

Cross Sector Partnerships as Capitalism's new Development Agents Reconceiving Impact as Empowerment

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Cross Sector Partnerships as Capitalism's new Development Agents.

Reconceiving Impact as Empowerment.

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These years we are witnessing a reorganization of development assistance to developing countries from across the Western world. Indeed, a marked shift in the conceptualization of development is taking place, influenced by a managerialist and capitalist logic (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014). While international development efforts were previously focused on the role of governments and to some extent NGOs rather than the private sector, cross-sector partnerships are increasingly seen as capitalism's instrument to overcome a range of challenges associated with the unilateral action of governments and civil society (Utting & Zammit, 2008; Kolk et al., 2008; Crane, 2010). Transnational governance instruments such as the UN Global Compact and the UN Sustainable Development Goals testify to this effect.

While cross-sector partnerships have been much studied in recent years, research has tended to focus on internal partnership characteristics and benefits (Kolk et al., 2008). Few comprehensive evaluation studies exist on the societal outcomes of partnerships. As pointed out by James Austin and Maria May Seitanidi, *"There is a tendency to assume societal betterment rather than provide the necessary evidence. Consequently, the core question, 'How is society better off due to the collaboration?', remains underdocumented in practice"* (2012, p. 957). In addition, while research on partnerships in developing world contexts has in recent years gained traction,

management studies have been largely silent on the issue of poverty (Utting & Zammit, 2008; Blowfield & Dolan, 2014) as well as the on the broader political implications of cross sector partnerships (Crane, 2010). Extant evaluation frameworks tend to assume that transforming partnership outcomes into societal impact such as poverty alleviation is a relatively simple matter of time and/or scale. Impact is assumed to derive from long-term outcomes which transcend the immediate sphere of partnership activities.

This paper questions this assumption. In order to address the need for empirically grounded knowledge concerning the conditions under which partnership outcomes lead to societal impact, we explore how outputs provided by a partnership are put to use and/or perceived as beneficial from the point of view of its beneficiaries.

In response to the powerful discourse which “hails private sector initiatives as a solution to poverty and marginalization”, Michael Blowfield and Catherine Dolan argue that in order to genuinely serve as agents of development, business must be engaged in intentional activities consciously undertaken to positively impact lives in developing countries (2014, p. 23). We apply the theoretical lens of Blowfield and Dolan’s ‘business as a development agent’ to the partnership context in order to highlight the fundamental challenges involved when partnerships with for-profit enterprises aim to contribute to poverty alleviation. Addressing the issue of cross-sector partnership in developing world contexts as a question of *partnerships as development agents* allows us to center our analysis on the societal purpose of these institutions, to draw into focus the issue of poverty alleviation and to do so with reference to a broader frame of global governance, which prescribes partnerships with such a role.

While Blowfield and Dolan’s (2014) framework is oriented around the institutional pre-conditions for obtaining development impact, it is not concerned with pre-conditions at the level of beneficiaries. Ultimately, the assessment of whether or not a partnership fulfills a role as a

development agent must depend on the extent to which its activities have the potential to positively impact the lives of beneficiaries. Cross-sector partnership (CSP) evaluation frameworks, such as those provided by Austin and Seitanidi (2012), van Tulder et al. (2014) and Stadtler (2016), provide conceptual scaffolding and process models to describe the elements in partnership effectiveness and their mutual relationship. Where these frameworks fall short, however, is in terms of conceptualizing the conditions under which partnership outcomes lead to societal impact.

Our study of outcomes at the beneficiary level of a Business-NGO partnership aimed at alleviating poverty in Ghana, shows that due to the inability of the business partner to give primacy to the poor, the partnership's development efforts result in what we call 'competence without agency'. The partnership delivers on its promise in terms of providing resources and competences for its most direct beneficiaries, but neither the direct beneficiaries nor the wider community are able to make use of these resources and competences to effect substantial change in their lives. This leads us to conclude that in order to evaluate the impact of a partnership, it must be assessed to what extent it promotes agency, as the critical bridging element between resources and achievement. We propose to theorize this condition through the concept of empowerment, which has for quite some time played a central role in development theory and practice, but which has yet to be introduced into business and society research. With this conception of 'impact as empowerment', we understand the ability of a partnership to function as a development agent to be conditioned by its ability to foster empowerment at both individual and collective levels. Empowerment requires not just access to resources, but the facilitation of increased agency and achievement and thus impact on these factors must be evaluated in order to assess any actor's capacity as a development agent.

Our contribution is threefold. First, by analyzing the impact of a North-South partnership, we address the call for research that investigates partnerships in developing country contexts as well as the call for research into partnership effects from the point of view of its beneficiaries. By

undertaking a micro-study of effects of development CSPs on individuals, we provide empirical knowledge concerning beneficiaries' perceptions of a partnership and its benefits and shed light on the dynamics, which determine the ability of a partnership to serve as a development agent. Second, we introduce new, highly pertinent theory from the adjacent field of development studies to refine and expand existing theory on cross-sector partnerships. Third, we develop an alternative, beneficiary oriented CSP evaluation framework which conceptualizes impact as empowerment to inform future research and partnership design for poverty alleviation.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we review partnership research broadly to provide an overview of partnership types (modelled in figure 1). Second, as a rationale for our study, we show how cross-sector partnerships are vested with high hopes as the new governance mechanism for international development and follow this with a critical view of partnerships as development agents. Subsequently, we review the literature on CSP evaluation frameworks to allow us to define the theoretical gap, which this study aims to address. After this, our research design follows including a case description and a detailed account of our data collection procedures. The next section presents our analysis and findings in two parts. The first part analyses the case partnership as a development agent from an institutional point of view. The second part analyses partnership outputs, outcomes and impacts from the point of view of the beneficiaries. In the ensuing discussion, we argue for a problem of 'competence without agency' which we propose to theorize as an empowerment deficit. Finally, we discuss the implications and make proposals for further research.

The cross-sector partnership

Partnership is defined here as an institutionalized collaboration, where a business joins forces with a public institution and/or civil society organization to pursue common goals, while leveraging joint resources and capitalizing on the respective competences and strengths of all partners. The notion of cross-sector partnership covers an array of different institutions which differ

both in terms of their structural make-up and their aim (see figure 1 below). Partnership structure pertains to the configuration of partners (e.g. Selsky & Parker, 2005), and the type of collaboration taking place between them (e.g. Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Partner configurations include, under various names, public-private partnerships, business-NGO partnerships, government-NGO partnerships and tripartite partnerships, the latter engaging parties from all three societal sectors (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Collaboration types are differentiated in terms of the level of engagement of the partners, in particular the business partner, under a range of different labels (Austin, 2000; Bowen et al., 2008; Kourula & Halme, 2008; Hardy & Philips 1998; Morsing & Schultz 2006).

Partnerships are further differentiated in terms of their aim. Cross-sector partnerships share the overall objective of contributing to societal betterment, typically emphasizing an ‘imperative to realize benefits for the wider community rather than for special interests’ (Skelcher & Sullivan 2002: 752). Where they differ is in terms of the nature and scope of the issue they aim to contribute to, as well as the means by which they do so. Partnerships are established in reaction to or anticipation of social issues concerning economic development, education, health care, poverty alleviation, community capacity building, and environmental sustainability (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Seitanidi, 2008; van Tulder et al., 2014). These issues may be pursued with varying scopes, conceived to yield micro-, meso- and macro-level impacts (Kolk et al., 2008). Micro-partnerships tend to be project-oriented and focus on a particular country or specific activity; meso-partnerships aim to improve the sustainability of a certain sector or supply chain; while macro-partnerships have wide issue definitions and broad objectives, covering several countries or global activities (Kolk et al., 2008). Finally, partnerships differ in terms of the means by which objectives are pursued, i.e. the function the partnership serves vis-à-vis the issue. Operational partnerships pursue societal betterment through the provision of services or goods (Beisheim & Liese, 2011), while resource mobilization partnerships raise funds for specific societal goals (Bull & McNeil, 2007). Advocacy partnerships

work through awareness raising (Bull & McNeil, 2007), while policy partnerships, pursue their societal goal by contributing to governance and standard setting (Visseren-Hamakers & Glasbergen, 2007; Bull & McNeil, 2007). Figure 1 below encapsulates the different partnership structures and aims.

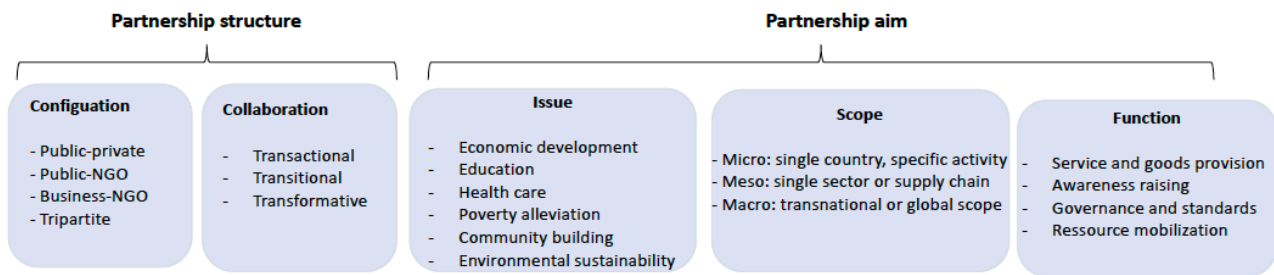


Figure 1: Cross-sector partnership structures and aims

Partnerships as Capitalism's new Governance mechanism

The growing importance of institutions of transnational governance vis-à-vis national governance has been recognized over a longer period, but it is only recently that we have seen a steep increase in implementation of and interest in various forms of market-driven governance (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007; Vogel, 2005; Börzel & Risse, 2005). While past development theories focused on the role of governments (and to some extent NGOs) rather than the private sector (Blowfield, 2012), cross-sector partnerships are increasingly seen as an instrument to overcome a range of challenges associated with the unilateral action of governments and civil society (Kolk et al., 2008).

While there is general agreement among researchers and practitioners alike concerning the potential of partnerships for contributing to achieving development goals, this potential is also considered to be largely unrealized (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Jamali, 2009; Reed & Reed, 2009; Kolk et al., 2008). The prevailing development logic, which points to cross-sector partnerships as the water bearers of sustainable development in policy (e.g. Paris Declaration (2005), SDG #17

(2016), etc.) has not been without criticism in the international development literature. This is mainly due to the lack of evidence regarding the ability of partnerships to in fact deliver on sustainable development outcomes. In the context of developing regions, partnership research has yielded very little systematic knowledge (Jamali, 2009). Scholars have highlighted the Western-centric nature of publication on the topic where theorizing occurs without reference to the context of developing countries, as well as the tendency to view partnerships strictly from a CSR perspective – i.e. focus on processes, success factors and benefits from the point of view of the business (Belal, 2001; Prieto-Carón et al., 2006; Jamali, 2009; Kolk et al, 2008; Utting & Zammit 2008).

Partnerships as Development Agents

In response to the powerful discourse which “hails private sector initiatives as a solution to poverty and marginalization”, Blowfield and Dolan argue that in order to truly serve as agents of development, business must be engaged in intentional activities consciously undertaken to improve lives in developing countries (2014, p. 23). This is what sets the development agent apart from the role typically undertaken by companies engaging in bottom million capitalism, that of the development tool, which takes no responsibility for the societal outcomes of its engagement. To evaluate the development efforts of commercial enterprises, Blowfield and Dolan (2014) propose a new framework for assessing the effectiveness of business as a development agent on the basis of structural dimensions. They present three key criteria, each of which draws into focus the positive impact for the poor. According to the first criterion, *willingness to deploy assets for an expected, calculated development benefit*, the business should make investments towards poverty alleviation. Development effects should not occur as an epiphenomenon to the practices of a company but as the result of an explicit strategy for creating impact for the poor, which is based on a thorough assessment of development needs as well as the appropriate measures to satisfy them. The second criterion,

primacy to benefits for the poor and marginalized, entails that when choosing between competing stakeholder interests, a development agent must give priority to positive impact for the poor. According to the third criterion, *accountability in striving to address poverty*, a development agent must consciously and accountably strive to address poverty and marginalization. This means that a development agent not only provides opportunities that would seem to benefit the poor, but also takes on the responsibility of ensuring as far as possible the poor do in fact benefit from these opportunities. And further, that the business provides an honest, fair and reliable account to itself and others of its development impact.

With these three criteria, the framework provided by Blowfield and Dolan (2014) points to the fundamental challenges for business to genuinely serve as a new development agent. In doing so, the framework provides a vocabulary for bringing into focus the quality of private development efforts, which can be transferred to assessing cross-sector partnerships as development agents. Extant research on cross sector partnerships considers the mutual fit between partners (Berger et al., 2004; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), or between the partnership and its cause (Kolk et al., 2008) emphasizing the importance of the shared “initial articulation of the social problem” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), but does not pay attention to the processes by which the definition of the social problem and solution comes about. Further, concern with accountability for societal effects is marginal in partnership research (with notable exceptions such as Reed & Reed, 2009; Newell, 2002; Utting, 2005) to a great extent due to effectiveness mostly being measured and reported upon at the output, not the impact level. As a consequence, the question as to whether target communities in fact benefit from activities and opportunities provided by the partnership, falls out of the scope of much of this research. Addressing the issue of cross-sector partnership in developing world contexts as a question of *partnerships as development agents*, allows us to center our analysis on the societal purpose of these

institutions, in our case specifically poverty alleviation, and to do so with reference to a broader frame of global governance, which prescribes partnerships with such a role.

Partnership impact

In partnerships for development, partners join forces to trigger societal change for disadvantaged groups and eventually improve the community's standard of living and economic viability (Bull & McNeil, 2007). The pronounced objective of societal change as well as the high hopes with which they are vested, intensifies the need for research into partnerships for development to pay greater attention to the monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of the outcomes and impacts on social problems of partnerships (van Tulder et al., 2016). While partnerships have been much studied in recent years, conceptual as well as empirical research has tended to be focused on internal partnership characteristics and benefits, i.e. on *partnership efficiency*, defined as the internal value added from the partnership (Kolk et al., 2008). Few comprehensive evaluation studies exist on the diversity of societal outcomes of partnerships for development. This is in great part due to the inherent complexity of effects, the so-called attribution problem, and the lack of appropriate evaluation methods and data (Kolk et al., 2008; Roberts & Khattri, 2012).

As opposed to the 'efficiency' of partnerships, *partnership effectiveness* can be seen as the added value and societal impact of the partnership compared to the individual activities of the different partners (van Tulder et al., 2016). Ultimately, effectiveness is a measure of the appropriateness of the specific partnership arrangement, including its inputs and throughputs, for achieving societal effects. When assessing societal effects, evaluation frameworks differentiate between outputs, outcomes and impact. This is important because outputs, the most immediately observable and measurable partnership effects, do not necessarily lead to the desired outcomes, nor do outcomes necessarily produce the desired impact. Outputs are understood as the activities,

products and services (Stadtler 2016; van Tulder et al., 2016), as well as the agreements, norms or guidelines (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2015) that are produced in the partnership. Outcomes, on the other hand are the intended and unintended effects on targeted communities resulting directly or indirectly from these outputs (van Tulder & Pfisterer, 2007; van Tulder et al., 2016). Impacts, finally, tend to be defined as the longer-term, direct and indirect effects on whole issues, that is, the changes and benefits the partnership brings to the wider society (van Tulder et al., 2016). Thus, both outcomes and impacts go beyond measuring activities and intentions to capture the intended and unintended effects associated with beneficiaries (Kolodinsky et al., 2006).

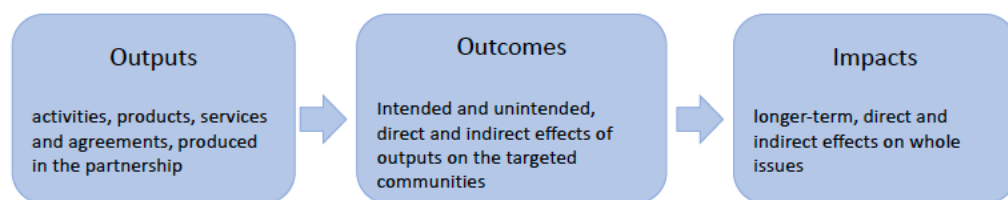


Figure 2: Partnership evaluation framework linking outputs, outcomes and impacts

In her evaluation framework for partnerships for development, Lea Stadtler demonstrates the manifold direct and indirect effects of a partnership on a development goal (2016). Her approach serves to emphasize benefits that are largely un- or under-acknowledged, especially indirect outcomes and longer-term effects for stakeholders beyond the target group, all of which are crucial elements for the assessment of partnerships for development. What makes this framework valuable is that it clearly differentiates the dimensions of time and immediacy from the stakeholder dimension, making explicit that indirect effects may produce outcomes at multiple stakeholder levels. While these dimensions tend to be conflated or used either indiscriminately or ambiguously in the literature, their differentiation is analytically important for capturing the nuances of processes that produce impact. Figure 3 captures Stadtler's evaluation framework.

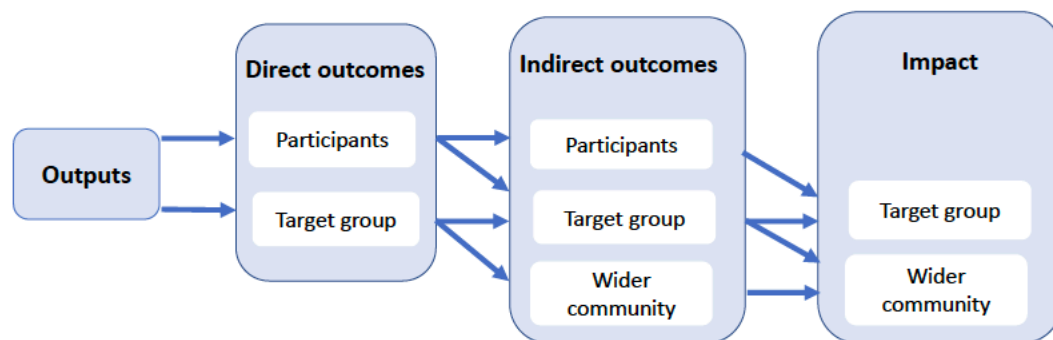


Figure 3: Partnership evaluation framework linking direct and indirect outcomes to impact for beneficiaries (based on Stadtler (2016)).

Where this and related assessment frameworks fall short is in terms of conceptualizing impact dynamics, that is, the processual relationship between outputs, outcomes and impact. How does an output lead to an outcome which ultimately produces impact? How do effects at the individual level have relevance for societal impact? As previously stated, the key importance of differentiating between output, outcomes and impact derives from the fact that one does not necessarily lead to the other. However, extant frameworks do not provide models for conceptualizing these relationships. Impact dynamics are explored in terms of the relationship between internal partnership processes on the one hand and outcomes on the other hand, conceptualized as the value chain in collaborative value creation (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), impact value chain (Wainwright, 2002; Maas & Liket, 2011) or impact loops (van Tulder et al., 2016). This leaves unexplored the question of the dynamics by which outcomes turn into “benefits or changes for individuals, organizations or society at large after participating in or being influenced by, the activities of the partnership” (van Tulder et al. 2016, p.10). Extant research tends to assume that the transformation of outcomes into societal impact is a relatively simple matter of time and/or scale, i.e. that impact derives from long-term outcomes which transcend the immediate sphere of partnership activities. This paper questions this assumption and asks how partnership outcomes lead to societal impact. In order to address this broad question, we explore how

the outputs provided by a partnership are put to use and/or perceived as beneficial from the point of view of its beneficiaries. We introduce our research design below to answer this question.

Research Design

Research setting

The paper draws on a single case study of a partnership between a Danish business and a Ghanaian NGO. It is a micro-partnership with a transformative collaboration structure, which aims to alleviate poverty. This particular partnership was chosen for three reasons. First, it is a North-South partnership, where a Danish business is partnering with an NGO in a country in which Danish governmental development assistance is currently being phased out. Second, the particular partnership was promoted by the Danish embassy to Ghana as its flagship business-NGO partnership. Third, the partnership has operated for more than 10 years, making it ideally suited for a study, which aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of long-term effects. Background on the Danish business, Ghanaian NGO and the partnership itself is provided below.

The Danish Business partner

The Danish business partner is a small design, glass and jewelry production company with headquarters in Denmark and retailers in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The company was created in 1989 by its Danish founder who is a professional glass-blower, jewelry designer and already established entrepreneur in Scandinavia. The company produces and sells decorative glass for the household and jewelry, which is made from recycled crushed glass.

The Ghanaian NGO

The Ghanaian NGO partner is a well-established, small local organization whose mission is poverty alleviation for its district in the Eastern region of Ghana. The organization started as a Danish-Ghanaian friendship association in 1989 but was later founded as a non-governmental organization (NGO) in 2000. Until recently, most of its activities were funded by the Danish Development Agency (Danida). The NGO's primary focus is education and capacity building for landless farmers, single mothers and youth.

The Bead partnership

The idea for the 'Bead partnership' between the Danish company and Ghanaian NGO arose when the Danish business owner visited a friend connected to the Ghanaian NGO. During the owner's visit, she encountered the enormous amounts of beads made from recycled glass in bright colors at a weekly bead market in a town close to the office of the NGO. The business owner saw the vast potential for leveraging her knowledge about glass to start a jewelry making business in the area, which made the glass according to Ghanaian tradition but assembled them based on her own design to sell to North American and European markets. Witnessing the challenging living conditions of women in the area, she also saw the possibility of helping local women by employing them to produce and assemble the beads. For the Ghanaian NGO, the motivation to engage in the partnership was fueled by its social mission to employ and train single mothers to become financially independent. The partnership received funding from Danida's Business to Business pilot programme in 2005 for a three year project and since then has not received any funding from the Danish Development Agency nor any other sources. It is physically located in the same offices as the Ghanaian NGO and is managed by two female employees, an administrator and a quality control manager. The partnership is overseen by the General Secretary of the NGO although the Danish founder also visits the production three-four

times each year to teach new designs to employees and provides managerial guidance and quality assurance to the production lines.

Data collection

The paper developed from an exploratory, pilot study to a full blown single case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984). The data collection process was “iterative” and inspired by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) through which conceptual categories emerged from the data but were continuously referred back to existing knowledge and theories (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

The paper is based on three separate data collection visits over a two-year period (January 2015, November 2015 & March 2016) to the Eastern district in Ghana where the partnership’s production and assembly of beads occurs as well as one visit to the headquarters of the company in Denmark. In Ghana, data was collected through interviews, focus groups discussions and observations at the partnership site and in three surrounding communities where the employees reside. Interviews were also conducted in the Ghanaian capital of Accra with local authorities and relevant parties such as the Danish Embassy. Since many of the respondents were not confident in English, a Ghanaian research assistant was employed for the majority of the interviews and focus group discussions to translate from the local language, Twi, to English.

A total of 29 individual interviews were conducted. This includes 3 interviews with the founder, 8 interviews with managers of the partnership, 18 individual interviews and 3 group discussions with female employees, and 3 interviews with local authorities. Moreover, 27 women, who were not directly involved in the partnership, but who lived in the surrounding communities participated in 3 focus group discussions.

We used focus group discussions since we were not only interested in individual experiences but also community perceptions, attitudes, and viewpoints (Lloyd-Evans, 2006, Laws, Harper and Marcus, 2003). Moreover, a key advantage of using group discussions in research characterized by relative large power gradients and socio-economic differences between the researchers and the research participants is that research participants might find it less intimidating to meet an outsider researcher in a group context than on a one-to-one basis. Research participants may find strength in numbers in a group and might experience that they are more in control. The method therefore has the potential of empowering the research participants to steer the discussions and thus take an active part in the production of knowledge (Langevang, 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2006). We also used participatory techniques inspired by Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers, 1993; Beazley and Ennew, 2006) and incorporated visual communication methods as opposed to verbal communication to engage “fringe stakeholders” (Hart & Sharma, 2004). The majority of the focus group participants had low education levels, which could have reduced their ability to meaningfully engage in the group discussions through only verbal communication. Participatory and visual methods were hence utilized to empower the participants to participate meaningfully and to treat them as ‘agents’ and ‘participants’ rather than passive subjects of research (e.g. McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016; Gough, Langevang and Namatovu, 2014). For example, throughout the discussions, participants were encouraged to make use of symbolic objects such as coins to reference money, books to correspond to education, and band aids to refer to health. At one point in the discussion, we also asked participants to “rank the challenges from one to five in this community” making use of these objects.

Figure 4 below illustrates the flow of data-theory interplay, the process of data analysis and the collection of data that we will unfold below in the description of the three data collection phases.

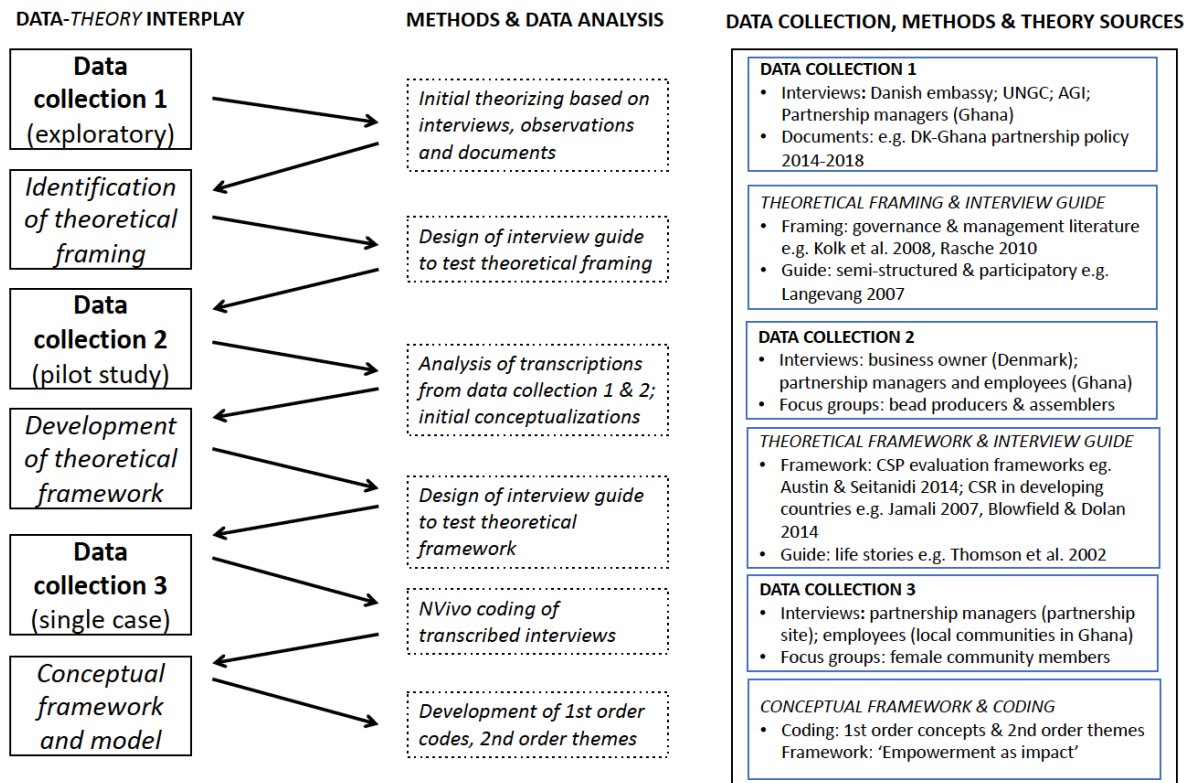


Figure 4: Data-theory interplay in data collection and analysis

Data collection 1. During the first visit to Ghana in January 2015, the context of Danish company-NGO partnerships and the bead production and assembly were explored. Unstructured interviews with local authorities including managers of North-South partnerships at the Danish embassy, The Association of Ghana Industries (AGI), United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), Ghana in Accra were conducted. These interviews sought to elicit information about the general history, purpose and scope of bilateral partnerships in Ghana. In addition, key policy documents regarding partnerships were collected. Exploratory, open-ended interview with the business owner and partnership managers were conducted at the partnership location. The history, motivation, structure and activities of the bead partnership were addressed during these interviews.

Data collection 2. In October 2015, a semi-structured in-depth interview was held with the owner of the business at the business headquarters in Denmark. The purpose of this interview was to fill in gaps in the information from the first interview and generate more in-depth insights into the evolution, dynamics, resource allocation and priorities of the different partners. This interview was followed by field research in Ghana in November 2015. This included three semi-structured interviews with local managers of the partnership, which sought to elicit data about the governance, daily management and funding of the partnership, their specific activities, recruitment and training of employees, and prioritization of resources as well as information about the target group. Semi-structured interviews with two female employees as well as three group discussions with small groups of bead producers and assemblers were conducted. The purpose of these interviews and group discussions was to get an initial understanding of the challenges that the women were facing in their everyday life and the perceived benefits and challenges of being employed by the partnership.

Data collection 3. Three interviews with partnership managers and 16 individual employees were conducted in March 2016. The interviews with the managers aimed at generating data about the impact that the partnership had generated for the poor. The interviews with employees were conducted at their homes. A refined semi-structured interview guide with 5 themes was used in order to garner information about the informants' life stories, experiences of change in their living conditions, skills and competences, as a result of their employment with the partnership as well as the indirect effects on the wider community. We used elements of life story / biographical interviews (Thomson et al., 2002; Langevang, 2007) to investigate whether employment through the partnership constituted a 'critical moment' (Giddens, 1991) or 'vital conjecture' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) which had altered the individuals' resources, their social position, their opportunities, outlook and aspirations for the future.

Three focus group discussions with between 5 and 7 participants were conducted with community members unaffiliated with the partnership in three surrounding villages where the employees of the partnership live. The participants were recruited using snowball techniques. The purpose of the group discussion was to generate knowledge about the partnership's impact on the surrounding community members. A guideline containing key themes was prepared in advance, which included questions intended to prompt a broad discussion about the challenges and opportunities in the community, their knowledge about the partnership and their perceptions about if and how it had affected their lives and the community.

The progression between the three data collections were informed by theorizing from management scholarship in partnerships and governance as well as development studies on empowerment as indicated by the “theoretical framing” boxes in the farthest right column in Figure 4.

All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo 11. To perform the analysis, we first labeled the raw interview text according to content and then used a four-step coding of the data. We first coded the data according to the three criteria for assessing a partnership's ability to serve as a development agent as outlined above. Second, we coded all data based on the distinction between outputs, direct outcomes, indirect outcomes and impact for participants, target groups and the wider community. Third, we Nvivo-coded all transcripts allowing for new themes to emerge. At this stage we identified links and missing elements in the process of creating impact for the beneficiaries, and the key theme, which we term “competence without agency,” emerged. This data-driven revelation brought us to theories of empowerment, and the interlinked concepts of resources, agency and achievements. Finally, we coded all data based on these

three key concepts. In the following we account for our empirical findings regarding the impact of the partnership.

Analysis

The analysis is divided into two parts, the first of which analyses the case partnership as a development agent from a meso-level, institutional point of view, and the second analyzing partnership outputs, outcomes and impacts from the point of view of beneficiaries, at a micro-level.

Analysis 1: The bead partnership as a development agent

Below, we analyze the partnership as a development agent by assessing its structural ability to make positive impact on the lives of the poor. We do so on the basis of Blowfield and Dolan's (2014) three criteria described above.

Deploying assets for an expected, calculated impact on poverty

The NGO performed a systematic assessment of local needs when it was first established. From 1999-2000 the secretary general from the NGO, in collaboration with a Norwegian Anthropologist conducted four weeks of fieldwork, interviewing community leaders, as well as various community members in the region. This was done to identify the population groups most in need as well as to identify the main challenges facing these groups. The fieldwork resulted in the realization that although the vast majority of the region's population considered themselves farmers, 73% were landless and accepted exploitative conditions in order to gain access to land for their livelihood. Additionally, the work was highly weather-dependent and sensitive to fluctuations in supply and demand. The organization thus identified landless farmers as a key target group for economic empowerment initiatives and together with the Norwegian anthropologist developed the idea of

alternative livelihood, which would make the population less vulnerable to these types of risks. Landless families were thus identified as the first target group for the organization. The second target group identified was single mothers as the fieldwork uncovered that 52% of mothers over the age of 18 were single, with an average of 4-5 children to clothe, feed and educate. Finally, due to the high occurrence of HIV in the district, the third target group was young men and women ages 14-24.

The bead partnership was established at the initiative of the NGO rather than the business to provide employment to single mothers in the area. At its inception, single motherhood was a requirement for employment. In this sense, from the point of view of the partnership (if not the business), the expected development impact is an integral part of its *raison d'être*. Given that a key critique of business engagement in development is that business tends to recognize only those problems for which a solution which the enterprise can produce, in fact this partnership was established on the basis of a problem diagnosis made by the NGO. That said, no systematic consideration of the benefits expected by the particular intervention by the partnership was ever made.

The NGO has not been able to find business partners to support their other goals, i.e. providing assistance for landless farmers and youth at risk for developing HIV. Clearly, Ghanaian single mothers are a good fit branding wise for the sale of accessories to European women. As the business owner states *"Initially, it was a bit of a marketing stunt to use single mothers. People like the story"*. Identifying a similarly attractive fit for landlessness and HIV is a bigger challenge. Thus, although the partnership was initiated by the NGO on the basis of thorough needs assessment, commercial imperatives still do determine the development benefits provided. Thus, the partnership is based on a thorough assessment of development needs but no explicit strategy for creating development impact is in place. Hence, the partnership's activities have not been chosen primarily because they are the appropriate measures to satisfy those needs.

Initially, the partnership was funded by Danida, and was thus not deploying its own assets, but rather development aid. Subsequently, however, the partnership has been operating solely by commercial means, but it remains questionable whether assets are deployed for development benefits. Employees, the partnership's primary beneficiaries are paid salaries based on the fairtrade standard of 20% above average salary in the area. In addition, the business partner pays a surplus to the NGO for managing the operation. This is currently the main income for the NGO, with which its services are financed. It is highly unlikely that the aggregate cost of this for the business partner exceeds the costs of equivalent production in Denmark. In addition, the partnership is arranged in a way that the financial risk to the business partner is minimal. Salaries are commission based and materials are kept safe on the premises of the NGO (the implications of this are discussed later). Thus, the business interests of the partnership appear to be fenced in and protected to such an extent that it would seem unlikely that assets would be deployed to secure a development benefit.

Primacy to benefits for the poor

As described above, the partnership was established based on an assessment of needs in the local area, which pointed to single women as a group in acute need. However, poverty varies greatly between different villages in the area in which the partnership operates. The villages from which beneficiaries are chosen for the partnership, do not belong to the poorest communities. In addition, for members of the local communities, the definition of the 'poor' is ambiguous. For many, rather than single mothers, it is unemployed youth and orphans who are in greatest need. Further, within the group of single mothers, some are in more need than others. It is clear, however, that no deliberate effort is made to employ the poorest segment in the partnership since they typically do not come with the necessary competences, skills and assets to work efficiently. On the contrary, the bead partnership selects the most resourceful of the single mothers. As noted by one woman not employed

by the partnership: *“If I get the opportunity, I would work for them, but I feel that because I don't have proper educational background, that would fight against my chances of getting employment with them”*. Tests are undertaken by partnership management to identify the most capable women. One employee of the partnership explained: *“We were many. They gave us training and after the training we were supposed to know what they taught us so those that were able to remember what they were taught were picked and the others were dropped”*. In this sense, the efficiency of the production process and thus, ultimately the profitability of the partnership is given priority over benefits for the poorest. From the point of view of the NGO, the use of community leaders to mediate the recruitment process is a key accountability measure, thought to ensure that recruitments serve the interests of the community. However, according to our interviews, not only the partnership, but also community representatives are concerned with the fitness of beneficiaries for commercial operations or, in Blowfield and Dolan's terms, *“with a particular categorization of beneficiary – ‘the viable poor’ –enterprising entrepreneurs who are capable of being integrated into the market and consumer society”* (Blowfield & Dolan 2014, p. 33).

Accountability in addressing poverty

Due to the small size of the operation, there is a close relationship between the individual employees and management in the bead-partnership, so there is ongoing informal insurance of the actual benefit to the women involved and to their children. One of the partnership managers stated: *“Sometimes we come, listen to them, we get to know the things that bother them. And just by observing them too. Just by observing them you can tell”*. However, there is no systematic monitoring of impact on the direct circumstances of employees and neither formal nor informal monitoring of benefit beyond these individual women to the wider communities around them.

For the NGO, accountability is higher. The NGO has over the years done extensive reporting required by Danida. Due to the funding relationship, an intricate governance structure is in place and annual meetings are held with a whole range of stakeholders. As the General Secretary of the NGO puts it *“We follow up. We monitor. We write reports”*. Reporting on the specific intervention by the partnership, however, does not exist. This means that just like the activities of the partnership are not the result of proactive calculated efforts, there is little systematic retroactive evaluation to fortify the accountability of the partnership. In addition, forward accountability in the partnership is highly limited. Information levels from the partnership towards the women and local communities, who are intended to benefit from it are low, bordering on opaque. The employees are, however, to a certain extent endowed an influence on elements of their engagement with the partnership. One of the partnership managers said: *“We are working out a policy for them, based on corporate social responsibility because we want to see how their transformation is affecting their children and we want to see how we can support them, so here in the office they bargain, they have admittance to bargain”*. Employees have over the years managed to influence their wage as well as to ensure that they would not be called into the office unless there was enough work there to make the trip worthwhile (including covering high transportation costs). Above and beyond these types of elements of the direct relationship between employees and partnership, beneficiaries are not included in the decision-making processes; they are not positioned as partners but merely take the role as contract workers. Thus, the partnership performs neither upward nor downward accountability concerning its impact in any systematic way.

To conclude, in spite of its pronounced dedication to poverty alleviation through assistance to single mothers, the partnership is characterized by the absence of a systematic concern with and prioritization of societal impact, both in terms of its strategy for intervention, its selection of beneficiaries and accountability measures.

Analysis 2: Assessing partnership outcomes and development impact

Below, we turn to the micro-level analysis of the ways in which outputs provided by the partnership are put to use and perceived as beneficial from the point of view of its beneficiaries. Following figure 3 above, benefits are differentiated by two dimensions, beneficiary group and directness of the effect. First, we examine benefits to participants, i.e. employees, second, benefits to the target group i.e. single mothers in the region; and finally, benefits for the wider community, i.e. any other potential beneficiaries in the region or beyond. In addition, we analyze benefits in terms of direct outcomes, that is, outcomes that derive directly from the activities of the partnership and indirect outcomes, understood as those that result from the direct outcomes.

Benefits for Employees

From outputs to direct outcomes

The most immediate outcome of the partnership is the employment itself. However, the employment is informal, implying that it is not regulated by the government and without any form of employment contract, social security or protection.

The primary output of the partnership from the point of view of employees is salary. Generally, the employees report having a somewhat higher income than what they would have otherwise had, due to their employment in the partnership. This direct outcome is, however, considerably constrained by crucial factors, each relating to the fact that the partnership does not give primacy to benefits for the poor. First, employment is unstable. Both production and assembly workers are called upon when there is demand on the Northern jewelry producer's markets. This means that income level at given points in time is unpredictable. Overall, there are 3-4 months every

year without income from the partnership. Employees consistently point to this as the main challenge of the partnership. As one employee expressed:

“The money I make, I could have said that I make more money from Krobodan but sometimes we are home for four or five months and when that happens, we are not paid. So actually, the amount of money I earn, the majority is from farming because when we are home for five months, we will not be paid.”

Another employee similarly stated: *“When we are home for a number of months and not working, they could give us some sort of compensation so that when we are working, they do the deduction bit by bit”*. The partnership does not, however, provide such compensation.

Further, transportation costs reduce net income. To reduce the risk that materials disappear, as well as to ease quality assurance processes (both in order to decrease production expenses), assemblers are required to come to the office to work rather than work from their homes. Transportation costs consume a substantial part of assemblers’ earnings. As stated by one woman: *“The challenge is the transport fare. If you work from Monday to Friday and you look at how much money goes to transportation, the whole thing falls apart”*.

These factors taken together mean that employees cannot make a livelihood out of the bead partnership. In fact, the women report that the salary from the partnership makes up about half of their income or less.

The second important output of the partnership is technical training. This output is mentioned frequently by management, as in the below quote from the NGO manager:

“She (the business owner) is taking them through a lot of training in design work, colour work, a lot of things so right from the start they are taught how to use various tools, design work. A main line has been the jewellery production using glass beads. Producing

glass beads has been the main line so these people have been trained over the years and been through all the assembling of the jewellery that we could use for exports.”

The direct outcome of this is that assembly workers develop very specialized skills. These skills pertain to the assembly of the particular designs of the jewelry company. Although the production of the beads themselves is based on traditional production techniques, the jewelry designs are not. In this way, the employees are trained to use their traditional beads in new, often quite intricate ways.

The development of these skills is, however rarely mentioned in interviews as a benefit.

“I have been taught how to assemble so that is helping me”, one employee stated but without further substantiation of how it is helping. Several other employees question that any such learning takes place. One woman stated: *“I haven't learned much because I was also in the business before I was employed”* while another noted that she *“...was already in that business so the assembling was not something new when I came to Krobodan”*.

As the third output, employees are regularly offered information sessions on issues such as health, family planning, domestic violence, human rights etc. undertaken by the partner NGO. The NGO manager explained: *“We also have educational workshop for them. We also have B2B programs, and apart from that we sponsored educational programs for them so we have programs on fairtrade, health issues, business development,... environmental issues especially for the villages.”*

A partnership manager elaborated: *“There are also like educational programs. They can take advantage of it. On civic education, or on some business and environmental issues”*. When asked whether they learn something useful through the partnership, these programs are mentioned to a greater extent than the production related skills. One woman, for example, expressed the following when asked about how the employees benefit from being involved in the partnership: *“...they invite health workers or doctors. They come and educate us about personal cleanliness and how not to attract diseases”*. Another women said: *“For example the nurses and the bankers. The bankers learn*

us how to save and we learn stuff from the nurses". Especially, the hygiene and health education is frequently mentioned as valuable. One woman explained:

"It helps me and how to keep ourselves from not attracting diseases and how to take care of our children... The recent one was on cholera; how after visiting the toilet when I come back I wash my hands with soap or even when I clean around before I eat I need to wash my hands with soap and water".

Thus, the three primary outputs of the partnership are salary, training and education. Salary has the direct outcome of a slightly increased income. The technical training has the direct outcome of increased skill, although some employees question this outcome. Education has the direct outcome of increased knowledge about, among other things, health issues.

From direct to indirect outcomes

The employees consistently state that the primary benefit of their employment is that they have been able to support the education of their children. While primary education is free and mandatory in Ghana, the women report that providing school clothes and materials is a considerable expense. To this extent, the income generated by the partnership does not provide new opportunities, but rather covers basic necessities. However, several of the long-time employees report that their children have been able to get education beyond primary level and many have as adults managed to obtain employment or set up their own businesses (as drivers, hairdressers etc.) so as to not rely solely on farming. This is consistent with the pronounced goal of the partnership manager to break the poverty cycle through education and alternative livelihood opportunities. The women express pride about this achievement. One woman, explained:

“The significant thing that has happened to me upon being employed is the fact that my children are now in a better school. They have schools around here but when the children go to school when they come home they ask you about other things but the children are now in Koforidua and there they have better schools than here. For me, it is the most important thing that the children are now in a better school than before.”

A partnership manager also explained: *“And now I can say that because of that I was able to look after my children: send them to apprenticeship, some are mechanics, and the last one has just completed the apprenticeship. But they don’t get any work to do now.”*

Supporting their children’s education is the only achievement mentioned. The women unanimously state that their income is spent on child rearing; food, clothing and school materials.

As mentioned, from the point of view of partnership management, the technical training of the employees is considered an important output. The technical skills as well as the innovative approach to jewelry making in itself, might translate into a competence, which could be used for independent production to support livelihood. The women are, however, not able to reproduce these designs as part of an independent production. There are no instances of former or current employees who have established themselves in the jewelry business or have otherwise become self-sustaining through entrepreneurship, beyond what some of the bead producers were already doing. One woman explained: *“If I quit working with /the partnership/, I could use all the designs but now that I am working with them, I can’t. As to whether what I learned there would help in my business, I think it will be similar to if I was no more working with them.”*

As mentioned, the women refer to the educational workshops as useful more than is the case for the jewelry related skills. *“I can say that the education they give us, helps us because they teach us how*

to keep the environment clean in the village where we are living". However, not all employees feel that the contents of the workshops correspond to what they need. One woman said, *"I wish that they would give us some form of training that could be useful for us... Professional skills, any occupational skills."*

The most appreciated information provided in workshops, as mentioned, is health education. At the same time, the primary concern voiced by the employees regards health insurance. While Ghana has public health insurance, according to the women this covers only rudimentary needs and does not include treatment or medications. This concern is well-known to the partnership management, who have however declined the request for the partnership to provide insurance. Several women express disappointment that the bead partnership does not provide health insurance. As explained by one woman: *"when the health insurance was introduced, we were expecting that they would have taken that role of getting us ..(into) the program but they didn't do anything like that"*. Another woman compares this to the practices of other companies: *"I know of some companies that go through a registration process for their staff. I would wish (the partnership) could do that for the registry of the women to the National Health Insurance Scheme."*

Several of those employees working on the production of the beads, comment on the health hazards involved in crushing glass and working with very hot ovens. One woman stated, *"The challenge with the bead work is the fire. Our health is exposed so for me I will try to get money and when I get enough money, I will quit this"*. The employees are provided with some education as to how to handle these health risks. A partnership manager explained: *"It has to do with glass pounding so you have to make sure that you cover the nose and all that and we also train them that they should use gloves especially when they are handling chemicals. That aspect is very important to us, that bead producers know all these things when they work with that so their health is also taken care of"*. In spite of this focus on health hazards, however, health insurance is not provided. For the

partnership's recent 10-year anniversary, the NGO manager proposed to the business owner that she offer the employees a health check, as an anniversary present. The business owner declined, because of the possible pressure that it might put on her, if the health check revealed ailments that needed expensive treatment. Instead, the employees were given cosmetics for anniversary present.

Finally, an important indirect outcome to consider is voice, that is, the extent to which the women are able to make their opinions heard and exert influence on their own conditions within the partnership and also gain voice in their communities as an indirect outcome of their engagement in the partnership. First, partnership management to some extent enabled the women to contribute to decision-making where it directly relates to their work. One woman said: *"Yes, we sometimes come together and when we say something, they accept"*. There are however issues of great importance to the women upon which they have had no influence, such as the problem of transportation costs, unstable income and health insurance. Although they have tried, the women have not managed to have these concerns met.

When it comes to the effects of partnership employment for the women's status in communities, there are both negative and positive outcomes. Several of the employees experience that due to their engagement in the partnership (and involvement with Obrunis – the local term for white people) they have gained voice in their community. They feel that they are listened to and their points of view taken more seriously than previously. They also experience that they are more likely to be approached by others for advice and assistance. As one woman explained: *"There is a level of respect and a kind of empowerment that now I have work, people listen more"*. Another woman said: *"I think that every time I make suggestions, they are taken ... I am the community leader for the women so I gather them."*

Thus, the affiliation with the partnership to some extent changes the status of these women in their communities. They become more central figures that are invited to all local events. This is, however, often based on an inflated impression of the women's financial capabilities, which they are unable to deliver upon. As one woman explained: *"They think that once you are working with (the partnership) you have money so when they are having programs, they invite you because you are able to give (money)."* Another woman stated that, *"In regards to the community, they are saying I am working with whites so I am perceived to have money so if they come and ask me to lend them money and I tell them I do not have they think I am lying because I am working with whites so I should have money."*

In sum, when we investigate which benefits women employed by the partnership derive from its direct outcomes (increased income, technical skills and new knowledge), it emerges that the resources acquired as direct outcomes do not in any great degree translate into beneficial changes in the women's lives. While being able to support their children's education is an accomplishment of which the woman are proud, it does not transform the circumstances under which they live. Similarly, while they experience having gained a stronger voice in their communities as well as in the workplace, they do not report being able to use this to effect change on important matters in their everyday lives. In effect, the resources and competences, which the women acquire through the partnership do not provide the women with better opportunities to live the lives they desire.

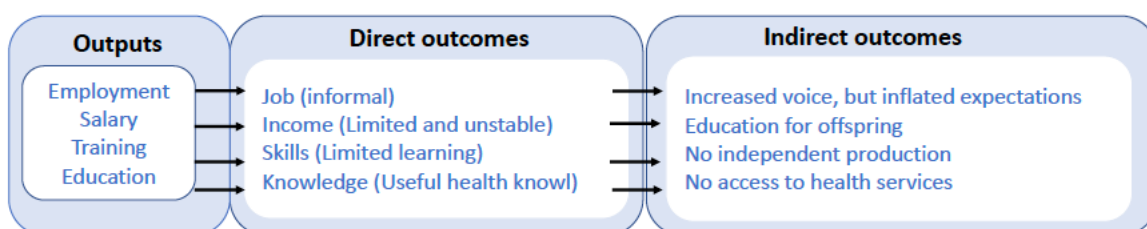


Figure 5: Summary of outputs, direct and indirect outcomes of case partnership

Benefits for target group and wider community

From outputs to direct outcomes

Direct outcomes on the communities resulting from the partnerships outputs is limited to various information and training sessions offered by the NGO. Some workshops are similar to the workshops for employees on health, family planning, civic rights etc. and some are more specific, targeted sessions concerning issues which are relevant to the particular communities. A partnership manager explained:

“Especially in the bead production area, they mostly use firewood in the beads production so we had talks with them on the need for replanting trees, use a kind of timber, take measures to use a type that could be easily replaced. We encourage them to replant trees that they could use within a short time”.

The value of these efforts, according to the NGO manager, is not only the knowledge gained, but also that they build networks for collaboration:

“They are always eager to come. Let me tell you. By so doing, we have built a kind of social network because some of the families have never known themselves but, by bringing them at the centralized training, they come to socialize. And after they leave here, they have put in place that kind of network. They can visit and find out what is happening in other communities. So it was a very important method for poverty reduction because even around that we built community visits where we can pick some farmers from one community to another community to look at what is happening. So it gives the organization a social network for people to collaborate.

Indeed, one employee mentions such an effect: *Not for the entire community but among ourselves. We do come together. For example, we can decide to come together and then do sort of savings where*

maybe this month we will take money - three or four, maybe ten Ghana each from four or five persons and give it to you. The next month we will do the same thing and give it to the next person.

However, in our focus group discussions in villages, only one single woman showed any awareness of the sessions offered by the NGO. Further, whether these activities should be considered outputs of the partnership, is unclear. The partnership subsidizes the NGO so as to make these activities possible, but the activities are not part of the partnership as such.

From direct to indirect outcomes

Since the income of partnership employees is used to cover their basic needs, there is little benefit of this in the communities. In the longer term, it is in principle possible that there will be less poverty in their villages, due to the better education of select children. However, since employment is so low – currently about 25 women spread across more than 10 villages – the community impact of these few individuals will be limited. None of the community members interviewed pointed to any such effect. As mentioned, some of the villages struggle with lacking electricity, running water and health clinics. Providing this kind of community infrastructure support to communities, including roads, bridges, schools etc. is beyond the scope of this type of partnership.

There is no transfer of skills from the partnership to the communities. Because the employees are required to work in the office and cannot bring materials to their homes, they cannot share the work with family and neighbors as would traditionally be done. This means that skill transferal is rendered impossible. As mentioned by one woman: *“When I was working at home, I could teach the children. Now that we do everything in the office, there is no opportunity to teach them that much”*. Another woman expressed similar sentiments: *“Before, I used to bring the beads home and worked at home*

but now the chance of teaching anyone is not possible. This is confirmed by the women, who live in villages with employees in the partnership. As stated by one woman: *“I have not seen that any of them are teaching anyone. They do it alone themselves”*

In addition, several women mention that they are not able to benefit from the skills or pass them on because the materials used are not local: *“I am not able to teach any one because the accessories we use, the person we get it from is not located at the market”*, one woman regretted.

A few employees mention that they share the knowledge gained from workshops with other women in the villages, especially within their families. One woman said: *“I know we got some information about family planning. I have told my family that we learned it”*. Another women explained: *“I tell them that from my experience from /the partnership/ they should take good care of their children, shouldn't allow them to move about endlessly, you should do this, you should keep yourself clean. I share this information with them”*. We did not, however, encounter women in the villages who report having learnt such things from partnership employees.

From our discussions with women in the villages, it is clear that there is little, if any, benefit from the partnership. Neither knowledge nor skills from the partnership are transferred to other single mothers, or to the wider community. The better education of a few individuals in these communities is not mentioned as a factor that leads to change. The figure below captures our findings from the second analysis.

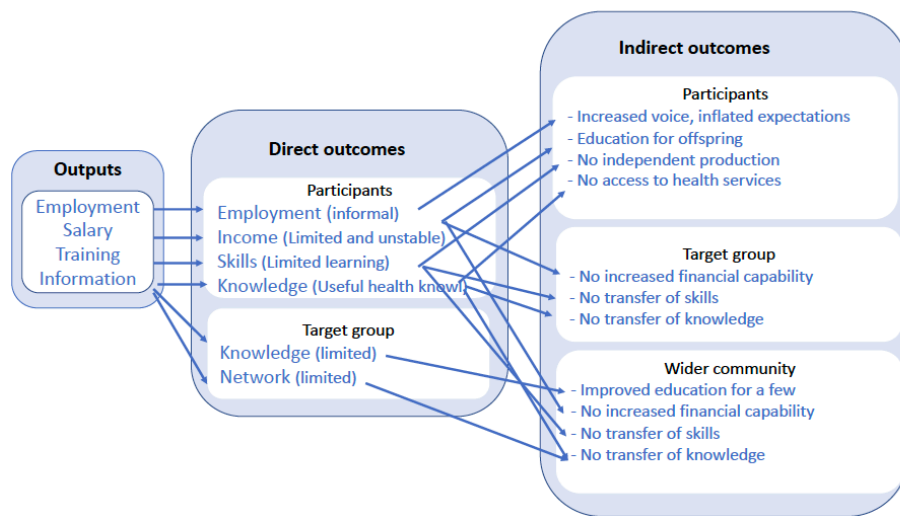


Figure 6: Partnership evaluation: linking direct and indirect outcomes across beneficiary types

Discussion

Competence without agency

The potential of making the partnership employees self-sustaining with resources and agency created by the partnership is not fulfilled in a single instance. On the contrary, the strong constraints on the use of materials and designs from the partnership are likely to impair the sense of agency with which acquiring these skills might have endowed the women. In addition, the women do not report being encouraged to use the technical skills acquired to develop their own designs. In this way, rather than building agency, in fact the partnership may bestow the sense that the business owns their skills. In addition, partnership employees do not work with the traditional methods and designs used in the area, and so, because they are taken away from their villages, lose the opportunity to acquire the traditional bead and jewelry making skills. Ultimately, the lack of possibility for mutual training, potentially leads to a de-skilling at community as well as individual levels.

Ideally, the engagement of parts of a community into an alternative form of livelihood, might stimulate a sense of agency in the community, through opening up a different sphere of possibility. There is, however, no indication of such an effect. On the contrary, the lack of information and transparency concerning partnership activities and recruitment processes, and the hand-picking of select individuals for employment, disables agency. It is disempowering in that it promotes a sense that opportunity is something that is given, rather something that the individual creates for him or herself – that is, effectively, the opposite of agency.

From evaluating the bead partnership, the result that emerges is that – at least in this particular instance – the engagement of a business actor in development efforts results in what could be called ‘competence without agency’. Because of the structural inability of the business partner to give primacy to the benefits of the poor, the competences with which beneficiaries are endowed are siloed into the partnership, emptying out their potential to be transformed into means with which beneficiaries could pursue their own goals. They are provided with health education, but without access to health services. They are provided with technical skills, but without being able to use them for their own production. They are provided with an income but without this being adequate for self-sufficiency. Having to make themselves available for whenever the partnership offers work, precludes employees from pursuing other opportunities, which might indeed provide self-sufficiency. Essentially, the beneficiaries have very little control over the resources and competences they acquire through the partnership, which critically constrains their ability to put them to use in pursuit of their own goals.

Empowerment as impact

Our key finding from this beneficiary focused micro-study of a partnership, is that while the partnership does provide a range of resources and competences, it does not promote agency, the critical bridging element between resources and achievement. By agency, we mean the capacity to make independent choices and act upon them freely. When partnerships for development target the poor and marginalized, the use of the concept of empowerment is pertinent as it brings into focus the power dynamics which determine agency for these groups. Although power is often expected to be achieved through economic ends due to the number of options it creates for the poor, these individuals often cannot choose these options for themselves (Rowlands, 1995; Mosedale, 2005; Narayan, 2005; Dolan et al. 2012; Cornwall, 2016). The social context and structures which shape the access to and experience of such opportunities is essential to defining power, choice and ultimately empowerment (Kabeer 2000). Empowerment is thus understood as a process whereby individuals become able to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Keller & Mbwewe, 1991, Cornwall and Edwards, 2010).

Building on the idea of power through choice, Kabeer (2000) sees empowerment as a process where those who have been refused the ability of creating strategic life choices attain that ability, through increased resources, agency and achievements. Resources include not only material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources, which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Agency, conversely, refers to an individual's capacity to define goals and act on them. Achievements, finally, refers to the actual outcomes of action and ensuing well-being (Kabeer, 2000). According to Kabeer, the overall (in)ability to achieve one's goals is determined by the interrelationships between these three elements (Kabeer, 2000). Key to Kabeer's understanding of empowerment is that it must involve transformatory agency. It must

enable strategic life choices to be made and acted upon with “consequential significance” for individual’s lives (Kabeer, 2000, p. 446).

Drawing on this conception of development impact as empowerment, we understand the ability of a partnership to function as a development agent as dependent on its ability to foster empowerment at both individual and collective levels. Empowerment, understood as the ability to make strategic life choices and act effectively upon them, is achieved not just through access to resources, but requires transformative agency and achievement.

With a conceptualization of impact as empowerment it becomes clear that while the bead partnership studied here offers some beneficial outcomes for the beneficiaries, these do not constitute impact. This is not just a matter of scale, reach or longevity. The benefits provided are qualitatively impactless because they do not provide the participants, the target group or the wider community with the capacity to make strategic choices that enable them to transform their lives. Rather, the partnership provides marginal improvements in the basic conditions of the everyday lives of a few select individuals. It is not our aim to say that this is without value. The majority of current partnership employees have been employed for many years, which is remarkable in a Ghanaian context, where employee retention is a major challenge. Clearly, there is value for the women employed, as indicated by one woman, who, when asked for examples of how she benefits from the partnership replied: *“I am happy. It is a good feeling”*. However, this does not constitute impact or societal betterment in the ways envisioned when contemporary global governance initiatives bank on the promise of cross-sector partnerships as development agents.

What we have examined here is a small partnership with modest resources and ambitions, and as such - although it was promoted by the Danish embassy to Ghana as its best example of a North-South partnership – it is not the type of partnership in which the greatest hopes are vested. However, as mentioned, the deficit of the partnership in terms of its capacity for impact is a

qualitative, not a quantitative issue and thus we argue that it is generalizable beyond this type of small, entrepreneurial organization. The empowerment deficit arises in part because of commercial actors' inherent inability to give primacy to the poor (what Blowfield and Dolan call the 'Porter Paradox') and in part because empowerment is currently a blind spot in the construction and assessment of partnerships for development. Thus, by drawing on Blowfield and Dolan's notion of 'business as a development agent' and the well-established concept of 'empowerment', we propose an alternative, beneficiary-oriented conceptualization of CSP impact. According to this 'impact as empowerment'-model, a CSP, which has poverty alleviation as its aim, must be based on an explicit strategy for facilitating empowerment of the poor, including the selection of beneficiaries and outputs. The resources deriving from partnership outputs must be planned, monitored and assessed in terms of the extent to which they advance agency and enable beneficiaries to achieve greater well-being, through the activation of strategic life-choices.

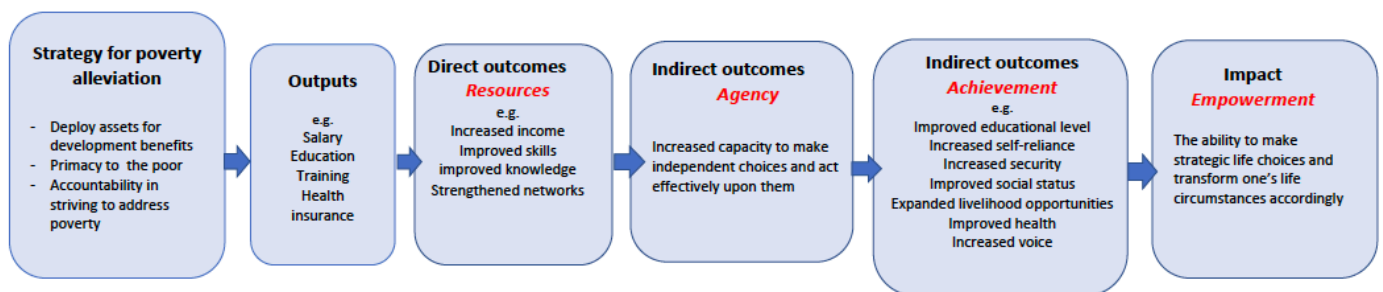


Figure 7: 'Impact as Empowerment' framework for assessing CSPs as development agents

With this proposal, following Utting & Zammit, we hope to encourage further critical research on CSPs as development agents, which explores "the complexities of power relations and how these affect outcomes, and the ideologies, agendas, contradictions and trade-offs involved in partnerships" (2008: 52). Our critical and empirically grounded analysis of a North-South CSP demonstrates that while capitalism may not dominate the strategic intentions, they come to dominate

the outcomes of CSPs and severely constrain the potential for long-term societal impact. Our findings have provided a novel contribution to understand better the critical challenges at the socio-political ‘deep structures’ imposed by the larger societal structures of a blind trust in capitalistic governance tools to serve as a stand-alone and relatively ungoverned mechanism of societal development.

Conclusion

While cross sector partnerships are these years vested with great hopes as capitalism’s new governance mechanism to solve challenges associated with the unilateral action of governments and civil society organizations, little is known about the ability of such partnerships to actually produce beneficial societal impact. Extant research tends to assume that the resources output by a partnership transform straightforwardly into societal impact such as poverty alleviation, if beneficiaries are provided with them to a sufficient extent, that is, if the scale, reach and durability of outputs are appropriate.

Interviews with beneficiaries of a North-South cross-sector partnership, whose aim is poverty alleviation in the Eastern region of Ghana, enabled us to challenge this assumption. Through a 2-year case study of this partnership, we explored how its outputs were put to use and perceived as beneficial from the point of view of its beneficiaries. We found that the resources provided by the partnership covered basic needs, while the potential of the partnership to increase beneficiaries’ self-reliance and enable them to transform their lives, remained unrealized. Our analysis led us to conclude that this was in great part because the competences, which the beneficiaries acquired through the partnership, were ‘fenced in’ in the partnership in order to protect the commercial interests of the business partner. As a result of this, the partnership provided what we call ‘competence without agency’.

On the basis of this empirical finding, we propose a new conceptual evaluation framework for cross-sector partnerships, which construes agency as a key indirect outcome necessary

for a partnership to produce impact. In order to do this, we draw on the concept of ‘empowerment’, already well-established in field of development studies. We suggest that an empowerment deficit is likely to arise in any cross-sector partnership in part because of commercial actors’ inherent inability to give primacy to the poor and in part because empowerment is a blind spot in capitalism’s resource-oriented understandings of development.

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