

## **Mzungu's Work? What role for local NGOs in Northern Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

This research analysed the experience of local NGOs in Northern Uganda as the “implementing partners” in development activity. Existing literature critiques power relations between northern and southern NGOs, types of partnerships, managerial issues, capacity building, and a host of related topics. However a range of assumptions still persist. This article examines what the implications of the normative position that working through a “local partner” provides increased community ownership, increased participation, and more contextualised development interventions for better development outcomes, which underpins most development interventions. This research is based on a critical appraisal of international development that builds on principles of community development, social justice, and empowerment. It draws on qualitative semi structured interviews with key stakeholders, including NGO personnel in local, national and international organizations actively involved in rural development in the region to ascertain: what factors influence the initiation, function and position of NGOs in local society; what opportunities do local NGOs have to drive the development agenda; and finally, how much do the assumed benefits of working with local partners resonate with the actual local partners themselves. This paper argues that the role of LNGOs is complex, but heavily influenced by their relationship with other key development actors. We find the complexity of the aid chain can leave little room for effective community engagement and participation in development, and that generalisations about the opportunities and limitations of local NGOs role in development are highly problematic. The existing aid architecture can reinforce notions of external control without effective communication, co-ordination and collaboration.

### **Introduction**

“all of my friends in Kampala asked why I was quitting my job. They said I was mad and that I would be doing *Mzungu's*<sup>1</sup> work” (LNGO respondent B)

This one particular quote from an interviewee who had quit their secure and privileged job in Kampala to run an NGO that serviced Northern Uganda frames the research. This interview was carried out towards the end of the research and made

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<sup>1</sup> A *Mzungu* refers to a white person, European or foreigner used widely across Bantu language groups including Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia

me question what is in essence a very complex and dynamic relationship between local, national and international roles and relationships. The notion that development work is somehow Mzungu's work raises some vital questions about the practicalities of a development industry philosophy that is embedded in development discourse of empowerment, local ownership, and context specific approaches. It raises the key issue of how we can make sure that development work, in particular, is NOT Mzungis work.

The explosion of Non Government Organizations (NGOs) in international development is undeniable, both in terms of numbers globally, and in amount of funding channeled through NGOs for development. This "associational revolution" (Salaman, 1994;1) has seen the explosion of NGOs worldwide, although estimates of this growth vary widely. The Union of International Associations identified over 21000 International NGOs in 2008-9, according to their criteria (UIA, 2008/9, cited by Kumar et al, 2009). Numbers of national NGOs, and local associational organisations across various countries are exceptionally difficult to track with estimates of between 1 and 2 million NGOs in India alone. USD 19.3 billion (or just over 14%) of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding was channeled to or through Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in 2011, up from an average of 17.3 billion from 2008-2011 (OECD, 2013). The increased flows of aid to the sector initially were strongly driven by international NGOs, but more recently has included direct and indirect aid flows to national and local NGOs and other CSOs. The move from direct program implementation by INGOs to much higher levels of "partnership" arrangements where the implementer is a local NGO, or CSO is based on an evolution of development thinking that prioritizes local ownership, community participation, as well as efficiencies and effectiveness.

The language of partnership is firmly embedded in all aspects of development discourse from the level of CBOs right up to the largest multilaterals. The Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation even further strengthened the rationale for development cooperation across a broad range of development actors, bringing both civil society and the private sector more openly into the aid effectiveness discourse as partners (OECD, 2012, 2012a)

The rationale for engaging local organizations, with particular focus on local Non Government Organizations (LNGOs) is explored and is compelling, however little data exists to support these decisions. The normative position that working through a "local partner" provides increased community ownership, increased participation, and more contextualised development interventions and more cost effective interventions for better development outcomes, still underpins most development interventions. This research was conducted in the specific context of Northern Uganda, which has transitioned from a humanitarian led intervention, during and post conflict in the region, to a development focus, with significantly less international support, with all of the implications this entails (discussed in detail later). This research is based on a critical appraisal of development built on

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principles of community development, social justice, and empowerment. Existing literature critiques power relations between northern and southern NGOs, types of partnerships, managerial issues, capacity building, and a range of other related topics. However a range of assumptions still persist about the benefits of working with local implementing partners, as outlined above.

This research aims to explore the experiences of local NGOs operating as the “implementing partner” in rural development interventions as a basis for a better understanding, not just of the limitations and challenges faced by local NGOs but also more broadly:

- What factors influenced the initiation, function and position in of the organisation in local society
- What opportunities do local NGOs have to drive the development agenda?
- How responsive do you feel they are to local community situations?
- How much do the assumed benefits of working with local partners resonate with the actual local partners themselves.

The paper introduces the context of Northern Uganda, followed by analysis of NGO and development discourse that has given rise to the existing aid architecture, including local NGOs. This context informs the following results of the research and discussions.

### **Northern Uganda: development and change in a post conflict age**

Agriculture dominates the economy of Uganda providing 80% of all employment, and 23 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Development Indicators 2011). Of the 34.5 million people, 87% or about 29 million people live in rural areas. Of these an estimated 8 million or 27% of the rural population are classified as poor (as against the 9% of urban population classified as poor (2009 figures)) (World Bank Indicators). In overall development terms Uganda ranks in the top 20 aid dependent countries with nearly 56 per cent of total government expenditure made up of aid (a constant figure from 2000). However Uganda has shown a solid tack record with an average GDP growth rate of over 7% from 1992 to 2011. This growth has been driven from the industrial and services sector, and is bolstered by the end of the conflict in the north, and large flows of ODA (averaging 14.7 per cent from 1991 to 2010 of GNI (UNDP, 2013).

However there are substantial regional disparities in development figures and outcomes with Northern Uganda being one of the least developed regions of the country. Sub Saharan Africa's longest-running war, that stayed mostly invisible to the outside world, occurred in northern Uganda. Civil war in Northern Uganda mainly related to activities of the Lords Resistance Army (LRA), and the Ugandan Military from 1987 to 2006. This insurgency resulted in casualties of estimated

100,000 civilians (Branch, 2011). There was massive disruption to life in Northern Uganda with the further displacement of an estimated 1.8 million of the population of Acholiland moved to IDP camps (or “protected villages” as they were officially known). In addition an estimated 24,000 to 38,000 children and a further 28,000 to 37,000 adults were abducted during this period to April 2006 (Pham et al, 2007).

Northern Uganda<sup>2</sup> is the home of the Acholi people. The emergence of peace in the region has seen the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the IDP camps, either back to their villages, or to remain in urban settlements such as Gulu when people cannot or will not return to villages, often due to landlessness or other exclusionary factors (Branch, 2011). The majority of resettled people are back to area of origin however there have been significant issues with the recovery and development efforts in areas of return, in particular in relation to access to basic services, and land issues.

As noted by many authors, 20 years of conflict and uncertainty, along with what was in essence the depopulation of the country side in much of Northern Uganda has impacted massively the social structures and culture of the Acholi people. In addition to this of course camp life and dislocation has impacted on people’s knowledge, capacity and resources to recommence agricultural based livelihoods. Survivors of this conflict, whether abductees, child soldiers, camp dwellers, the children who moved nightly to avoid abduction, the victims or watchers of torture rape killings, and other atrocities, have to deal with significant psychological, social, and cultural issues. Alongside this, other practical everyday necessities of life, food, clothing, shelter, health, well-being, must also be dealt with.

Although there is scarce data, anecdotal, and first hand evidence of lack of basic services in reestablishing communities is quite clear. As a very obvious start there is inadequate access to essential services, including health care, and education, poor or non existent infrastructure, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, poor or non existent roads.

Land issues have also caused considerable problems with the return process. In this region land is the base of any livelihood and therefore unfortunately the base of conflict in returning persons. Traditional landownership was based on occupation, and local knowledge, with 90% of the land held in customary tenure (Mabikke, 2011). Returnees can often face moved, boundaries, alternative claims to the land, conflict and potentially secondary displacement (IDMC, 2013). There has also been substantial transfer of land to investors in private ownership and privatization, in the all too common land grabs across Africa, As well as land incorporation into national

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<sup>2</sup> The term Northern Uganda is not used consistently. In this study it specifically does not include Karamoja, and the data for this research was collected from NGOs based in Kitgum and Gulu working primarily in the Acholi region, including Kitgum, Gulu, Pader, and Ameru, , but with some also covering Lira, Soroti, Kaparamaido and Apec.

parks (IDMC, 2013). Of course even when people have clear access to land, land is often very overgrown, requiring substantial effort in clearing until in land, which without mechanical help is exceedingly labor-intensive. Tools and inputs to clear the land plant the land and harvest crops are also scarce to non-existent. Of the younger generation, many have little interest in, or knowledge of, agricultural systems.

Northern Uganda was once the key producer of cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, Rice and Sim Sim (sesame). However, after the forced relocation of the majority of the rural population into the camps farming activities were heavily restricted two areas close to the camps is a military – political strategy to cut food supplies to the rebels (Mabikke, 2011). Agricultural activities outside of the designated areas around the camps drew heavy penalties, beatings and sometimes loss of life. Livelihoods thus became dependent on humanitarian relief and food aid.

The reality in Northern Uganda is therefore a development environment, which needs to deal with the aftermath of more than 20 years of conflict in the region. Humanitarian development assistance to the region was substantial throughout the emergency period, and the resettlement period, particularly from the international community. By the end of 2011 all humanitarian coordination functions were handed back to the Ugandan government, and responsibility for any remaining displaced persons was also transferred back to being Ugandan human rights commission. There has been a range of policy and program responses for recovery and development in the region. The national 2007 Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (P RDP) for Northern Uganda was a three-year framework for development and the restoration of lawful and order. However, the widely acknowledged lack of political commitment to northern Uganda has seen substantial delays and little activity. The National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) and the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (currently in its second iteration) are two other programs that could have contributed considerably to the region. Unfortunately, NAADS has suffered significant issues and is in throes of a major restructure. IDMC identified significant shortcomings in support for recovery and development in the region (IDMC, 2013). They note substantial confusion about funding between government and donors lack of coordination, limited impact, and a focus on visible outcomes such as infrastructure and consolidating state authority (IDMC, 2013). Reestablishing livelihoods is an area of significant concern, with many of the displaced being subsistence farmers originally.

Northern Uganda occupies a specific place in Uganda's development story. The role and experience of NGOs in Northern Uganda has changed substantially over the past ten years. The post conflict environment in Uganda, as elsewhere attracted a large amount of humanitarian aid. In the aftermath of the humanitarian imperative, moving into the development phase, there has been a substantial reduction both in the volume of aid money entering the region, but also (and obviously related) in the number of aid organizations operating. Much reference was made to Karamoja region, which is the primary area of focus for humanitarian assistance and

development funding at the time of the research. Although it is worth noting that unrest within the DRC frequently causes an increase in refugee's along this border, and subsequent focus for aid agencies.

### **Methodology**

The research utilized a qualitative methodology, drawing on semi structured interviews with key personnel in the NGO sector in Uganda focusing on rural development, with some focus on agricultural production systems. Interviews were conducted with staff from a total of 14 organizations, including International NGO staff (INGO), national NGO staff (NNGO) and local NGO staff (LNGO) to ascertain how organizations engage with each other, and to ascertain in particular what the role and function of local NGOs is in designing, implementing development activities within Northern Uganda. The foundation of the research design, analysis and discussion is the integration of NGO discourse with development theory and practice in the specific context of post conflict Northern Uganda.

The remainder of this paper first analyses current development discourse relevant to NGOs, Civil society and rural development to contextualize the research. The data from fieldwork is presented under key themes that emerged from the process of semi structured interviews with key stakeholders in Northern Uganda.

### **NGOs, Civil Society and Rural Development;**

NGOs, as previously discussed, have grown exponentially in development theory and practice, alongside the growing recognition of the importance of civil society in global and local development. Civil society is a cover all term for a wide range of organizations, institutions and individuals, with civil society and the third sector overlapping primarily through organizations (Anheier, 2008). There are different perspectives on the role of non-profits. At one level they can provide services that are not readily available, through other sources (government or private sector). A second potential form is in providing a collective voice for a broader accountability agenda, through advocacy and other channels. Substantial attention has been paid to the problematics of defining and understanding NGOs, critically debating their potential and actual contribution to development outcomes, and assessing the relationship between differing sectors, in particular with states and donors (Lewis and Kanji, 2009). A point of note in this debate is Korten's (1990) typology of NGOs, which he posited as evolving through a series of stages or generations from relief and welfare, through community development, sustainable systems development and finally, ideally perhaps, self managed people driven networks. The underlying principle embedded in much NGO discourse is of course that of an alternative to state led development. (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008). The separation between non profits and private enterprise was also embedded in this discourse. However, with the contemporary focus on Public Private Partnerships, as one of many potential partnerships, these distinctions are perhaps becoming less clear. Of primary importance to this paper is the perceived advantages, or what Farrington *et al* (1993)

call the “NGO-lore” of NGO led development. This is in the assumed closeness of NGOs to communities, their people-centered approach which is more participatory, more flexible, adaptable and holistic, but also their efficiencies (Bebington *et al.*, 2008). The Neuchâtel Group argue that NGOs have a variety of roles, “*not least through pilot projects and as mediators. They operate in spheres of activity and regions where neither the State, private operators, nor farmer organizations can deliver appropriate services. The independence and initiative of NGOs has benefits for other actors*” (Neuchatal Group, 1999).

A second strand of debate has concerned the impact and positioning of, in particular, the larger international NGOs. Lewis (1998) wrote of the role and changing nature of northern NGOs, which in the face of complex discussions and challenges about their identify, approach and value added in the aid and development sector (cf Edwards and Hulme, 1995, Salaman and Anheieir, 1997, Giberlman and Gelman, 2001) have moved away from direct implementation to working through a partnership model. This is designed to resolve identified shortcomings in their ability to reach the poor, to provide appropriate interventions based on localized contextualized understandings of the situation, downward accountability, and their relationship with donors. The issue of representedness is central to this debate.

A final point of reflection is on the service delivery role attributed to many NGOs by governments and donors, and perhaps increasingly by larger international NGOs to small national or local NGOs in contrast to the perceived innovativeness of the NGOs themselves. Types of partnership between NGOs raises complex discussions around ownership and power relations.

Of course the story above, in line with a substantial proportion of NGO literature, at least a few years ago, refers to a very broad, and very generic concept in the use of the term NGO. The discourse in development circles has of course now moved from the language of NGO to the language of civil society, and often Non-state actors which obviously covers a broad spectrum, both civil society and, of increasing importance, the private sector. The Busan conference of 2011 placed greater emphasis on non-state actors, thereby strengthening a “whole of society” approach, identified by Glennie et al (2012:vii).

Given how entrenched funding directed to the NGO sector is for implementation of development projects and the recent nature of dialogue concerning partnerships between NGOs and other actors there is little link made in the literature directly concerning a substantial shift to the “use” of local partners, although some recent research by the British Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has focused on the notion of “localizing aid” drawing on a focus on a whole of society approach, driven primarily by the USADI agenda to integrate private enterprise into development, and the aid effectiveness agenda (Glennie et al, 2013). . There are seemingly few organizations involved in development assistance that do not seek to work either

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more closely, or directly with local “partners”. At a broad level the rationale for working with local partners is strong and compelling. There is potential to build capacity, both organizationally, and within the target communities, there is an assumed level of local knowledge, connections, and trust already existing, people are already in the area (potentially providing “surge “capacity in times of crisis), the results should be more sustainable, more locally relevant, therefore with greater impact. There is potential for this approach to be more cost effective (although not necessarily true which will be discussed later). The OECD (2012b) summarizes their rationale in that CSOs

“have grass-roots knowledge of needs in developing countries, expertise in specific sectors, knowledge of public opinion and as advocates for human and civil rights, fighting poverty and environmental degradation, improving public governance and making international policies more development-friendly.” (p4).

This call is echoed by the likes of the Gates foundation, amount others with a similar rationale,

The aid effectiveness agenda has impacted considerably on the way in which aid is perceived, given, and evaluated. The initial focus within aid effectiveness was on increasing country ownership, primarily through recipient governments. There was limited or no focus on the role of non state actors within the aid effectiveness debate. However, the “system” approach promoted by the Paris Agenda – in using existing country systems for a more effective aid architecture – may have relevance to the non state sector, and there is a considerable gap in understanding of the potential of channeling aid through existing systems, both state, non state and private sector. This has particular relevance in a post conflict environment where the quantity of aid channeled through international entities largely outweighs that of local entities, and where the development approach and amount of funding is likely to be, or recently have been, in an extreme state of flux or . The implications for local entities would seem to be considerable in a number of ways – employment, capacity, links to local communities and so on.

In summary:

*“Like other industries before, the aid community is finally having its “disrupting moment” and the future of nongovernmental organizations lies in the “holy grail” of partnerships.”*

<https://www.devex.com/en/news/future-of-ngos-lies-in-holy-grail-of-partnerships-mercy-corps-ceo/81995>

Gates Foundation is results oriented and provide an interesting rationale for partnering with local organizations (and also for not partnering directly):



- “1) Only local institutions have a truly deep knowledge and understanding of the local context.  
2) Local institutions can be more cost-effective in the medium- to long-term, increasing the impact per dollar of our support.  
3) Local institutions are in a better position to ensure the long-term sustainability of the transformative systemic change we want to see.  
4) Direct engagement with on-the-ground actors can enable the foundation to learn and develop more effective strategies and programmes.  
5) There may be some contexts in which only local institutions are really able to operate at all, due to cultural, political, security or other reasons.”  
<http://www.theguardian.com/fund-the-front-line/the-gates-foundation-helping-ngos-at-the-front-line>

So, local ownership is in the spotlight, from the aid effectiveness agenda, this requires and perhaps is in the process of requiring a more nuanced approach than just government. NGOs, and CSOs are challenged, and in a state of flux. The use of local implementing partners has emerged as a core development approach, and is evolving alongside much more focus on market led development approaches, value chain approaches, making markets work for the poor and so on. I would argue that the theories of change, in particular in relation to the increased reliance on local partners are not well understood, or articulated. It is within the complex context that this research sought to explore the impact of working with local partners on the partners themselves. This deliberately did not seek to assess the nature of the partnership, as these differ between and within organizations and also over time, but to explore lived experiences of the local partner organizations.

**Research Results: The view from the ‘local’ or ‘implementing’ partner.**

The following section is organized by key theme from the data.

**Changing Development Environment and Impact on Aid Delivery**

This is a double edged sword, as on the one hand there is a substantial move from humanitarian relief to development. The implications of this are in the development modality moving towards a reliance on the community to engage in the development process, rather than be a recipient of it. The second is in where the funding goes, the priority areas, and the reduction in funding.

*“We participate a lot in project proposal development and this project proposal development of course goes a lot down to the people perspective. We involve people in the sense that we do need assessment and then based on need assessment we generate action plans and based on the action plan we are able to apply for funding and then implement the money that we receive based on the action plans that have been generated by the communities. However during emergency phase, you know we have been in a period of war for many years and during emergency phase of course it*

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*was a different scenario whereby we would apply for emergency funds and then participate in distribution of food and nonfood items to the suffering people.”*

Respondent C, NNGO

At this stage in northern Uganda the humanitarian agencies have left. There has been a dramatic reduction in the overall number of international NGOs and donors in the region, as evinced by the remnants of signs announcing the local headquarters of agencies long departed.

### **Impact of Development Aid on the Region**

One oft cited impact on the region was in terms of the employment aspect of development industry. There are lots of unemployed graduates. Several respondents noted the employment potential of the development machine. There are a number of social science graduates driven by the demand created by the humanitarian work. With the substantial reduction in agencies and funding there is far less work in this sector. However, there were also opportunities for good personal. As is often noted good people are recruited, or poached from local institutions. As the humanitarian machine has moved on, there was reference to a range of local people who have now moved on with the machine – either to Karamoja, or internationally, DRC, or Sudan, and even Afghanistan.

The second main impact related always to money, and by implication both implicit and explicit, power. Some of the individuals running NGOs had worked in the aid sector previously, and with the retraction of international organizations had started their own NGO. However, competition for scarce resources and funding is providing problematic. There is also very little alternative employment.

### **Location of funds:**

Gulu is the NGO hub for Northern Uganda with better hotels and airstrip and so on (Respondent K, LNGO). Lira is the business hub. Kitgum is not really either. The region has development potential, particularly if the situation in South Sudan stabilized. However, most of the donors, whether bilateral, multilateral or INGO are in Kampala. Without existing relations with funders in Kampala it is extremely difficult to access funds, or even to engage with policy and practice discussions. The flow of information seemed very one way. Despite the availability of internet in Gulu and Kitgum, it was not necessarily affordable or accessible for smaller organizations. The journal to Kampala is often difficult, depending on the roads. Rains often make the journey impossible or heavily delayed.

### **Access to funds:**

Acknowledging the scarcity of funds and the competition, where there is funding, it is often at the end of a substantial aid chain. One of the challenges of being the LNGO “implementing partner” is that you are always a sub-grantee (Respondent D, LNGO) with little control over the agenda. Donors are skeptical (respondent I, LNGO) and are much happier to go with the ‘usual suspects’, being organizations that they have a history with, and or an existing association. . “The UN ‘are not all bad’

(respondent C NNGO). They started a joint office with UN agencies in Gulu. ‘Now they are more effective’ (Respondent G, LNGO). The perception of a monolith agency with too many four wheel drives (!) as excessive has proven wrong as Respondent G (LNGO) had to buy a four wheel drive for practicality.!!

The type of funding is of course vital. Core funding is important. Respondent F s organisation (LNGO) was a great example of an organization that set its own agenda with core funding and support from an INGO (Trocaire) and WFP to get going. However the majority of the initial energy was from the people themselves. They had a background in the development sector.

They work in partnership with Government (as well of course as their partner NGO/donor)

Their impetus for programming comes from the on ground realities. Youth have access to land therefore agriculture and livelihoods are a focus, but associated health and education for overall development. and this lent itself to getting started but also was a focus for an INGO in the area.

The reality is however that often core funding is much harder to get, despite ongoing recognition of this problem. There are still substantial numbers of people who do not draw a wage for their work as there is no wage to be drawn (Organisation H). *“Another challenge which I’m realizing currently many of our donors do not want to go in for I will say capital development like investment like on vehicles it is difficult and also supporting administration.”* Respondent C, NNGO

The capacity to “play the game” is essential. Blind passion gets you nowhere. Partnering with other agencies is widely seen as beneficial (even as sub-grantee). The focus of work is also important and if you know the system you know where to pitch for money – “with these kind of ideas (HIV/AIDS) .... we will get there” (Organisation H). This of course has implications for where organizations will focus their efforts. *“She reckons donors are skeptical - need a track record, difficult as donors Priority changes - can be difficult to do something well. She said “ do one thing and do it well” so they focus on GBV everything must be related to this overarching aim.”* (Respondent I)

There is also potential for donor funds to be very traditional and bounded by existing understandings of NGOs as development implementers. Despite the discourse of inclusive partnerships, and CBOs, there is still a focus on being a legally registered entity under the NGO board of Uganda. Not all organizations are so registered, particularly some of the FBOs.

*“We apply for funding from any source not necessarily only within (our international organization) but when we apply with other (organization) agencies they respond positively. Others have stringent conditions like we want to work with a registered*

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*organization; this is something which I did not introduce to you. Organization operates under registered trustee of the diocese so we are not legally registered under NGO Board of Uganda.”*

*“we have strengths on the ground at the same time they are also registered so partnering with them is a better way of getting the funding for us we do the implementation on the ground meanwhile they control whatever we do” Respondent G, NNGO*

### Impact of Funds

A key issue that arose was whether local NGOs can maintain integrity in a competitive environment. Is it possible to say no to donors, or manage donor expectations, and organizational integrity (mission creep). Of all the LNGOs interviewed, only 1 said that they had organisations that they would not apply for funding from, due to past experiences. The majority clearly said that there were no donors they would not accept money from, almost regardless of the conditions.

The actual structures of donors are “thin” (lots of partners, very little own capacity except to manage partners) or “thick” – large org with substantial presence. The implications of both models are different. The first is more difficult to access, but the second is hard to get a relationship with.

Of course the need to meet donors requirements came up frequently

*“Yeah, part of my challenge is that since we have multiple donors, at the moment we have like 11 of them, all of them come with different demands, reporting templates different, financial reporting different. One time we said no let us harmonize this. Other said no, for us we want you to follow this format, our back donors need this. Others say yes we can harmonize this, others say no we want ... up to tomorrow we don't have a one uniform reporting format. That's part of my challenge. “ Respondent G, NNGO*

This of course then raises the issue of coordination, communication, cooperation, and back to competition. The quote below from the leader of a national NGO in the region highlights this issue well.

*“I cannot say that we are so proud that we are doing a lot. Of course we work in partnership with other organizations whereby coordination is important, we also recognize the contribution of other organizations like Food and Agriculture Organization, Horizont 3000, Concern Worldwide and CRS, ZOA to mention a few. However get it from me and I can be quoted anywhere the cooperation has been there but somehow we the civil society organization hide a lot of information that if we were to be open minded and sharing a lot of information by now most of the problem that we have within our community would have been solved.*

*I address it back to coordination of humanitarian network of assistance it's a bit weak. If coordination of humanitarian network assistance was strong issues to do*

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*with sharing of budget, issues to do with sharing of the ... let me put in quotes, "beneficiaries" we would know immediately which organization is doing what in a particular community but that one is lacking. When we have joint meetings all of us try to sell the idea of the importance of our NGOs, (Organization name) we are doing this, we are doing this, we are doing this in these areas and all that without necessarily stating that this is our budget, this is our annual budget and within this annual budget maybe CAFOD is giving us so much money and we are in this sub county and all that. " Respondent G, NNGO*

### **Development Approach (Neo-liberal Agenda)**

INGOs are now promoters of market based approaches, driven from international development agenda. Local implementing partners are using this approach, predominantly as they must follow the overall approach of the donors, whether they be INGOs or higher up the aid chain.. They are, however, predominantly skeptical about it - particularity in the context of northern Uganda with all the limitations on market investments and access. It is difficult to get the private sector here. There were multiple comments on the fact that the Government is not investing in northern Uganda so Public Private Partnership is more NGO Private Partnership!

NGOs are taking a M4P approach and are partnering with private enterprise. The underlying philosophy is market based, with no perceived social aspect to it at all interestingly. This was not in all programming areas, but had significant purchase in areas for livelihoods, poverty reduction, and agricultural development. One of core issues to be raised in respect to market based approaches was that it is no longer targeting the core poor, but the 'productive poor' (respondent G, NNGO). The philosophy of poverty alleviation is that the benefits will 'trickle down'. The requirement is of course for entrepreneurial businessmen – in this case, farmers, to engage in market based activities. Key concepts raised included smart subsidy, trickle down, and M4P.

The concept of Trickle down seems to have reentered development speak.

" In doing so we empower them and when we empower them we expect that the trickle down also goes to the people that we cannot reach because our service delivery does not cater for each and everybody because we majorly base ourselves on donations from abroad we don't have local based revenue that we generate." (Respondent G, NNGO)

Agriculture is now significantly more of a market driven economic enterprise rather than livelihood, which moves the debate a long way from ideas sustainable livelihoods and similar. It is not as straightforward as a market based approach. Respondent F (LNGO) noted that many of the youth she works with are interested in agriculture more as a business than as food production. However, she notes that "for our groups, they are not yet ready". Productivity is low and they have limited access to inputs required for commercial production. They need resources to open

land (even a hand tractor or oxen), plus a binding agreement with landowners so that “they don’t run the risk of being chased and they have nothing” She has investigated oil seed companies. She was in favor of cooperatives. Respondent K went further and noted that “we take a livelihoods approach but it does often not work out , farmers have different needs – immediate cash needs, People try contract farming but when some other person come and offers them cash then – they cant turn it down.” Concluding that “We are supposed to link to the private sector but we don’t.” (Respondent K, LNGO)

In opposition to this opinion was the example that:

*“Compared to the practice which we were doing before whereby we procured ... we procure seeds, distribute to farmers, when we distribute to farmers you know what happened is that either the seeds are washed and then they eat or the next day you find the same seeds in the market. We engage them to participate in the whole process.”* (Respondent G, NNGO)

Somewhere in the middle is a kind of mixed approach whereby farmers are linked to markets (subsidizing the entrance of private sector from Kampala and elsewhere to the district, or by a variety of other means including voucher schemes based on markets approach, but in conjunction with input provision as the basic issue of input provision is problematic.

*“we also have agricultural inputs. When I talk of inputs I mean oxen and ox ploughs, these are like animals who ... To plough the land and all that, we also buy and give to them.”* Respondent G, NNGO

*“We do not expect them to contribute money because as I told you we deal with the poorest of the poor but again among the poorest of the poor we deal with productive poor. Productive poor in a sense that people who are ready to till their land ... “* (Redpondent G, NNGO)

The result was a very mixed set of responses, where a small number of respondents were very positive about market based approaches, but many were less confident about their immediate practicality. Others openly stated that they were using this approach to meet donor requirements but did not feel it was the most useful approach.

Group formation and work is always interesting in development discourse. Respondent M (LNGO) Identified groups though the sub county. They are not formal groups but they were known as the sub county level. They commented that forming groups for specific purposes is not working so they sought out existing groups. Community groups are also not necessarily registered as CBOs so they are only really known at sub-county level so the role of local NGOs or similar in identifying existing groups seems exceedingly relevant. However, the primary method of identification

seems to be through the sub-country, or community level. The NGO forum supported CSOs, in trainings. They can also act as a point of entry into the district for example from a donor looking for an implementing partner. Organisation M has the slogan “bridging the gap” because others have been here and done so much but where are the gaps now?

### **Role and responsibility of donor**

Two core issues emerged when discussing donors. The first was the donor as ‘enabler’ and the second was donor as ‘partner’. Donor as partner, there was substantial discussion of the “partner” donor. The aim of this research was not to provide further discussion on the notion of partnerships per se, but it has been well researched and discussed in terms of the level of power and equality in partnership and some of the driving forces which are likely to lead to more equal partnerships .

There are local government planning cycles where consultation starts from the village and then goes to the second level which is the parish, then to the sub county, and then to the district level. The biggest challenge though is that it is not really working. People don’t come so engaging CSOs in the planning process is important.

There are networks particularly for sectors (for example the food security cluster which meets at district level). The donors however do NOT attend these meetings, and there is some but not great representation from the government. There was mixed message as to whether the INGOs came to these meetings. The question was asked in two parts, do they come, and how do they engage? The answer to the first from one person was a long and thoughtful yeeeeees (which has a built in hesitation, or even a no, not really!) and the answer to the second was a lot of thinking but no response – in 2 cases, and in a third a much more positive response – yes, they come and yes they engage.

All NGOs without exception could talk the language of development. This was particularly noticeable in terms of transparency and anticorruption. “we recruit according to skills, not family or otherwise” (Respondent K, LNGO). Accountability and reporting was always outlined clearly (including in many instances the software used!). Comment was made that communications are getting stronger from a network perspective (for example the Acholi Google Group). Therefore IT can contribute to organization and operation.

*“On accountability and also to keep donors that we have we involve, I want to put it in quotes the beneficiaries but these days we are changing, we call them partners. .... Its difficult to clear up who are the parnters ... yeah, it is difficult so we call them beneficiaries some donors say no you call them partners, well fine but in our mind we call them beneficiaries.”* Respondent G, NNGO

### **Role and Position of LNGOs**

Lots of local NGOs set up in response to issues. However the rapidly changing aid and funding environment has had a range of outcomes in terms of NGO function.

Most of the NGOs were started by more than one individual (differed markedly from Timor Leste). Perhaps the most telling comment in terms of what the role and functions of LNGOs is came from Respondent B (LNGO). She is a lawyer from Kampala who quite her job and started to work in Pader and now runs a women's empowerment NGO. When I asked why she did it, she laughed and said that that was the question all of her friends in Kamala had asked. They told her she was mad and that she was doing Mzungus work.

### **Discussion**

The results indicate that the expected benefits of working through LNGOs can be problematic – and that the underlying principles of development theory in promoting local ownership, empowerment, community driven development and so on as the basis for economic growth, food security and poverty alleviation (as well as other related MDGs) are not necessarily well aligned with the existing development “industry” based on models of competition, efficiency and effectiveness in the NGO sector.

Some of the underlying contextual issues in the region are: a generation who only know conflict, the loss of memory of the productive lives people lived in the region, a reliance on aid and development assistance, rural villages and communities who have resettled having little or no services (clean water, inputs, cleared land etc.) all of which are very immediate concerns. However there are also the issues of a vast quantity of people who were employed in the development effort, a tendency for people to study social sciences as an entry point into development work, and a wide range of under or unemployed people due to the reduction in development assistance. (Flora has social sciences followed by development studies as her academic qualifications).

Funding and the related issues of competition for scarce resources, lack of co-ordination, and the position of local NGOs near the bottom of the aid chain all were highlighted as major obstacles to progress. The overwhelming perception was one of lack of control, which was often vested with foreign entities, whether donors, or NGOs. Some comment on alternative sources of funding outside the traditional sectorial options were raised repeatedly.

### **Conclusion**

There is a move from focusing on vulnerable people to “viable” people (Gelsdorf et al, 2012), or as one of the respondents noted, from the core poor to the productive poor. The implications of this for the communities involved are substantial?

There are competing demands on smaller NGOs in such a context as Uganda. The first is the highly competitive environment in which they operate with reducing access to donor funds. This pressure has sparked intense discussion across the country within the NGO sector on alternative forms of finance, of which the two



main ones raised were social enterprise, and partnerships with private companies. A second pressure which feeds into this is the lack of capacity perceived by donors (whether INGOs, bilateral or other) which can drive an ever deeper requirement for NGOs to act only in spheres of interest and in modes and modalities identified by donors. This limits them to being service providers. This is not new of course, but the increasing length of the aid chain, through INGOs to implementing partners, seems to even further reduce the accountability to the communities (even if we now call them also partners!)

New focus on localizing aid provides a useful point of empirical evaluation of an existing phenomenon, but only if it engages with multiple modes of working with, through local entities (and I deliberately do not use the term “partner” here because this may be only one way of understanding the relationship – albeit with numerous interpretations within this understanding!)

“Partner” is a constant and embedded term within international development discourse. There are multiple instances where the notion of a partnership is problematic at best. The necessity of this language seems to render it meaningless (and this topic has been researched in multiple forms). We need to consider alternative relationships between entities and use language appropriate to the type of relationship.

A similar issue exists with the language of CSOs and NGOs. The existing aid architecture is exceedingly difficult to move away from a model that is based on the usual suspects. Power lies at the heart of most relationships and the notion of empowerment, and ownership is central to moving beyond the partnership agenda. Funding is core. Unless local institutions can engage with alternative systems than existing funding arrangements there is likely to be a substantial power imbalance, which is unlikely to be overcome.

Agenda setting by local actors seems difficult in a relationship where money is core to existence. Alongside this the “fund the frontline” campaign calls for funding directly to local actors. This is supported by the Gates Foundation, and Civicus amongst others. Mechanisms for sourcing funding include crowd sourced funding, and social enterprise may provide alternative mechanisms, which have the potential to shift development programming away from a traditional donor led model.

Simplified understandings of relationships do little to engage with real world issues and problems. The aid system, is a complex and multifaceted system. Despite a conceptual shift to Civil Society, rather than NGOs in development there is still a strong tendency to engage with NGOs as implementing partners (usual suspects!). CSOs often tend to cover CBOs more so than CSOs as a whole. There is little capacity in the context and development modalities analyzed above to provide for anything other than incremental change, and service provision. If there is to be systemic change perhaps there also needs to be critical reflection, based on a clear theory of

change, on the potential and actual roles, benefits and limitations of existing actors in the aid chain, and their interrelationships in any given context. The current development context in Northern Uganda is both heavily reliant on, and not particularly supportive of local NGOs. Until development work in the region is not Mzungu work, it seems unlikely to produce lasting effective outcomes.

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