Section III:
Partnership relations in development aid

Partnership dialogue starting from sector expertise

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Introduction

Development cooperation inevitably touches upon partnership relations. Organisations from different countries supply additional financial and human resources to work in ‘cooperation’ towards the same development goals. No wonder partnership relations always pop up in discussions about development aid and its strategies.

Partnership has been incorporated under the concept of “mutual accountability” in the Paris Declaration (OECD 2008) among other principles like alignment, ownership, harmonisation and aid effectiveness. But partnership has received little attention in the follow-up discussions, in the monitoring of its application and in donor performance. Just like aid-effectiveness becomes to a certain degree incompatible with alignment (see Section II), so might strong partnerships, at least in the short-term, lead to unexpected delays in implementation of an intervention, and thus reducing the effectiveness of aid. A thorough dialogue, and certainly in case of conflict, takes time, to the detriment of practical implementation of activities. However, in the long run it is believed that a good dialogue, although maybe tough at moments, will create the mutual understanding necessary for effective aid.

The scientific community has shown little interest in structuring partnerships, in analysing in-depth how mutual accountability has been applied in practice and how it could be conceptualised for the set-up of development aid. In the context of complexity, in which predictability is reduced and therefore strict respect for collaboration contracts becomes difficult to measure, the partnership relation tends to become even more blurred. Therefore a re-examination of the international aid set-up, of its effectiveness beyond the simple value-for-money analysis and of the way development processes are pursued, is required. The debate on how to create a working policy dialogue between the donor community and the recipient country, and on what strong partnerships should look like, needs to be taken up.

In this section we explore the hypothesis that strong, critical and well-structured partnerships are essential for long-term aid effectiveness and sustainability of aid (Jones 2011). We want to show that partnership relations do not get the attention they deserve and that they are insufficiently developed to allow a sincere and facts-based dialogue at technical, policy and
political level. The partnership dialogue, currently conducted at high political level, is often sterile (van Reesch 2009), purely theoretical, not taking into account the rights of the poorest in society (Sanders et al. 2004; Glennie et al. 2013; Nash et al. 2006) and, maybe most importantly, becomes counterproductive for the endogenous, nationally owned policy and political dialogue between the operational and political level within the country itself (see Section II). Much attention will be paid to partnership relations built up in development projects and programs. Partnerships also apply to other aid modalities such as basket funds and budget support initiatives, but they seem less controversial in these set-ups. It will be demonstrated further that budget support initiatives and the development dialogue linked to it, in isolation, are insufficient to be useful for development. The dialogue between high-level partners is only fostering development if the link can be made with field experiences and if it supports the endogenous nationally owned policy dialogue.

We will analyse the problem first on a conceptual level: how should a partnership relation be structured taking into account the complexity of development aid and its consequences for the project-programme conception? Practical experience and critical incidents constitute a second source of information that will be used to think about partnerships for development aid. We propose a model, based on these two sources of information. More systematic observation and testing in the field will be needed to come up with more robust arguments. We will also look at the relation between establishing partnerships and the presence of “international technical assistance” in interventions (Land 2007). We will concentrate on bilateral development aid. However, the basic principles of – and need for – a correct partnership are believed to be also valid for multi-lateral and NGO interventions.
Defining Partnerships

What are we talking about?

A partnership is a collaborative arrangement between two or more parties to work toward shared objectives, involving a sharing of responsibilities, co-investment of resources, joint accountability, and sharing of risks (Lavergne et al. 2006). Development aid can be described as a partnership between institutions from different countries. In bilateral aid, the partnership is essentially between two governments. It can be seen as the equivalent of joint ventures in the sphere of commercial firms. Two parties work together because they can mutually benefit from the collaboration and together they can reach more than each separately.

A partnership is like a legal contract uniting two partners that have rights and obligations. In principle, both parties are equal (De Wit et al. 2010). The obligations are those elements in the contract which the respective partners have to realise in order to ‘realise the contract’ or in other words in order to ‘reach the common objectives’ defined in the contract. The rights of the respective partners can be defined as the right to monitor the performance of the counterpart, to verify whether the counterpart respects the agreements described in the contract and also the right to question the contract when observing anomalies in non-respect of the contract terms. In the context of complexity, partners need to learn by doing together and by jointly deciding on changes or adaptations in the approach to realise the objectives. Joint planning is largely insufficient under complex conditions (see Section I). Therefore the ongoing dialogue between the partners is crucial and should be structured explicitly. In a worst case scenario, one of the partners can terminate the contract when all negotiations to restore respect of the contract conditions have failed (De Wit et al. 2010).

In principle, partners are independent and pursue their own interest. Nevertheless, the relation is not one of opposed parties. The contract linking both partners represents common interests for which both parties want to work together because of the perceived mutual benefit16. In other words, they pursue common goals described in the partnership contract. If an individual, defined as belonging to one of the parties, is inclined to defend the interest

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16 Benefit in case of development aid should of course be understood as positive and sustained development results, not as profit in the economic sense of the word.
of the counterpart against the interests of his own partner organisation, there is a conflict of interest. This implies that the accountability of each actor in the contract needs to be explicitly defined for the contract to be executed without confusion (De Wit et al. 2010). The common goals defined in the contract do not permit individuals “to belong” to both partner sides. They are ‘accountable’ to one side of the partnership relation (Box 16). Further on in this section, when we discuss accountability, we will speak of being hierarchically responsible to either the national partner or the donor side, never to both at the same time.

The term “national partner” will be used in this section to indicate the partner country (developing or recipient country) and “donor partner” when indicating the donor side or country (the donor or his executing body). The term “development partners” will be used when indicating both.

Box 16. The importance of explicit accountability relations in the frame of partnerships

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<td>Accountability is a much used term in development aid, but in different occasions and contexts which causes quite some confusion in many writings on development cooperation. Being accountable to somebody or an organisation means that one is expected to give explanations for what one has been doing. There is often a connotation of hierarchy between the accountable person and the one to whom he is accountable. People occupy many functions at the same time and therefore one person can be accountable to several persons. Sometimes these lines of accountability can become complex and even contradictory. So one is accountable to the director at work, and one is also accountable to wife or husband at home. But there are also friends, clubs, neighbours, police, tax controllers, etc. In addition people also feel moral accountability to their principles and beliefs, i.e. to themselves. In the context of development aid, confusion exists around the accountability of experts hired by projects or programmes. Some state that they are accountable to the national partner, others claim they are accountable to the donor agency who pays the salary, still others claim to be accountable to the poor, for the benefit of whom they do the work. Probably experts are accountable to all stakeholders and these types of accountability can indeed become contradictory. Whatever the position though, it is essential that experts in the frame of their developmental work are assigned...</td>
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explicitly to the authorities to which they are primarily accountable, from whom they get their orders and which position they defend,. By not being explicit about it, partnership relations between national partners and donor agencies can become confused and a potential source of conflict.

Strong partnerships are necessary to realise the contract. This means that all parties fulfil their obligations and exert a control over each other’s obligations through a frank and constructive dialogue. If one of the partners is weak, it may easily be overruled by the stronger partner. It becomes then likely that the contract will be realised in a unilateral manner with loss of ownership by the weaker partner. The tendency of the donor community to aim for quick and tangible results stimulates this phenomenon by investing in action rather than reflection.

Specificities of partnership in development co-operation

Partnerships in the context of development aid show distinct differences with the classical principles known from the private sector partnerships, in which two or more partners are linked by a clear contract.

COMMON OBJECTIVE?

An important difference is the ‘common goal or objective’. As discussed in the previous section, ‘development’ means different things for different stakeholders. Unlike the more uniform product of the private sector where profit is essential, the development aim is not without ambiguities. Whereas in the private sector each party knows ‘exactly’ the agenda of the other, this is far less the case in the development aid context. Although partners claim that development is at the centre of their attention, this is not always clear (personal agendas do interfere with common agendas). Many developing countries publicly ask why the so-called developed countries want to help them. Some countries bluntly criticise donor countries by stating that the latter have a double agenda. It is obvious that donor countries, just like the developing country partners, have multiple agendas - e.g. international politics can never be fully separated from development aid. But even if the intentions were noble, development organisations have been accused (e.g. “sterilising” the community through (polio) vaccination (Nigeria), or “killing the population” in the Ebola crisis in Guinea Conakry in 2015).
MULTIPLE PARTNERS: DIALOGUE BETWEEN WHOM?

The multitude of stakeholders is an obstacle to clearly define the partner and partnerships. For a bilateral aid agency the partner is the national authority (at whatever level of the political pyramid), and the population, read the poor, is assimilated with the ‘objective’ to be ‘lifted out of poverty’ through development aid. At the same time this poor population is an important stakeholder with whom the national and international partners need to maintain a dialogue. In practice, some bilateral development agencies see ‘the poor’ as their partner, confounding the dialogue with the national authorities17.

Bilateral aid agencies have a privileged dialogue with the developing country authorities, but this does not prevent them from dialogue with NGOs with a different -sometimes contradictory- intervention content. Even between actors of the lead ministry, the dialogue may not be uniform. Unlike in the private sector, where decisions and positions are relatively straightforward (the director or CEO makes the final decision and takes full responsibility), this is often not the case in a development cooperation context.

Many international NGOs develop a partnership contract with the local community or a civil society organisation (national NGO). For them the partnership dialogue remains at this level and sometimes they jointly confront the national authorities as the common opponent. In-between situations also exist, showing how difficult it is to find a common ground for partnerships in the context of development aid.

ASYMMETRY IN POWER

Power asymmetry is also a major difference between development aid and the more classical private sector partnership relations. In the private sector, an asymmetry either leads to abandoning the relation or a take-over. Obviously mergers or take-overs are not possible in (bilateral) development cooperation. The power asymmetry in development cooperation is complex. Low Income countries need the donor money and are dependent on foreign aid. On the other hand, they have other levers of power (e.g. the right to refuse), and can exert power on the orientations of development interventions. In principle, they know better the end product (development objectives) than the donor.

\[17 \text{Such agencies confound 'partner' in the sense of a partnership with the one whose rights they defend, 'partner' in the sense of 'the one we like'.} \]
countries. Donor countries seem more powerful because they have the financial resources, they can withdraw from development aid when they like (in practice they only do when serious problems arise) and they claim to have a lot of capacity for analysing situations, making good intervention proposals and to implement projects. The donor community has been accused of unpredictability because every so many years they seem to restart their planning from scratch, often leaving financing gaps. The latter is the case for budget support initiatives where big disbursements can suddenly be stopped. Although in principle more predictable, in practice budget support scored worse than other intervention modalities in terms of predictability. The donor community has also been accused of arrogance, imposing their (development) agenda on the partner countries. The donor community often accuses partner countries of being weak, of not having the absorption capacity, of lacking long-term vision and of preferring personal agendas above development as a public good.

The asymmetry in power relations between the donor community (development agencies) and recipient countries is a reality. The powers that can be put into play to exert power over the other are multiple and difficult to compare. This partly explains why the Paris Declaration put so much emphasis on the ownership and alignment principles.

LINEAR PROJECT LOGIC – SIMPLE PARTNERSHIP

Projects have been considered as straightforward interventions with a linear cause-effect logic. The log frame allowed to plan activities and the necessary means years in advance. Contributions of the donor agency as well as from the national authorities are clearly identified in project documents. In such an approach, little discussion on project implementation is needed and the partnership consists of verifying whether both parties fulfil their pre-identified obligations. The partnership is logical, linear and predictable, just like the project implementation. In the complex learning modus, this logic cannot be maintained. Under the simple logic of project implementation, many donor agencies claim that policy dialogue does not take place at the project implementation level (the dialogue being ‘completed’ at the project’s conception), whereas in our analysis of interventions in complex environments, this operational level is crucial for a credible policy and political dialogue.
ABSENCE OF A THIRD PARTY AUTHORITY

Partnership contracts in the context of development aid are not regulated by a third party. When there is a dispute on fulfilling obligations by the partner, solutions are looked for through informal exchanges, diplomacy or frankly accepting failure.

There is anecdotal evidence that donor agencies allow much liberty for the national partner because on the one hand they do not want to put their own position in danger (a more critical dialogue might result in abandoning the cooperation altogether) and on the other hand because they know that ‘punishing’ political authorities is in the end ‘punishing’ the poor whose rights they claim to defend. Reality is probably an in-between situation where donor and recipient country are involved in a difficult balancing exercise.

THE HUMAN RELATION

In light of the above, it is astonishing that with such complex relations and power asymmetries, and despite the absence of a third party regulator of the contracts, development cooperation still exists. We assume that this is largely due to the moral and human relations that exist between donor and recipient country. Development aid is not about simply making profit, but about human values and defending the rights of the poor and most vulnerable in a society. Although these terms may mean different things for donor agencies and recipient countries\textsuperscript{18} we can reasonably claim that human values qualify the relationship more than anything else. Development partnerships balance between legal contracts and contracts based on trust and moral values, in a context of social control and peer pressure by other development partners and actors who make up the international diplomatic community. After all, everyone has a reputation to defend.

\textsuperscript{18} The human values and the corresponding ‘ideal’ societal model is different for each donor agency and each country. Even within organisations, the expression of these values might be extremely different.
Observed elements of partnership contracts in bilateral development aid

For most bilateral donors, cooperation starts with defining sectors and the broad areas of intervention. This choice is usually based on the demand of the recipient country, historical reasons (e.g. previous interventions) and on division of labour between donor partners. Subsequently, more in depth analyses of prioritised intervention sectors are conducted to identify the scope and content of the interventions. In principle the national partner should be the driving force behind these further analyses.

In general, the macro-environment in which bilateral development aid takes place is shaped by an ‘overall cooperation agreement’ between two countries. The support to a sector can be defined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on international aid or in a bilateral agreement or contract. In the Belgian development co-operation the latter is used to stipulate the legal binding for an intervention.

Most development interventions are developed in a "technical document" which also includes financial, administrative and managerial aspects. The degree of detail of this document varies considerably between donors and depends on the type of aid modality (project-programme, budget support, pooled expertise fund etc.). It forms the ‘contract’ for the intervention and describes the partnership relations between stakeholders of the contract, the way partnerships are structured and organised at the different levels. Therefore the ‘partnership contract’ is the reference document for the partnership relations as it defines explicitly who is accountable to who, what is being discussed with whom and at what level, and finally on what occasion which kinds of decision are taken.

In the context of the project-programme approach such a partnership contract is valid for projects defined by relatively narrow objectives and relatively independent implementation agencies, but also for more modern projects and programmes, which have no specific parallel project structures and are rather critically aligned with the partners strategies and policies (see Section II).

19 We used the Belgian system as the basis.
A partnership contract consists of:

- Mutual commitments to achieve the goals;
- Obligations and rights of both partners;
- Overarching, internationally recognised, development aid goals for the eradication of poverty and other human indignities;
- The technical project-programme document, which describes the technical scope of the intervention and the objectives and results to be achieved. Often these are schematised in a logical frame with an initial plan of activities and budget (the limited relevance of these planning tools has been highlighted in Section I);
- The definition of the implementation modalities for the administrative and financial procedures to be followed.

The technical document and the implementation agreement each highlight different aspects of the partnership relation. Both aspects will be examined further. A model for organising partnership in development aid will be proposed based on the insights of complexity theory and the obligatory learning mode when dealing with uncertainty.
Partnerships in Project-Programme Approach under complex conditions

The Paris Declaration emphasises the importance of building partnerships and mutual accountability mechanisms in development cooperation. Partnership dialogue is not limited to the interaction between the partner representatives (e.g. sector authorities). While every donor remains responsible for the content of his dialogue with the national partner, donors amongst themselves also need to look for a uniform and concerted dialogue with the national partner. Finding consensus within the donor community is not always possible, but if donors are willing to have an open constructive dialogue amongst each other, a consensus can be jointly sought with the national partner (Box 17). It is up to the latter to decide among different policy options. Donor communities that esteem that their vision is not sufficiently represented can opt out in those specific domains of aid.

Box 17. An example on how two donor organisations have incompatible approaches to development questions

A donor intervening in health in support of health insurance had the green light to pilot an experience of a public health insurance initiative. However its vision was opposed to that of another bilateral aid agency, that envisaged a health insurance for the poor through scaling-up community-based health insurance schemes. The first argued that scientific literature showed that small-scale community-run health insurances were never lasting and that scaling-up was demonstrated to be virtually impossible. The latter claimed to be more aligned with the national policy it had been contributing to. In the field there was geographical overlap.

The ministry was undecided because it did not want to offend the two donor agencies. Both interventions invested a lot in policy dialogue, but without much progress. Finally the ministry decided that both agencies could pilot their vision on health insurance in two different geographical zones. Evaluations would have to reveal evidence which vision had most potential. The visions of both donors were profoundly different from each other. The first believed in public service and state involvement, the latter had a vision of private initiative. Different world views result in different policy dialogues, sometimes incompatible with each other. In such situations the ministry
should take a decisive role but then the weaknesses of the ministry’s vision and policy become visible.

Defining the partnership relation in the project-programme approach

PARTNERSHIP IN A COMPLEX CONTEXT: UNPREDICTABILITY OF CONTRACT OUTCOME

Partnerships are mutual contracts in which the rights and obligations of both partners are defined. The objective is supposed to be simple if it concerns for example private enterprises that are looking for maximum financial profit of both equal partners. Section II showed that due to the complexity of the matter, the outcome of development aid is rather unpredictable. Therefore the rights and obligations of both development partners are less obvious than in private partnerships, especially when it comes to ‘the obligation to participate in strategic thinking and contributing to complex development results’. Which contributions are sufficient? What is the role and responsibility of each partner when results are below expectation?

Tools like Realistic Evaluation were proposed in Section II to look with a critical eye at complex change mechanisms. We are convinced that they can produce a sense of objectivity to answer above questions and at least produce a sound basis for discussion.

PARTNERSHIP UNDER LEARNING CONDITIONS

Partnership relations, as illustrated in above paragraphs can be based on objective engagements like financial contributions or contributions in kind. But much of the partnership is situated in the complexity of the interventions, where objective contributions in the development process are less evident.

Complexity and the inescapable degree of uncertainty that goes with it oblige stakeholders engaged in change for development to follow a ‘learning-by-doing’ attitude. Both development partners have to put themselves in a learning mode, accepting that their respective contributions are relative and that none of the parties has the absolute truth. Open discussion, ‘a priori’ respect for each other and listening are therefore part of the modus vivendi between development partners. This is all the more true at the concrete implementation level of project activities, the ‘operational level’.

In order to understand each other, things have to be well documented
(monitoring, action-research approaches) and approached in an objective and rational manner, as much as possible away from (or at least aware of) emotion and impressions. Development interventions therefore need to invest in Realistic Evaluation methodologies with monitoring of indicators, interpretation of these indicators through process analysis and modelling. Partnerships in this sense are essentially human relations between stakeholders who learn to understand each other’s positions. The dialogue and partnership building are continuous.

The concept of critical alignment (see Section II) is the starting principle for constructing such partnerships.

**Partnership in terms of content management**

The principles of double anchorage, learning by doing, multiple stakeholders approach with different and often opposing agendas and vision were developed in Section II. It is in the light of these principles that the proposal made in the following paragraphs to organise the partnership relation must be understood.

Development partners engage in a partnership contract to jointly achieve the intervention’s objectives (mutual obligations). Indicators and monitoring tools allow to follow the progress made and to provide the content for dialogue and for possibly criticising the counterpart when commitments are not met.
Figure 21. Organisation of partnership relations in a project-programme approach in the Belgian development cooperation

Figure 21 shows schematically the different levels of partnerships and the different forms of partnership dialogues used in the project-programme approach in the Belgian development cooperation. Projects are structured in such a way that partners meet at different levels in order to work together for development.

The ‘lowest’ or operational level is defined as the place where the planning and implementation of the intervention’s activities take place. Projects and programmes support local initiatives and negotiate which activities can be financed through a consensus building process. It is at this level that intensive collaboration, exchange, negotiation and consensus building take place between the (long-term) International (sector) expert(s) and the ‘local’ national partner. This level can handle any specific element or group of elements of the system (sector) in which the intervention operates. It is to be regarded as the starting point of a successful partnership dialogue. In terms of complexity, it is at this level that modelling takes place. The system and its behaviour need to be understood and working hypotheses
This level of dialogue has been relatively neglected in more recent development aid strategies like SWAps that concentrate on high-level political dialogue, tending to ignore the stakeholders of the periphery and the voice of the poor (OECD 2011; de Renzio et al. 2006). Such centralised dialogue seems convenient but can easily become trivial (van Reesch 2007) if it denies the fact that development aid cannot be politically neutral. It often denies the multi-stakeholder reality in which development aid operates (see Section I & II) and the necessity to conduct a policy dialogue starting from field experience and with knowledge of what happens at the operational level. A decision can be favouring one or the other stakeholder, seldom all stakeholders at once, especially in the short run.

The operational level dialogue is also in many ways the most important. It is at this level that (i) the conception of change should take place, (ii) capacity development is most important because the gaps are biggest and opportunities are created (learning by doing) and finally (iii) capacity strengthening is most necessary to stimulate the voice of people who are relatively powerless in society.

If intense learning takes place at this level, and if moreover the policy dialogue depends on lessons learned and field observations, this implies that at this level the donor has to provide experts who accompany the change and innovation processes. These experts have to work through what Khaneman (Kahneman 2011) called a second level or slow mode of thinking. Learning indeed means that one leaves the intuitive or spontaneous mode of acting and reacting that we use in daily life, to replace it by continuous analysis, reflection and critical action: slowly, but surely, or at least with more certainty, considering the complex environment in which one acts, more than strictly sticking to uncritical planning and implementation or relying on ‘automatic’ action-reaction mechanisms for decision making.

Project-programme steering committees constitute a second level of consensus building and partnership dialogue. Project steering committees were initially created in the 1960s for classical projects in order to bring these parallel, non-aligned, often local, initiatives back in line with national policies and to reinforce ownership at higher national levels. Current interventions should be fully integrated in national systems, which implies that steering committees could become obsolete as they now become parallel structures.
that get entangled with nationally owned plans and decisions. They can still be important for the following functions, i.e.:

- **Increasing national ownership** through the provision of the necessary information of the project’s achievements, difficulties and challenges. They contribute to bottom-up information exchange. This is especially true for projects in remote areas where contacts with the central level are relatively scarce and where the principle of double anchorage is poorly or not developed.

- **Resolving obstacles and conflicts** through policy dialogue at a higher level. They can intervene in case of conflict when one of the partners does not fulfil its obligations or when no consensus can be reached at the operational level. Steering committees are well placed to alleviate important bottlenecks which prevent the project to reach its objectives as their members are usually high level officials with important decision making power and potential to influence other ministries or sectors.

- **Increasing national ownership** by involving higher levels of decision making on important re-orientations of the project, meaning negotiation of important changes to the content of the partnership contract.

A third level of partnership dialogue and negotiations exists at the central level. It is the dialogue between national authorities and embassies of the donor community. It is at this level that the (policy) dialogue becomes essentially a political dialogue. This dialogue is important in case of major conflicts when for instance (basic) conditions such as democratic ruling or respect for human rights are not respected, and these situations could lead to the interruption of the partnership by the donor side. The scope and technical aspects of the intervention itself are not systematically discussed at this level. In case of controversy on sector development strategies or on broad priorities they can become the subject of discussion.

The vertical arrows in Figure 16 indicate the exchanges of information and opinion that should exist between different levels of organisation within each partner’s side. These are the accountability lines (see Box 16) in the frame of building partnerships.

The higher instances of (policy and political) dialogue (steering

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20 Even though it can be said that there is an interplay between ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ at all levels, not only the most central one.
committees and intergovernmental negotiations) are somehow the higher ‘independent’ authorities that can solve local conflicts or frictions. At this level, consensus building and partnership are also needed, so these organs are obliged to take distance and judge the situation in an objective way before deciding.

**Partnership in administrative and financial implementation modalities**

The separation between content management and administrative and financial implementation is artificial. However, separate discussions allow to highlight the different aspects of such complex partnership. The project-programme contract stipulates how the financial means of the intervention (project funds) have to be mobilised and how activities have to be financed (under national or international law, with or without public tenders, subsidies,…). Checks and balances in the financial procedures are defined in order to ensure transparency for both partners. They are part of the broader governance aspects in development aid, which are discussed in Section IV.

Regarding the execution modalities, both partners have explicit obligations and rights. The most important right is the demand of transparency in decision making and the right to control expenses, be it *a priori* or *post hoc* (through audits). The partnership is reached through consensus building. In most interventions, also for these aspects, the ISE are privileged witnesses because of their proximity to the intervention planning and implementation.

**Box 18. ‘Co-management’ in the Belgian Cooperation**

*Co-management in the Belgian Bilateral Cooperation*

Years before the Paris Declaration, the Belgian cooperation conceived an original approach to implement the projects, from an administrative and financial perspective.

In principle, Belgian projects were encouraged to use the national partner’s financing rules and procedures. This was sometimes difficult because the procedures were not always guaranteeing transparency and procedures often got stuck, causing time waste and less efficiency. But there was also the clause that all expenditures had to be signed by both partners. This double signature gave equal powers to both partners, because either party could...
block an activity by not signing for the expenses. This was an important tool for power sharing and creating transparency. National partners often appreciated such an approach because of this (even if sometimes symbolic) type of partnership relation. Voluntarily releasing some power strengthens the partnership relation and obliges both partners to respect a dialogue and to build consensus.

Development aid as a team sport: a continuum of dialogue in partnership

Any partnership implies a dialogue. The dialogue serves the achievement of the common goals and objectives as stipulated in the overall agreement of cooperation and the project - programme contract. All stakeholders at both sides of the partnership contribute to the dialogue. The level and position of each stakeholder determines the nature and type of the dialogue. There is no clear cut between the different kinds of dialogues but rather a continuum as illustrated in Figure 22.

Figure 22. The continuum of the partnership dialogue in development cooperation
Actors at the operational level use an operational and technical dialogue to discuss the technical aspects and the day-to-day business of the project or programme. This level forms the starting point of the continuum of the partnership dialogue. Strategic options or the overall improvement of the sector, however, need feedback from the lead ministry so the technical dialogue becomes more a policy dialogue. At the level of steering committees, the dialogue gradually turns into a more political dialogue. This dialogue is in the first place inspired by the policy or the technical dialogue and by the analysis and inputs from ‘lower’ decision-making levels. This information is usually provided by civil servants or civil society at the national partner side, by long-term technical experts at the donor side.

Conditions to establish strong and credible partnerships include:

- **Feedback and inputs from the ‘lower’ levels**: The ‘higher’ levels depend on feedback and inputs from the ‘lower’ levels provided by experts accountable to them. An international expert is a privileged witness of what is happening in the field at the operational level and in the sector. Presence in ‘the field’ allows to base the partnership dialogue on local experiences and observations.

- **Team work**: experts, donor representatives and embassies have to work closely together and act as a team, in order to be on one line in their communication with the national partner and to enable a constructive and fact based dialogue.

- **National team**: The national partner also needs to function as a team. They need to be organised and prepared to be able to engage as a strong and equal partner in the dialogue. This avoids frustration and unnecessary authoritarian reflexes which can hamper the intervention.

- **Harmonisation of the donor community**: In modern cooperation, development interventions are rarely implemented in isolation. They are part of a more general programme, generally implying multiple partners at the donor side. Deliberation between donors is essential and donors, whenever possible, should speak with one voice. In this way, the partnership dialogue implies a strong harmonisation of the donor community on the content and strategies of the development interventions, which is distinct from harmonisation of
administrative and financial procedures (see Figure 16) right side, donor community development dialogue).

- **Understanding of the context and honest empathy:** Constructive and honest partnerships should be based on a profound understanding of each partner and of the context in which the contract has to be realized. Profound knowledge of the local conditions and the local partner allows developing honest empathy and trust for the partner that will stimulate a constructive cooperation and development. The understanding aspects allude to the necessary learning mode and attitude in which one has to work, and therefore on taking voluntarily distance from using power to get one’s way.

- **Consciously and explicitly consider complexity:** Partnerships are constructed in complex environments with multiple stakeholders at different levels. Inclusiveness is an important value and approach to improve governance in society.

Strong partnerships should not be confounded with “conflict models” based on mistrust, paranoia and disrespect. On the contrary, partnerships create the possibility to engage in a confrontation of ideas and positions in a constructive and frank way, based on mutual respect and trust. As it is unrealistic to expect that all stakeholders would have the same opinions, agenda’s and objectives, discussing these differences in a strong partnership setting can prevent conflicts that would block further cooperation. Partnerships create the right environment to negotiate and to look for a consensus to continue the interventions.

**The endogenous nationally-owned policy dialogue**

Figure 23 repeats the figure from Section II on the conception of programmes. It shows that the policy dialogue between development partners is related to but substantially different as well from the endogenous and country-owned policy dialogue. The latter is defined as the policy and political dialogue between the operational and political level within a given sector between the population, civil society and civil servants on one side and the political level on the other. In principle this dialogue should emerge spontaneously in a well-functioning society where ‘democratic’ and especially ‘good governance’ values (Zakaria 2004) are in place. Such dialogue should be institutionalised and part of the national strategic decision-making process. But the reality shows that the endogenous policy dialogue is often weak in developing countries. Most of the time, such societal dynamics are
little considered in contemporary development cooperation. This will be further discussed in Section IV on the governance issues of development aid.

Figure 23. The support of development projects to the endogenous policy dialogue between the national stakeholders at ‘local’ and ‘policy level’

Projects provide the opportunity to support the endogenous policy dialogue (Figure 23 A). Through their support to local change processes, they can help to structure this dialogue. Strengthening this dialogue is giving voice to the people at the operational level (e.g. lower civil servants, civil society, the population, the poor, the vulnerable) and is part of the internal emancipation and development process. The weaker the local stakeholders, the more projects should invest in supporting this emancipation process. Figure 23 B highlights the means that can be deployed by projects to stimulate this endogenous policy dialogue. It also shows that development is a national partner’s responsibility, but that development aid interventions can support this process.

The partnership policy dialogue in the frame of a development intervention reinforces the endogenous one because largely the same themes and stakes will be discussed as they are based on the same experiences. Donor agencies often do have more power than local stakeholders and, unfortunately, are sometimes more taken into consideration than local stakeholders. Fortunately this is not always the case.
Use of expertise to define and shape partnerships

Reasons for re-defining Technical Assistance

Sector development requires specific capacities. The primary objective of technical cooperation is to ensure the achievement of sustainable results through the development of the capacity of organisations and individuals. According to the guidelines issued by the European Commission, technical cooperation consists of ‘the provision of know-how in the form of short and long-term personnel, training and research, twinning arrangements, peer support and associated costs.’

Technical cooperation is needed to provide policy or technical expert advice (or to make knowledge products available), or to ensure the effective implementation of complex interventions that require highly specialized expertise, or to facilitate programme preparation and cooperation between the development partners. In practice there will often be an overlap between these four objectives (see Figure 24).

Figure 24. Purposes of Technical Cooperation (TC) and corresponding types of support

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**1. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT TC (CD-TC)**

Capacity development of organisations and individuals.

**2. POLICY & ADVISORY TC**

Providing policy and/or expert advice (or making other knowledge products available).

**3. IMPLEMENTATION TC**

Strengthening implementation (of services, investments, regulatory activities).

**4. PREPARATORY TC**

Preparation/facilitation of EC cooperation (or broader donor cooperation).
The term 'technical assistance' has been widely used throughout the history of development aid. Its meaning evolved along with the changing concepts of aid provision but without necessarily following the same evolution. Technical assistance refers to 'the personnel involved (individuals as well as teams of consultants) in developing knowledge, skills, technical know-how or productive aptitudes' (European Commission 2009; OECD 2009). It has never been explicitly defined and covers today quite a number of different concepts and an amalgam of situations. Experts, sector experts, technical experts, technical advisors, sector advisors are but some of the wordings used.

In the early days of development aid, technical assistance was defined as a development partner staff, who was practically realising the project on behalf of the national partner. Often the implementation of the project meant bypassing of the national partner to achieve quick results. In traditional development aid, technical assistance was provided through the employment of long-term international technical assistants with a mandate to improve local systems and to generate the expected project outputs. In this approach the danger of overemphasizing the role of the international experts with often purely technical capacities (skills) was a reality. The current situation has become more diverse with the presence of different forms of development aid like budget support, technical advice at the ministry's level, pooled funds of expertise, bilateral expertise funds, partner countries hiring independently international expertise paid by their own funds, etc.

In these definitions and description of functions, nothing is said about the partnership relations and they are still embedded in an atmosphere of top-down transfer of knowledge, read a linear logic of development. They therefore do not fit well with the complex environment in which development programmes work, they do not specify on which side of the partnership these experts are sitting, nor what their specific skills should or could be.

**The place of science and expertise in development and policy-political dialogue**

In Section II, arguments were given for a more scientific and research approach in development cooperation. In the following paragraphs we will study what science and research can signify for policy and politics and their place in development cooperation. Kahneman described how the human mind has difficulties to make rational decisions. The more situations become
complex, i.e. the more decision options and contradictory information exist, the more there is need for careful analysis before deciding. We are brought up in a linear logic of cause-effect reasoning and a system’s real behaviour therefore often becomes counter-intuitive. There is much need for what Kahneman calls a ‘System 2’ reflection: ‘effortful mental activities, including complex computations and subjective experience of agency’, choice and concentration’ (Kahneman 2011).

Table 1. Articulation between science and policy advise according to Pielke (Pielke 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View of democracy</th>
<th>View of science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Pure scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schattschneider</td>
<td>Science Arbiter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stakeholder model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Issue Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schattschneider</td>
<td>Honest Broker of Policy Alternative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independently from any development aid considerations, Pielke described the articulation between scientists (science) and politicians (politics and policy making) as presented in Table 1. He recognises two types of democracy. In Madison’s democracy competing factions engage one another in political debate and the resulting compromise reflects the best possible balancing of conflicting demands. Under such a view, experts would best serve society by simply aligning themselves with their favoured faction of interest group and offering their special expertise as an asset in political battle. In Schattschneider’s view, democracy is a competitive system in which the public is allowed to participate by voicing its views on alternatives

21 Active stakeholders in a system
presented to it in the political process. These policy alternatives come from experts who have the role to present policy alternatives for decision-makers (Pielke 2007).

Secondly, Pielke distinguished two models of how science can contribute to policy and societal development. The linear model is familiar in terms of a metaphor that represents a flow of knowledge from basic research to applied research to development and ultimately societal benefits. He stated that the situation of a particular fact or body of knowledge that compels a particular decision is hardly observed in reality. Instead, the process of using science for social purposes is thought of as one of optimally matching scientific opportunity with social need. This optimal balance between opportunity and need can only be arrived at through a highly interactive, mutual education process involving both dimensions (Pielke 2007). Such recognition and taking into account of different actors’ concerns is the defining perspective of the stakeholder model.

This point of view corresponds with our discussions on intervening in complex situations (no simple linear cause-effect relations) and the role of the experts that we described earlier as a stimulator of scientific learning by doing. If we place experts in a partnership relationship between two independent countries in which it remains the responsibility of the national partner to take the ultimate policy decisions, experts fit in best in the ‘honest broker’ model. This means that they should respect as much as possible the independence and the ultimate responsibility of the partner country. They provide in the best way possible the different options through which a government or local stakeholders could tackle a problem.

In practice this approach is never present in its purest form. Experts do not know all alternatives and cannot always be neutral and independent from their own ideas and preferences. But the honest broker is a person who constructs and learns. Such an attitude is a voluntary act of releasing power in exchange for a more constructive partnership relation.
Figure 25 summarises the discussion on the role of experts in development aid. They can have each role at certain particular moments during their mandate. In general though, and especially when it comes to innovation, tackling complex situations, there is no clear consensus, there exist quite a degree of uncertainty and the purpose of the partnership is not to reduce the scope of options but instead to highlight the alternative available options.

**Role and accountability in the partnership relations**

At a project-programme’s operational level, the partnership is structured through a representative of the national partner and an expert representing the donor side. They are both in principle committed to the common goals of the development intervention document, but this does not influence their respective accountabilities to their own organisation or the partner they represent. They are in constant interaction with each other to negotiate how the common objectives of the intervention will be realised. They plan and make budgets and they act together to reach the project’s objectives. Through monitoring of indicators, mutual controlling for respect of financial procedures, both exert their right to control the respect of the contract by the
counterpart. **Co-management** is the term applied to this kind of situation in the Belgian cooperation (Box 18). They work together, but they do not belong to each other. This means that the expert is not working for the national partner but together with him.

The expert should have a broad “technical” expertise (e.g. engineering, public health, agriculture, in principle related to a specific sector an intervention is dealing with) because they need to master the scope of the intervention and of the sector in which the intervention takes place. They support a complex development process in the specific context of an intervention (Schneider et al. 2006; Ford 2009). They are in the first place change-managers of complex processes rather than a person ‘who realises activities’ (see Section I & II). As change managers they are in the first place ‘honest brokers’ (Pielke 2007), providing all the necessary technical and political inputs to enable partner's choices and decisions. They have no hierarchical authority on local stakeholders, nor the right of manipulation to make their own opinions pass. This demands specific relational skills and attitudes, balancing between doing, observing, providing information and advising, sometimes referred to as 'complex leadership' (Pielke 2007).

Without experts, the intervention would lack a crucial accountable person at the donor side. They represent the donor side at the first level of negotiation and monitoring of the contract between two nations. They are privileged witnesses of the ‘local’ reality. They start and shape the dynamics and content of the partnership dialogue. In case of conflict or inability to reach a consensus in how the contract should be implemented, the steering committee can be the next level of negotiation between the two parties. At that more political level, often no specific technical sector competence is present to judge these aspects in the project. Therefore, the expert and the national representative are the respective resource persons for the contracting organisations (donor side and national partner).

Even in development interventions that aim to build the institutional capacity of a ministry at the national level, experts are bound to the donor partner through the partnership contract. They remain accountable to the donor organisation irrespective of the content of the intervention to which both parties are committed. They can give independent advice to the national partner organisation and negotiate the activities needed to reach the intervention’s goals in the same way as an expert does in projects intervening at the operational and local level.

Box 19 provides some practical examples of the accountability in the project -
programme approach. They illustrate that the accountability position is too often left implicit causing confusion in case of conflict.

**Box 19. Practical examples of the accountability of experts in development cooperation**

In an institutional capacity building project, an expert identified himself so much with the partner’s interest that at a given moment he advised the ministry not to accept a proposal of the donor. The donor partner interrupted his contract because of this conflict of interest. *Even if the international expert questions the decisions of the donor, he should search for consensus within the donor’s ‘side’. In the end he has to defend the interests and opinions of the donor partner. International experts remain accountable to the donor organisation.*

The national partner at the operational level refused to implement the rationalisation of personnel even though this was stipulated in the project document as condition to pay incentives to the remaining staff. As a result the international expert did not allow the payment of the incentives. This led to a conflict with the partner on the interpretation of the project document. The donor representative had to intervene at the lead ministry level. In the end the local level was asked by the ministry to respect the project document. *The partnership roles were played correctly at two levels, irrespective of the question whether this decision was correct or not.*

Three different projects in the health sector had one joint steering committee. Once a national partner representative could not attend a steering committee meeting. The international expert of that project took over his role and started to criticise the other projects’ planning and proposals. This was not appreciated by the other experts nor the donor representative. To avoid similar situations in the future formal meetings between experts were set up. They served to reach a common vision and position within the donor side. *International experts can never replace a national partner representative in a steering committee meeting, no matter how good the personal relationship might be.*

An international expert was placed at Ministry level in the frame of an institutional capacity building project. She was explicitly recruited through a basket fund by the Ministry of Health. She was explicitly accountable to the national partner. During four years she was frustrated because she saw all the corruption, felt how the project’s objectives were pushed aside for lucrative
activities for certain individuals, etc. She informed the embassy, but they did not react officially. At the same time, the embassy used her to get information about the Ministry and how 'things were going'. The project withdrew after four years and the cooperation agency decided it was impossible to deal with the ministry. They started subsidising national and international NGOs and even other bilateral cooperation agencies. When another cooperation took over the institutional capacity building at the Ministry’s level, it was at first hard to take for the ministry that the international expert would be accountable to the donor side and that the intervention would be managed under mutual agreement. The project went through a difficult time, with few disbursements during one year. A strong dialogue emerged from this situation and finally the Ministry took its responsibility and replaced certain elements of the personnel. Afterwards, the project fared well. In this example the importance of an open and frank dialogue and a strong partnership in favour of development becomes clear. They form a necessary condition for international experts to function.

Experts should constantly dialogue with the partner on the priorities of the intervention and be in the frontline of the fight against corruption. This position makes them most vulnerable at the donor side of the partnership and thus they deserve an ‘a priori’ protection by the donor. An explicitly formulated line of accountability of experts and their role in the partnership with regard to the intervention’s objectives will benefit the overall partnership relation.

**The role of National Technical Assistance**

National Technical Assistants (NTA) have the nationality of the recipient country. In our definition, NTA also sign a contract with the donor partner. They are in principle technically equal to international experts. Nevertheless their position in a development cooperation strategy is different due to their nationality.

First, an international expert has an external eye on the system, with less resistance to change, which provides a more comfortable position to question 'the obvious' and to make original proposals for change. Secondly, even though international experts and a NTA are both contractually accountable to the donor organisation, this is less obvious for a NTA. Even if a NTA is on the payroll of the donor organisation, it is not guaranteed that in case of conflict, the NTA will represent the donor partner.
and defend its point of view. The chances are that they are too much linked to local dynamics and relations to keep sufficiently distant from social pressure. Box 20 shows some practical experiences of how the role/accountability of an NTA can be ambivalent, sometimes even embarrassing the international experts and jeopardizing the project’s results.

**Box 20. Field situations that illustrate the accountability problems of NTA**

| In RDC, a senior NTA was contracted by a bilateral donor organisation to work at a high level in a project. At a certain stage of the project, a conflict on paying topping-ups for the personnel of the ministry arose between the international expert and the representative of the national partner. The project document stipulated that salary supplements could only be paid if the ministry would rationalise (read reduce) the number of staff according to the real needs. This was against the immediate interest of some individual national stakeholders. In the context of this conflict, the senior NTA publicly declared in front of the partner that the salary supplements had to be paid (immediately) without any conditions. Although contracted by the donor partner, he was identifying with some countrymen’s interests. As a result the international expert was discredited and the national partners pushed for his resignation.

An NTA was pressured by the ministry to pay for (improper) *per diems* for a workshop in the province and on another occasion for a visit to traditional healers during the weekend. The NTA did not dare to refuse but argued that the international expert had to sign for these expenses and that it certainly would be refused because this activity and thus the expenses were not planned in the framework of the project. He was actually relieved that he could pass the responsibility to the international expert.

Because of possible conflicts of interest in accountability and the social pressure to which NTAs are exposed, NTAs should be hired for technical inputs and technical dialogue in a development programme. One should be aware at all times of the possible social pressure under which such cadres sometimes have to work.

**Buying in occasional (short-term) expertise**

**EXPERTISE CONTRACTED BY THE PROJECT-PROGRAMME**

In the context of development projects, short-term national or international expertise is often attracted and contracted to facilitate project’s activities.
This expertise is used to realise well-defined activities and to answer specific needs of the intervention. These experts have a specific mandate and role. They form an integral part of the project-programme, have a restricted scope of work and their contract is limited in time. They do not (directly) engage in the ‘change process’ for development directly but contribute to it in a specific way through their assignment. These persons are contracted by the project and hence are accountable to the project and the project team. As a project is owned by both partners, such occasional experts should not be directly involved in the partnership dialogue. This marks an important difference with the role, mandate and accountability of the national representative and international experts, whose scope of work is much broader. There is a clear parallel with expertise that is attracted through a pooled expertise fund (special funds), discussed below.

EXPERTISE CONTRACTED THROUGH SPECIAL FUNDS

A specific approach of providing expertise to a partner country is contracting expertise through special funds. EU and DANIDA for instance actively promote pooled funds for expertise. For a long time, the Belgian Cooperation has provided expertise funds through which partner countries can buy specific expertise. In general this is about short-term expertise. The lead ministry contracts experts with specific terms of reference. These experts have usually a specific task to fulfil. They are filling (temporary) expertise gaps of the contracting ministry when this expertise is not available in-house. In principle, they should be replaced by national ministry staff whenever possible. As such, they are directly accountable to their contractor, which is the ministry in question. They are not defined in the partnership contract between the national partner and the donor. As such they do not accompany the projected development process, though they contribute to it in a specific way. They are in principle not defined as change managers.

These experts find themselves in exactly the same position as the experts who are contracted for their specific expertise in the context of a project-programme (see previous paragraph). Such experts, whether contracted through special funds or projects, should not be directly or institutionally involved in the partnership dialogue.
Partnerships in SWAps and Budget Support Initiatives

The Sector-wide Approach (SWAp) was first promoted by WHO. It was introduced as a reaction against classical problem-oriented projects and vertical programmes that were acting in parallel to government structures and systems (Hill 2002). It was to be a move towards a more systemic approach to development and development aid. SWAps made a call for changed partnership relations between donors and recipient countries. It was a (renewed) call for more ownership and leadership of the developing countries and for a voluntary sharing of power by the donor agencies.

WHO formulated it as follows:

“Under the SWAp, project funds contribute directly to a sector-specific umbrella and are tied to a defined sector policy under a government authority. In essence, a SWAp calls for a partnership in which government and development agencies change their relationships (to clearer government leadership). They interact more together in the formulation of policy, and less on the details of its implementation.

Key characteristics of the SWAp should include: i) the partner government clearly leads and owns the programme; and ii) a common effort by external partners to support that programme, including provision of all or a major share of funding for the sector, in support of the government’s unified policy and expenditure programme. Over time, some SWAps progress towards using government procedures for implementation and the disbursement of funds.

OECD defined SWAps as follows:

“All significant donor funding to support a single, comprehensive sector policy and independent programme, consistent with a sound macro-economic framework, under government leadership.

Donor support for a SWAp can take any form – project aid, technical assistance or budget support – although there should be a commitment to progressive reliance on government procedures to disburse and account for all funds as these procedures are strengthened.” (OECD 2006).

Every word is important in the above descriptions of SWAps. We have to recognise that SWAps are essentially about partnership considerations. Projects, programmes and other types of development aid modalities are possible, but the initiatives should respect government policies (alignment) and ownership. SWAps can be considered as long term partnerships (Hill
Development aid should become less donor driven. At the same time, it is recognised that SWAps are not feasible under all circumstances. Other sectors than the health sector have followed the same approach, but results have been mitigated. Much of the (non) success depended on the level of leadership and ownership of the recipient country. SWAps were most successful in countries that showed strong leadership. The Paris Declaration was certainly inspired by the hypotheses of SWAps. Unfortunately, it did not consider so much the systemic dynamics and the conditions needed for such principles. Instead of ‘more’ alignment and ‘more’ ownership, the principles were presented rather as absolute values.

In theory SWAps are less demanding from an administrative point of view, but this has been offset by the extent to which the preparation for and implementation of SWAps consume the limited ministry energies and resources (Hill 2002). In our experience and perception, SWAps later evolved into Budget Support (BS) and Sector Budget Support (SBS). But the system’s complexity was ignored in the simple (oversimplified) set-up: a huge budget aligned under one policy, and a critical dialogue between the donor community and the recipient countries, were supposed to be sufficient for development to happen. An explicit partnership relation was put in place, but the learning aspects (for the donor community!) were reduced to (necessarily superficial) yearly field visits, and leadership and national policy were (by definition) considered mature enough to build a strong partnership with the donor community.

In practice, the partnership relation in BS and SBS is not laid down in an intervention contract as such but acts through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by donor partners and by the national partner. This MoU is, in terms of partnership, the equivalent of the project-programme contract between two partners with shared objectives.

A MoU in the case of BS describes the following aspects:

- **Size and use of the budget**: The MoU stipulates in the first place the budget and the way this should be disbursed. The budget support serves commonly defined (consecutive) objectives which the partner should attain as condition for the next part of the budget to be released (‘conditional disbursements’). Unlike in the project-programme approach, the financial and managerial implementation...
modalities are by far the core business of the partnership, whereas the technical aspects (sector strategies and plans) are roughly considered to be the responsibility of the national partner only.

- **Performance indicators**: Commonly defined indicators allow to follow the sector evolution and the public finance performance in the country. They are the basis to discuss on the degree of performance of the national partner with regard to the contract.

- **International expertise**: Some donors allocate international expertise to the budget support initiative to enable the policy makers at the donor side to interpret the progress and to decide on future budget releases. Usually these are experts in Public Finance Management (PFM) or sector experts. This international expertise is clearly accountable to the donor partner and functions as technical advisor for the donor community. They are not considered as direct actors in the development process but they concentrate on monitoring the partner’s results (obligations).

- **The policy dialogue**: Technical working groups, sector reports and annual review meetings structure the policy dialogue between donor and national partner.

Figure 26 illustrates how the partnership in budget support is structured. The similarity with the partnership structure under the project–programme approach is obvious (see Figure 16). There is as such no opposition or contradiction. The two partnership structures are congruent and complementary, the major difference being the (S)BS’ absence from the operational level.
More even than in the project-programme approach, the partnership is not realised in isolation. Every donor can join the partnership. The need for coordination between all stakeholders and parties and at the various levels is clear. That harmonisation is not an obvious process was illustrated earlier, though; theory and practice may be different. The dangers of this kind of partnership and consequently the dialogue are highlighted in Section II. As a link with the operational level is not automatically established in a budget support initiative, the budget support partnership only includes central national level partners. There is no or limited multi-level anchorage and this is a limitation for a multi-stakeholder approach.

Although not by definition, in practice (S)BS is often ignoring complexity as much as most other development interventions (classical projects and programmes). The dialogue is based on presumed predictable targets and indicators and ignores the inevitable degree of uncertainty, hence the obligation to continuously learn that goes along with it. The technical working groups in practice often lack the field experience dimension and
many donor agencies do not appoint international experts to contribute to these working groups. The technical working groups are often ‘dormant’ and actually tend to replace a dynamic of analysis and discussion within the Ministry's organisation. In many occasions, the ministry considers such working groups as an obligation on the donor partners' side in order to fulfil their obligations in the partnership relation. The intrinsic motivation is often low.

On the donor side, harmonisation is often lacking, not only because of opposing opinions between donor agencies (this would actually lead to interesting exchanges) but also because many donor agencies do not use specific (sector) expertise. The Belgian cooperation is one of the exceptions because they appoint ‘by default’ a sector expert and a public finance expert (PFM) whenever they engage in budget support. These experts are considered as advisors for the Belgian Embassy and are therefore clearly situated at the donor partner side.

In our experience, the biggest danger for the policy dialogue in the frame of (sector) budget support is the fact that it is disconnected from field experience and innovation. The dialogue cannot be based on piloting and learning. In our experience, technical working groups and (short) annual field visits cannot fully compensate for this inconvenience. Budget support, in isolation, is therefore probably insufficient to act effectively in complex development situations, but it could usefully complement project and programme approaches if well-coordinated.
Strong Partnerships in Programmes in a complex environment

Increased Need for Internal Coordination

Section II defined a programme as ‘A group of development interventions (e.g. projects, sector budget support, general budget support, pooled funds) that constitute a coherent whole, with explicit synergies and one common vision’23. Its objective is the strengthening of a sector or a national programme.

Even though development programmes operate in a complex environment, the principles of a strong partnership and the use of long-term expertise as the entry point of a partnership dialogue do not change. But the combination of several interventions increases the risk of internal division or unintended contradictions. Therefore coordination among experts of a same programme is crucial to avoid contradictory exchanges with the national partner. Box 21 is an example of how poor internal (in this case ‘inter-donor’) coordination causes confusion and incoherence, even leading to delays in fund disbursements and in achieving the objectives of the intervention.

Box 21. Example how poor coordination within the donor community causes confusion and incoherence

In DRC, an agreement between the Ministry of Health and Public Service and the donor community, stipulated that donors were prepared to pay salary topping-ups that corresponded with the difference between what the government would like to pay and what it could actually pay (i.e. the Mbudi Agreement).

At that time the Belgian Cooperation supported the health sector through an important bilateral health sector support programme and executed at the same time a health programme on behalf of the World Bank. Both donors were equally aligned to the above-mentioned policy. But incoherence occurred when applying the policy in the field. The Belgian Cooperation, in exchange for the salary topping-ups demanded a rationalisation of the staff, as in many health centres and hospitals between 50 and 90% of the

23 ‘One common vision’ here refers to the shared underlying paradigms whereas ‘objective’ is more concrete.
personnel was considered plethoric. The decision of the Belgian Government not to pay for irrational use of personnel and their demand of rationalization of the health personnel caused important resistance within the system against this conditional change. Intentional delays in disbursement of the project budget and a difficult dialogue between both parties were the result. The World Bank however did not adhere to the demand of the Belgian government (or did not know about it) and pushed for quick disbursement of the budget. In their interventions areas the dialogue with the partner went smoothly, whereas in the areas supported by the Belgian Government the dialogue with the partner was rather difficult.

**Coordination in practice**

Different types of long-term expertise can be used simultaneously in complex programmes. Meetings between experts are privileged occasions to build synergies and to shape and deepen the policy dialogue. Projects can be anchored at different levels and have different entry points into the system. This means that experts cover different aspects of a complex reality in the system. Their view can be biased because of partial knowledge of the sector. In order to avoid contradictory advice, to enhance their acting coherently and to enlarge their vision on the sector, it is essential that technical experts meet on a regular and structured basis to understand other interventions and difficulties. Meetings should be structured in a way that it enriches each individual intervention.

There should be no *a priori* hierarchy between experts. Every expert has an original insight and input in the global process of sector development; they can mutually enrich each other and therefore are complementary rather than hierarchically structured. The different competences are not of more or less importance, but are to be considered as complementary. Control and hierarchy rarely stimulate free reflection and exchange of information.

Overall, development cooperation often leaves the accountability question open. At the level of long-term expertise, this causes confusion and hinders the establishment of strong partnerships with the national partner. In addition, it complicates the coordination between development partner organisations. Clear views and explicit definitions on the accountability question would solve this issue. It allows stakeholders in development cooperation to work closer together instead of defining themselves as opposite forces.
In Section II we already alluded to the possibility that joint steering committees could still be relevant in a ‘modern’ project-programme approach if they succeed in enriching the policy dialogue. In case of a sector programme consisting of several individual interventions or sub-programmes, the creation of a single steering committee for the entire programme should be considered. Such a committee is not equal to the simple sum of all the individual steering committees of each intervention. Besides addressing bottlenecks and changing strategic options for the individual interventions, the joint steering committee should look also at the overall development of the sector. It should build synergies and should look into a given problem from different angles, etc.

The national partner representatives and the experts should jointly prepare steering committee meetings as a team, in conjunction with other stakeholders. If correctly structured, these meetings are important occasions for shaping the partnerships and programme coordination.
Conclusion

In summary, in this section we have claimed that:

- **Partnership relations** in development aid have received too little attention from development partners (donor and national partner), especially the partnership at the ‘lower’, operational levels. There is limited documented evidence on how donor agencies and national partners use their power in the cooperation partnership. Human values qualify the relationship more than anything else.

- ‘Partnerships’ are an important tool in development aid to achieve long-term results. Project-programme agreements and memoranda of understanding are seen as ‘contracts’ that define partnerships and hence stipulate explicitly the mutual and respective accountability.

- ‘Strong partnerships’ imply a co-ordinated, harmonised and field experience-based dialogue at different (political) levels and are based on an empathic relation between the partners. Partnerships assure the quality and the sustainability of development interventions.

- The ‘partnership dialogue’ starts with a technical and policy dialogue at the operational level. A bottom-up information flow, building on the reality of the field, makes the policy and political dialogue at national political level stronger. Without a dialogue at the operational level, the higher levels lose much of their value, accuracy and credibility.

- ‘Long-term expertise’ has an indispensable role to play not only in the piloting and innovation dynamic described in Section II, but also in shaping the partnership relation between donor and recipient countries. They are accountable to the donor side although they work closely together with the national partner to reach the common goals stipulated in the contract.

- The partnership dialogue should not be a reason for neglecting or replacing the emancipative and democratic endogenous policy dialogue in a country. Projects-programmes with long-term expertise should reinforce the country owned development process in a specific and explicit way.

The Sector-Wide Approach and the (Sector) Budget Support initiatives have evolved into useful complements to project/programme approaches on the condition that they are sufficiently connected to field experience and
innovation. Systematic and well-structured meetings between experts, who are close to the operational realities, can be an important resource and source of information for keeping this connection alive.

It is clear that the partnership relation in development cooperation is not something that automatically optimises itself. It needs a particular attention in terms of structure, explicit basic values, clear lines of accountability and effects it may have on other vitally important processes such as the endogenous policy dialogue. It is important that we capitalize as much as possible on past experience by drawing the necessary lessons from it. In this section we have tried to highlight some of these lessons. The most important underlying concern may be not to leave the structure of the partnership relation(s) to chance. Even in situations of reduced certainty and predictability we can at least try to deal with the ‘known unknowns’ - the known areas of uncertainty - in order to keep having some grip on the complex realities. This is an area where true expertise and sound judgment need to be applied to maintain a sound and fruitful consultation process. Fortunately we do not need to re-invent the wheel; we only need to re-align it continually to adapt it to the particularity of the context.
References


