumbura Bar Association.

The Bujumbura Bar Association is a professional body which brings together lawyers registered within the jurisdiction of the Bujumbura Court of Appeal. One of the objectives of the Bar Association is to “serve as an indispensable auxiliary for justice while ensuring that all members collectively defend all persons and their interests and in particular in the legal and judicial domains”<sup>2</sup>. As a civil society organisation having a legal status, the Bar Association is a central player in relation to access to justice and the rule of law in Burundi.

In the area of legal aid, the partnership between ASF and the Bar Association therefore seems quite natural and self-evident.

Between 2004 and 2010 ASF developed a direct means of intervention, organising and training its own “pools of lawyers” tasked with providing judicial assistance and legal advice services. The partnership with the Bujumbura Bar Association at that time was limited to the formal provision of lawyers whose work was supervised and supported by ASF.

From 2010, ASF has developed its strategy and in particular the nature of its partnership relations with the Bujumbura Bar Association. Eager to move forward, the NGO wanted to anchor its activities more firmly within the Bar Association and gradually transferred its activities into it. Based on a strategy of self-reliance, ASF has chosen to promote the development of the capacities of the Bar Association so that it is able to deliver the legal aid services itself. In the knowledge that this could not happen quickly, ASF has established a transitional phase which includes a gradual increase in the level of responsibility that the Bar Association has for the provision of legal aid services.

<sup>1</sup> ASF operates at the juncture between the promotion of human rights and development assistance; its programmes are focused on providing access to justice at local and national level and their objectives are the promotion and protection of human rights and, more specifically but not exclusively, those impacting on a fair trial and the exercise of the rights of the defence. [www.asf.be](http://www.asf.be).

<sup>2</sup> The Bujumbura Bar Association action plan 2010-2013.

Since 2014 ASF has been aiming to extend its partnership with the Bar Association. ASF wishes to expand and develop the terms of its collaboration with the Bar Association over and above legal aid and move in the direction of a more strategic relationship which goes beyond the implementation of projects in the short term and which is oriented towards the development of a dialogue of equals - a more transparent dialogue increasingly based on co-construction.

#### **An international backdrop which favours partnership**

Since the beginning of the 2000s, “partnership” has been the new watchword, and one of the conditions for obtaining public funding and carrying out development activities. This principle first appears in the Rome Declaration (2002) on aid effectiveness but it was actually enshrined in the Paris Declaration of 2005. The Accra (2008) and Busan (2011) summits which brought together the range of stakeholders involved in development cooperation only served to reaffirm this principle and to develop and enrich it. The Paris declaration emphasises 5 fundamental principles: ownership of development actions by stakeholders in the south, alignment of the strategies of the northern stakeholders with those of the stakeholders in the south, harmonisation of practices between technical and financial partners for development, mutual accountability between northern and southern stakeholders and management based on results. These various principles must ensure aid effectiveness and promote the implementation of sustainable actions directed and implemented over time by southern stakeholders. This objective is laudable and even appears self-evident. But more generally, and irrespective of the sector, what organisation today can operate alone, in a vacuum? What appears to be a new

strategy for intervention nonetheless raises fundamental questions and implies that we need to look again at the activity of northern NGOs in the so-called southern countries and, more broadly, at the place of the northern NGOs in the range of stakeholders involved with development assistance.

The actual implementation of the principle of “work in partnership” is therefore faced with the realities of the development cooperation and international solidarity sectors: ever more intense competition to obtain funding, competition for projects, the objective of profitability, financial pressure and pressure for results, the persistence of some paternalistic approaches, the mismatch between certain declared humanist values and the day-to-day practices on the ground. Partnership in practice is therefore a lot more complicated than it might appear. Faced with the day-to-day practice, the stated principles which underlie the partner relationship (equality, reciprocity, shared responsibility, etc.) therefore become more relative, more affected by “variable geometry”, indeed not very, or not at all, appropriate to the specific and multiple contexts in which the northern NGOs are operating.

#### **ASF acting with the support of COTA**

It is in this context that ASF has acted and has focused on the question of partnership with the intention of rethinking its arrangements for collaboration taking into account the realities of the development cooperation sector and, in particular, the political, institutional and, more broadly, the socio-economic contexts of the countries in which ASF operates. In order to make this undertaking a success ASF has been working methodically with COTA<sup>3</sup>. The two organisations therefore committed themselves to a process of

<sup>3</sup> The association was created in 1979 from the movement for Appropriate Technologies (TA). From the outset it involved a collective of French-speaking Belgian NGOs wanting to acquire a tool to capitalise, inform and advise on these Appropriate Technologies. COTA then gradually widened its field of activity into the social, economic and political aspects of development and extended its range of support to all aspects of project engineering. [www.cota.be](http://www.cota.be).

action and research the main aim of which was to establish how the stated principles underlying the partner relationship can be applied to the everyday activities of an NGO whose core business is to promote access to justice in so-called “fragile” countries.

The process started in 2014 and is still ongoing today. By means of this article, and on the basis of the actual shared experience of ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association, ASF and COTA wish to demonstrate and share their findings, the lessons learned and their queries.

## METHODOLOGY

### The support process and the place of COTA

The support process developed by COTA is based on an existing dynamic. Indeed, both ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association had become aware of the need to develop the nature of their partnership relations.

As a stakeholder in the partner relationship with bar associations and civil society organisations, ASF has found it necessary to conduct this process with complete neutrality, by positioning itself as the object of study and review in the same way as the partner organisations in the south. ASF has therefore had recourse to an external organisation, COTA, to support, facilitate and organise the process through methodological input. As well as the expected neutrality and the methodological aspects, COTA also provided ASF with a space for dialogue and discussions with other organisations sharing the same concerns. Another aspect of COTA's contribution was to add substance to the concept of partnership, thereby helping ASF and the

Bar Association to better position their partner relationship.

Apart from focusing on the methodological and conceptual aspects, COTA also wanted to make sure that both partners were determined to successfully complete a process that could sometimes be painful or an unpleasant experience, as it could call into question not only collective practices but also, and especially individual practices, affecting both know-how and in particular soft skills. Stressing the importance of consistent determination is crucial as COTA cannot and should not be a substitute for the stakeholders involved in the partner relationship. Being prepared to question oneself both collectively and individually is absolutely central to the implementation of the support process.

### The main methodological stages and the support mindset

In the context of the support process described above, ASF and COTA have adopted a progressive methodology:

- First and foremost, it is essential to get rid of fixed ideas and “ready-made” definitions of partnership in order to address the issues in a straightforward way by thinking about a few **essential prerequisites**: do we have anything in common? Is there something we want to do together? If so: what, why, how and when? What are the rules that will govern the partnership? How will the parties communicate, and about what? Etc. More than just a theoretical construct, it is also and especially about appealing to common sense **by asking simple and essential questions**. The level of complexity of the relationship will be determined in accor-

dance with what it is that the future partners wish to do together.

- The phase of **deconstruction/reconstruction** that follows allows cross-analysis of the perceptions and feelings of each of the parties to the partnership, within a constructive approach. This phase is managed by a third party, in this case COTA, which provides the results to both partners and moderates the ensuing debate and discussions allowing certain points to be dealt with collectively and any areas of frustration to be resolved. The reconstruction work is managed on the basis of the immediate agendas of the partners (development/evaluation of a project, of a strategic plan, etc.) and is based on a collective definition of the modalities of collaboration within the project in order to position the partnership from the outset within a framework that is broader than just development actions. This also allows the parties to move beyond a partnership that is merely circumstantial to the construction of a more strategic and durable partnership.
- The adoption of a **pragmatic approach** based on the the partners' concerns and on the achievement of tangible and immediate outcomes that allow the parties to cope with issues and work together is necessary. In the case study in question, for ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association it was a question of working together to jointly develop a partnership framework agreement, followed by specific agreements relating to specific projects. The terms of this framework agreement and the process of constructing the specific agreements were the result of a collective one-day workshop which enabled

the major mechanisms for institutional collaboration to be drawn up (other than the projects) as well as the arrangements for collaboration on projects (collective working arrangements, modalities of communication and management over a specified timescale and the objectives specifically related to a project).

- An **approach over two timeframes**: the immediate (often the timescale of a project, generally 2 or 3 years) and the medium and long term (beyond the project, the partnership between institutions). Neither of these two dimensions should be overlooked in a dynamic partnership that claims to be strategic. In this way, and starting from immediate issues, it is possible to build a dynamic over the long term; conversely, a long-term strategy that has already been defined needs to be structured by short-term projects.

Support processes are never linear. They require flexibility and constant adaptation to local contexts and issues with nevertheless a permanent focal point: the approach must continue to make sense for each of the partners. This may seem a priori secondary, but the search for a balance between adaptability, flexibility and consistency in terms of the meaning given to the support process is an imperative since to a large extent it ensures that the process continues to be dynamic and encourages the on-going participation of the stakeholders.

## A FEW LESSONS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PARTNER RELATIONSHIP

In its most widely understood sense, the term partnership refers to the idea of an association of stakeholders who choose to combine their efforts in order to achieve a common goal. Partnership is often reflected in alliances, networks, collaborations, or other terms defining the various and varied methods of collaboration.

In the development cooperation sector, “authentic partnership is associated with, among other things, a commitment to long-term interaction, shared responsibility, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and balance of power” (Fowler, 2002 quoted in Navarro-Flores, 2007: 26<sup>4</sup>). Similarly, “a partnership is an attempt by the organisations from the north and south to match their values, principles and institutional ideals. Emphasis is placed on the concept of mutual trust, respect and equality and efforts are made to create a degree of reciprocity in decision-making, evaluation and accountability issues” (Smillie, 1995 quoted in Navarro-Flores, 2007: 26<sup>5</sup>).

These various definitions highlight two aspects<sup>6</sup>: partnership has a number of objective factors (common objectives, shared accountability, etc.) and a number of subjective factors more related to soft skills (the shared confidence necessary for the establishment of this relationship, the quality of the formal but also the informal dialogue, etc.). By transposing these elements to the realities of north-south partnerships, we wonder if the current trend does not neglect soft skills too much, in favour of know-how (project set-up and implementation, financial accountability techniques, administrative management of the collaboration). Is this not a factor which tends to

make partner relationships between NGOs from the north and south very “administrative”? Similarly, and in a general sense, should not some of the elements contained in these two definitions be put into perspective when compared with the lessons arising out of daily practices?

### Strategic partnership or circumstantial partnership?

The work carried out jointly by ASF and COTA shows that a **partner relationship can be defined in various ways and can take many forms**, depending on what the partners want, their identities, their respective objectives and interests, and their institutional histories. We have been able to identify two categories of partnership: those that could be described as “circumstantial”, limited in time and in objectives (often related to the implementation of a project), and those that are more “strategic”, established for the long term, requiring a vision, a strategy and common objectives that go beyond the implementation of a project. Experience tells us that both can be justified and both can have their place; it is not a question of making a judgment on the nature of the partnership undertaken but rather of ensuring that both partners have the same understanding and that the choice made is the result of a genuine agreement. In the end, is a good circumstantial partnership not more worthwhile than an idealised strategic partnership for which the scope and the content are poorly or inadequately defined?

The experience of ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association has shown that first and foremost the partners must jointly **clarify the desired degree of partnership** in order to then define the corresponding terms and accept them.

<sup>4</sup> Navarro-Flores, Olga. 2007. “Les relations de partenariat Nord-Sud: du paradoxe au compromis. Une approche institutionnaliste des relations entre ONG dans le secteur de la coopération internationale”. Collection thèses et mémoires - ESG UQAM, no 201, 373 p.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from Navarro-Flores, Olga. 2007. “Les relations de partenariat Nord-Sud: du paradoxe au compromis.”



ASF and the Bar Association have long emphasised the “procedural” (over the long term, that takes time) nature of their partnership while the partnership as developed in reality was more linked to a project, and so a more circumstantial approach, related to an obligation rather than of their own accord. This aspect has been modified during discussions at the institutional level, ultimately leading to a framework partnership agreement for a period of six years. The projects implemented within this framework are merely means of achieving a common goal over the medium term and the projects are therefore no longer just ends in themselves.

### Sustainability and exercise of responsibility

The approach adopted by ASF and COTA has also allowed us to put the concepts of reciprocity, equality, responsibility, and transparency into perspective. These concepts should not be fixed in absolute terms but should be **adapted to the context and put into perspective**. The definition of these concepts must first of all take into account the identity and the capacities of each of the partner organisations.

Sustainability and the exercise of responsibility for actions are not automatically defined for the partner; these two principles are discussed and worked on together (to want and be able to exercise responsibility in respect of what? What does sustainability mean in the context of the collaboration and by what means is it to be achieved? Etc.).

In the case of a progressive strategy for transferring responsibility from the north to the south, it seems necessary that firstly the southern partner actually wants this responsibility and that the northern partner is operating a coherent strategy for the transfer of responsibility without

continuing to exercise a power of control which in the end tends to make the relationship very top-down, with a gradual reduction in responsibility for the southern partner. Each of the parties involved in the collaboration must also identify its own interests and be fully aware of what the exercise of responsibility involves (in terms of tools, methods, human resources, skills to be mobilised, etc.) and both need to participate fully in defining the strategy so that they get there.

Finally, it is not enough to share out the responsibilities on paper; they need to be actually assumed and fully exercised in reality, both in success and in failure.

The partnership between ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association has the particular characteristic of relating to two organisations with different identities and organisational structures: on the one hand an NGO specialising in project management in the field of access to justice and, on the other hand, a professional association of lawyers whose core business is not related to project management. Can we expect a professional association, such as the Bar Association, to become a design office specialising in project management just because of an immediate desire to empower the southern partner? A priori no, at least not abruptly, unless we want to completely change the nature of the partner organisation.

### The exercise of responsibility: partnership or outsourcing?

As we have just seen, the logic of a partnership does not always change in any significant way **the vertical and top-down aspect** of the system of development cooperation in which the northern partner designs the projects, the southern partner participates and is then delegated,



either wholly or partly, the implementation of the project under the authority of the partner from the north, which continues to exercise a form of control. In many cases, therefore, does the partnership not in fact take the form of an outsourcing, without stating this overtly? In such cases would it not be better to define the terms of a good outsourcing arrangement rather than pretend to work in partnership?

It is also noted that in this kind of relationship, the northern partner generally ends up standing in for the southern partner when the latter has failed. Even if this is understandable, because in the end it is the northern organisation that has the ultimate responsibility (in relation to the donor for example), is this form of substitution not disempowering or even demeaning? Moreover, these repeated substitutions often end up in frustration for the partner doing the substituting because they may eventually think that their partner is not capable and never will be, that they are taking the easy option, etc. This mind set can gradually contribute to a deterioration in the quality of the partner relationship over the longer term and sometimes make it even more top-down than it already is. The question of **the exercise of responsibility** in the partner relationship is central because it determines the level of reciprocity and equality between the partners but also, and above all, the level of respect. Asking a partner to take responsibility for their errors may be harsh but it can be a strength, because it indicates a relationship of equals and shows respect for their ability to act.

Acting as a substitute for the purposes of complying with its obligations to the donor is understandable in the short term (accountability), but may constitute a weakness in the long term and very soon destroy the entire edifice that has been constructed jointly. This can also contribute to strengthening both the image of the

donor for the northern NGO and the top-down character of the relationship. Thus, if partnership practices do not always lead to better “working together”, it is also possibly because of the technical, administrative and financial constraints that burden NGOs and which are not always suited to “working together” or quite simply to the stated principles of the partnership. If we take the example of the system of project requests for proposals, the deadlines given to NGOs for the design and submission of projects generally does not permit genuine collaboration about the definition of the content of the project or its operational terms. Certain normative frameworks are also very technocratic and are either partially or wholly inaccessible to some partners. In this regard are there not certain inconsistencies between what the donors ask or require (working in partnership, empowering the partner in the south, etc.) and the operational and administrative implementation of the projects?

#### **What consistency is there between the conditions for funding and the administrative practices?**

The partnership is often viewed through the prism of a **requirement stipulated by the donors (partnership imposed rather than chosen)** who subsidise the NGOs (no partnership, no funding). This very point raises the question of the responsibility of donors in relation to the phenomena of substitution. For most of the funding coming from the north, the administrative and financial responsibility is borne entirely by the northern partner which is usually the only one signing the funding agreement. From a legal perspective, therefore, they are solely and exclusively responsible. These are the same fund donors who at the same time insist that the southern partner be empowered. Is there not therefore an inconsistency between the rhetoric and the administrative operation of public

funding? With this in mind should not donors promote the development of tripartite funding agreements (donor, northern partner and southern partner)? While this would certainly not solve everything, such a provision would have the merit of creating consistency between the conditions for funding and the administrative practice. The southern partner would then be formally and directly endowed with an element of responsibility.

#### Partnership and capacity-building: are they compatible?

The obligation to work in partnership generally goes hand in hand with an obligation to enhance the capacities of the stakeholders in the south. The experiment undertaken by COTA and ASF has highlighted the inconsistency, even the contradiction that may exist between the stated principles of the partnership and the conventional positions that imply capacity-building of whatever kind (financial, material, technical, etc.). Indeed, capacity-building very often assumes a relationship perceived or experienced as very top-down in nature, all the more so because a number of stakeholders from the north link capacity-building to a very formal and normative phase of organisational diagnosis in which the southern partner is “put under the microscope”. But then, is the northern partner also “put under the microscope” by its southern partner? In general the answer is no...ultimately, and in relation to the actual experience of ASF in Burundi, the question which arises is this: is the Bar Association the partner of ASF or the beneficiary of multifaceted capacity-building? Are the two compatible? The work carried out between ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association shows that, beyond the very technocratic and very rigid terminology, the two positions are possible as long as the capacity-building activities are conceived and agreed by both parties and

when the northern partner also accepts a position of humility and puts its own weaknesses on the table. To be a real catalyst for change within a partner relationship, capacity-building must necessarily evolve from being a very normative and top-down practice to a practice that is seen through the prism of reciprocity, dialogue and the capacity-building must be voluntary and not imposed.

Furthermore, we can see that the timeframes for projects (2 or 3 years) do not correspond to the timeframes required for deep-seated, mutual and lasting capacity-building within an organisation. Capacity-building actions firstly require the partner to have a strong desire for change (this is the driver). Should not capacity-building be seen as a process, over the long-term, which should be rooted in the partner’s timeframe and agenda? For this to happen it is necessary **to adapt to the timeframe for the change, which does not necessarily coincide with the timeframe for the project.** The instruction for capacity-building over the timeframe of the project does not seem to work. In that case is capacity-building not imposed rather than actually wanted? And wouldn’t the actions that are eventually carried out within this framework be a succession of ad-hoc activities that correspond to what the northern partner wants rather than to what the southern partner might want?

The capacity-building actions initiated by ASF in the Bujumbura Bar Association are broadly unilateral because it is ASF which builds and the Bujumbura Bar Association which benefits from the capacity-building actions. De facto the capacity-building logic results in a relationship between “the one who knows” and “the one who needs to be strengthened”, therefore a top-down relationship.

Conversely, the partners have agreed that their

respective financial managers work together to identify an expenditure procedure which takes account of the usual activities and the standards of each party in order to arrive at a compromise and a joint procedure. It is indeed a capacity-building process in which both parties have input and work together, and each makes compromises and learns from the other.

#### **Transparency: a principle or a negotiated practice?**

The concept of transparency also seems to characterise a healthy and well-balanced partner relationship. But here too, should not transparency be put into context and seen in a more practical and less ideological way?

Both partners should be able to collectively discuss and define the scope of the transparency. The experience of ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association shows how important it is to be transparent about the budget of a project where a part of its implementation is the responsibility of the southern partner, regardless of the form of partnership chosen. This topic is often taboo, and we have to admit that it is central to concerns and, often, to frustration. Therefore where the partners agree to work together on a programme, project, or a definite action, is it not necessary to jointly prepare this common project? Each partner should therefore be able to present and justify its operational choices which have an impact on the budget.

Therefore when the issues pertaining to transparency are defined by the two partners, it is appropriate to then define the mechanisms and tools which will facilitate it. Partnership does not mean “merger” but a relationship in which **the partners agree on what they are happy to treat as joint and it is this “joint” element to**

#### **which the concept of transparency will apply.**

The process undertaken has also highlighted a central element determining the quality of the partner relationship, especially in its initial phase. To know oneself well, to know what one wants and what one expects from the partnership before starting a dialogue with the other party is essential. Knowing oneself well before approaching the other party facilitates discussions between the two organisations and, above all, helps to smooth communication and ultimately identify what could constitute “common cause” and “joint action”.

For example, before bringing together the Bujumbura Bar Association and ASF in the same workshop, each of the two organisations had to clarify what they wanted and what they expected from a partnership.

As well as the priority themes and methods identified between the two partners, ASF and the Bar Association must work to find a balance between the requirements for quality (requiring sometimes complex tools and difficult processes) and the availability of services provided to improve access to the law for the most vulnerable.

#### **To learn how to “work together” and build together rather than seeking equality**

Working in partnership should mean more than the words, the concept and the stated principles; it should constitute a genuine philosophy for action, for which it is necessary to understand what “**working together**” actually means.

Learning to work together; is this not one of the factors in the success of a development action? It has long been said but, in relation to the facts and the daily practices, it can be seen that **working together does not necessarily mean**

**perfect equality** with regard to the distribution of work and responsibilities. Is it absolutely necessary to look for perfect equality when it is a question of organising dialogue, communication, decision-making and the work?

A sharing of work and responsibilities which may a priori be unequal is perhaps not the central question to be asked; is not the important point that these potential imbalances should be discussed, negotiated and agreed by the two parties and, in particular, put into perspective (what objectives are we setting ourselves? Where do we want to achieve and what means can each of us deploy to get there?). Rather than seeking equality in the relationship, **partnership perhaps implies, above all, learning to work together.**

Working on partner relationships generally means looking at the terms and means of what is often referred to as co-construction (how to construct something jointly). Of necessity this involves agreeing on a certain number of points and finding a compromise. For example, in the implementation of their actions should the partners not agree on the concept of quality and identify common ground on the criteria that define a so-called quality action? Very often a northern partner will say “Yes, we should work as a partnership” but “we cannot negotiate on the quality level”: is that a consistent approach? Is that not a very subjective and self-centred vision of the concept of quality? Does not working in partnership on a project imply that both parties should define the quality settings?

#### **Is partnership not primarily about soft skills?**

In particular, a partnership seems to mobilise and test the capacity of each partner for “soft skills”, rather than any technical or administrative aspects. We are then talking

about the stance, the capacity for empathy of each of the parties involved, the ability to listen and to compromise. Partnership is a dynamic; it is built gradually, from the foundations to the finished product. And like any construction project, it will not proceed without difficulties and constraints that need to be addressed and overcome. Each stage of the construction is important; leaving even one aside is to run the risk of building a relationship on unstable foundations.

The experience of the partnership between ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association also shows how an **astute balance between formal/institutional relations and informal relations** is important. In particular, informal relations have the advantages putting a human face on the relationship and of improving mutual understanding. The informal can help to resolve certain problems, certain difficulties. While this kind of communication does have its place in a partnership, it should not however be a substitute for institutional relations which are a guarantee of continuity and are supposed to regulate and organise the relationship over and above the personal aspects.

#### **Partnership: a fluid concept, a way of questioning oneself**

Wanting to enclose the partnership in a straitjacket, within a very rigid definition applied to the very restricted area of development cooperation does not reflect the dynamic nature of a partner relationship. In the end each partnership is unique and should not be thought of as a lifeline where disengagement is the ultimate goal. Rather, should not the ultimate goal be to learn how to work together to overcome this north-south division which in so many ways no longer makes any sense? Partnership applied to the development cooperation sector is ultimately very restrictive and envisaged purely

in terms of capacity-building and disengagement (very technical angle), all in a very short timeframe and in the end bringing about a very top-down - even condescending - relationship.

Shouldn't working in partnership instead be viewed above all as a great opportunity to **question oneself in order to move forward**: to review several years of partnership in a constructive manner in order to take stock and to update the modalities and the strategies.

Taking a retrospective view, it is interesting to note the not insignificant importance of the longer-term effect of the partnership between ASF and the Bujumbura Bar Association. Without this partnership, ASF might not have chosen the same areas for intervention or the same methods of intervention in Burundi, and the Bujumbura Bar Association might also have been different if this partnership had not existed. It might not have had as many members and might have put less emphasis on legal aid.

#### A FEW KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

The path taken by ASF and COTA has allowed some important questions to be raised. So what are the main ingredients for a successful partner relationship?

- Becoming involved in a partnership requires you **to first of all know who you are and what you want**. Approaching the other party implies that you know what is behind the concept of partnership and what you expect from a partner relationship.
- A successful partnership **demand**s and **requires time** and an investment in both the formal and the informal. Should we not then promote the number and the quality of partnerships?
- It seems important to clearly **define the partnership, to be aware of the different forms it can take**, and to properly assess what is desired or desirable in terms of the degree of collaboration. All of this means we should and can put the idealised characteristics of the partnership into context: transparency, equality, reciprocity, mutuality, balance of powers, etc. All of these “ingredients” are certainly necessary and can constitute objectives over time but they cannot be a starting point in the construction of the partnership.
- Partnership is **to a large extent about soft skills** (capacity for empathy, dialogue, listening, etc.) and a sensible balance between the formal/institutional and the informal. Both are important and complementary to a large degree.
- **Partnership is about assuming that there will be imbalances** between partners and turn these into advantages in order to steer the partnership towards a mutually desirable format. In order to do this, is it not important to **define by common agreement the “key stages” in the evolution of the partner relationship**?
- **Partnership is about knowing** how to **combine the pressures** weighing on NGOs (carry out projects in order to exist) and build partner relationships with full knowledge of the facts and knowing what you want. This twin anchoring is possible by being honest about partnership ambitions and by fitting these ambitions to the capacities of each party.
- A “strategic” type partnership is constructed over time and can be adversely impacted by staff turnover and the lack of **continuity in an organisation**. Too high a level of turnover

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does not help the development of strategic partner relationships. And, at the same time, staying too long in a post can allow a certain level of routine to develop in the partnership which can result in a loss of dynamism. Having new people come in who can review and develop the partnership is an important factor; and a sensible balance between “too much change” and “not enough change”.

## CONCLUSION

Practical experience seems to demonstrate that a partnership is not a homogeneous and uniform whole. There are as many partner relationships as stakeholder organisations. Each partner relationship is unique. It is then up to the partners to add content, define it and develop it if such is the wish of the parties. A partnership dynamic is organised (organisation of communication, decision making, sharing of responsibilities and mutual accountability, etc.) starting from the reality as it pertains to each of the partners (identity and culture, technical, financial and organisational capabilities, etc.). It can develop depending on what each party wants and how each portrays itself. In the context of a collaboration between two different cultures, each of the partners will certainly have to demonstrate an ability to listen, to focus on the weight of the words and on what they really mean.

Any partnership dynamic also assumes a trust that is not innate. It has to be worked on, earned gradually. The partners get to know each other and accept the possible imbalances between them with a view to turning them into drivers for progress in the arrangement.

The partnership is formalised and institutionalised (framework partnership agreement...) but it also brings into play human relationships in a cross-cultural setting that is not always easy to understand.

To enter confidently into a partnership dynamic is perhaps to say that “nothing is ever acquired or settled”; the partnership must be fed, nourished and questioned otherwise it may simply die due to lack of a dynamic and lack of scrutiny. To enter confidently into a partnership dynamic is also to say to oneself from the outset that one day it may come to an end and that in itself

that is not a concern; what might be regrettable would be for the partnership to be terminated without the two parties having discussed it in advance and implemented it jointly.

Working in partnership takes time, time for “working together”, time to find compromises. This approach is recognised as a factor in sustainability but is it compatible with the current and growing pressure to achieve results in the very short term and the quest for performance at any price?



## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



