A POSITIVE PROJECT OUTCOME: LESSONS FROM A NON-DOMINANT GOVERNMENT UNIVERSITY-BASED PROGRAM

Anne N. Lutomia, BEd, MA, PhD; Julia Bello-Bravo, LLB, MA, MBA, PhD; John Medendorp, BA, MA, PhD; and Barry Robert Pittendrigh, BSC, MS, PhD

Abstract

This article explores factors contributing to a non-dominant collaboration paradigm in a partnership between a government-based international development agency and a university-based non-governmental organization. Anchored in Wood's and Gray's collaborative framework, this article describes how a steeply hierarchical partnership navigated the elements of collaboration – organizational autonomy; shared problem domain; interactive processes; shared rules, norms, and structures; and decision making – to produce non-dominant values and practices deriving from negotiated processes, rules, norms, and structures that produced positive collaboration outcomes. In particular, a history of prior mutually beneficial interactions emerges as a critical precondition for achieving the non-dominant collaboration in this case study's steeply hierarchical organizational relationship, one in which egalitarianism and equal decision-making regarding the agenda and the goals of the collaboration could have been highly constrained.

Keywords: partnership; non-domination; project managers, positive-outcome experience; equalization of inputs; trust; relationship; government; collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing evidence that better alignment of intervention goals and outcomes, as well as increased participant satisfaction, are associated with non-

dominant more than with dominant approaches to partnerships (Alperovitz, 2017; Bello-Bravo et al., 2018; McCordic et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2017), implementation of these research insights remains too infrequent or merely perfunctory (Bruce, 2019). In addition to discussing the possibilities for non-dominant collaboration in macro-scale partnerships, attention should be focused on barriers to the implementation of non-dominant approaches in those settings, factors that support the persistence of dominant collaboration paradigms, and leverage points that present opportunities to challenge that persistence.

Throughout, we refer to the government entity in this case study as the governmental convening partner (GCP) and the university-based NGO as the convened partner (CdP) in the partnership. This senior-junior distinction points generally to the decision-making power of the GCP within the partnership, especially around agenda-setting, but also in its empowerment to *distribute* or share decision-making powers with the junior partner. This in part suggests some possible analogies with patron-client relations, which we discuss later.

There are many approaches to analyzing collaboration. Phillips and Hardy (2000) identify four. The collective strategy approach is motivated by joint strategic advantage (e.g. Astley, 1984; Barney, 2018; Bresser, 1988; Bresser & Harl, 1986; Carney, 1987; Amara, 1990; Barley et al., 1993; Nohria & Eccles, 1993; Powell & Brantley, 1993). The organizational economy approach (Barney & Hesterley, 1996), though similar to the collective strategy approach, uses transaction cost analysis (Um & Kim, 2019; Williamson, 1975, 1985) to explain newly emergent forms of collaboration that fall outside established institutional domains (Buckley & Casson, 1988; Hennart, 1991; Hill, 1990; Koenig & Thiétart, 1988; Williamson, 1991). These emergent forms are sought precisely because existing institutional domains are not sufficient to address unanticipated complexities. A third approach focuses on initiatives that bring together businesses, governments, and other non-business organizations (e.g. Herrigel, 1993; Weiss, 1988; Weiss & Thurbon, 2018). These collaborations are intentionally structured to cross sectors, with the understanding

that only a cross-sectorial approach can deliver a system-wide response to the shared problem domain. Another approach to collaboration has been developed by writers on interorganizational domains (e.g. Gray, 1989; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Wood & Gray, 1991); this approach, in turn, draws on negotiated order theory (e.g. Emery & Trist, 1965; Strauss et al., 1963). They call for inclusive (Warren, 1967; Warren et al., 1974) or collaborative (Gray, 1989) decision making in which organizations pool their expertise and resources (Trist, 1983) and negotiate their social order (Gray, 1989; Nathan & Mitroff, 1991; Strauss et al., 1963). This article relies on and applies the last of these, interorganizational domains.

Wood and Gray (1991), building on Gray (1989), approach the study of collaborations from the perspective of the negotiated space in interorganizational domains. These domains form around a shared problem that cannot be addressed by the participant organizations alone. As Wood and Gray point out, the decision to collaborate is in its essence an effort on the part of collaboration partners to expand their influence and overcome the barriers and constraints that the problem domain presents. Collaborations are not always equal. There is a power differential in most relationships that varies in the steepness of the resulting hierarchy. Depending on the preconditions that govern a collaboration, one of the collaboration participants may bring greater assets, such as finances, networks, power, authority, market position, and name recognition, than the other (Phillips & Hardy, 2000). Wood and Gray (1991) describe this unevenness of assets between the convening partner and the convened partner as inequality of power in the collaborative relationship. Regardless of who initiates the collaboration, this unevenness of assets and of the corresponding power can lead to circumstances in which the convenor exerts a disproportionate influence over the agenda and goals of the collaboration. Hardy and Phillips (1998) argue that there are three forms of power governing the dynamics of collaboration: formal authority, the control of critical resources, and discursive legitimacy. The first entails a recognized institutional authority to make decisions. The second refers to both financial and other resources essential to the problem domain. The third refers to the recognized legitimacy to speak to the problem

domain. This authority, unlike formal authority, is based on expertise rather than structural institutionalism.

The unevenness of resources is not necessarily a bad thing. These can include unevenness in knowledge, awareness, and power to act in the problem domain, and can allow convened partners to leverage the additional resources of the convening partner for organizational benefit. Nevertheless, the unevenness of this relationship can also lead to the stifling of the convened partner, with a commensurate loss of insight, creativity, agility, and responsiveness to circumstances.

Government collaborations are almost always, by definition, based on inequality of power. Governments by their very nature tend to have greater finances, networks, power, authority, influence, and prestige. To that end, case studies of positive-outcome non-dominant government partnerships afford in-situ examples of successful practices. This article specifically explores the dynamics of a positive-outcome, non-dominant government-consultancy partnership with the authors' United States university-based, convened-partner non-governmental organization (NGO). Personal reflections using themes from Wood and Gray's (1991) collaboration framework described below help to identify those elements that made the positive-outcome experience possible for both parties.

Positive outcomes in this report meet two basic criteria: (1) satisfactory development and delivery of the GCP partner's product as commissioned from the CdP, and (2) the CdP's experiential satisfaction across the dynamics of interaction during the partnership; this latter is particularly significant for non-dominator paradigms, given that the voices of junior partners in unequal partnerships can often go unheard or get dismissed (Kerasidou, 2019; Kokwaro & Kariuki, 2001; Lutomia, 2019; Madela, 2020; Parker & Kingori, 2016). By analyzing these reflections through the lens of a collaborative framework (Lutomia, 2019), the findings link both to original insights and to the existing literature of partnership studies. Specifically, this case study exhibits how, even in a relatively static and non-negotiable

hierarchical partnership arrangement, positive non-dominating outcomes are possible.

Addressing in detail the benefits (positive or negative) for community recipients of solutions developed on their behalf by non-dominant partnerships is beyond the scope of this article, but one important potential benefit should be mentioned. To the extent that non-dominant processes better afford flexibility in design and development, they potentially improve the fit between the solution delivered and the actual problem faced by communities. In hierarchically steep settings, the voice of the convened partner can, in this way, potentially influence or even change the agenda-setting, pre-established vision, and goals perceived by the convening partner, with potential benefits for solution recipients downstream.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Collaboration theory has long built on the three stages identified in Gray's (1989) seminal work on collaboration, later extended by Morris et al. (2013). Gray's initial work proposes three iterative stages as *input, process,* and *output*. Stemming from systems theory, this theory describes how organisms, organizations, and objects work together in a complex environment (Gray, 1989). However, Wood and Gray (1991) subsequently developed a *preconditions, process,* and *outcome* framework, highlighting how preconditions for collaboration can include high levels of interdependence, a need for sharing resources and risks, resource scarcity, complexity of the problem domain, a previous history of efforts to collaborate, and situations in which each partner has resources that other partners need. While Wood and Gray's model (1991) overlaps with resource-based and resource dependency frameworks discussed briefly below (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010; Klipsch, 2011; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Phillips & Hardy, 2000; Sherer & Lee, 2002), the inclusion of preconditions (as inputs to collaboration or partnership) marks a crucial addition. In general, Wood and Gray (1991) discussed that collaboration occurs when a group of **autonomous stakeholders** of a **problem domain** engage in an **interactive process**, using **shared rules, norms, and structures**, to **act or decide** on issues related to

that domain. Here we focus on organizational autonomy, a shared problem domain, interactive processes, shared rules, norms, and structures, and decision making.

Organizational Autonomy

Organizational autonomy means simply that each of the collaborating partners has a reason for existence outside of the collaboration. In other words, even if the collaboration never came to fruition or ceased to exist, each of the collaboration participants would have an independent organizational existence and mandate. The concept of organizational autonomy is significant because it allows each stakeholder to be assured that their contribution is benefiting the collaboration in some way (Gray & Wood, 1991) and that they are empowered to apply their knowledge and expertise to the tasks at hand without excessive interference or micro-managing. Of considerable importance, in hierarchically steep partnerships, only the convening partner enjoys a generally unrestricted organizational autonomy, the power to impact the operations of the convened partner, and immunity from convened-partner micro-management. This makes organizational autonomy especially critical in collaborations. Organizational autonomy includes the elements of governance and administration.

Shared Problem Domain

Crucial to collaborations is the existence of a problem common to all partners that is beyond the capacity of any one organization to address. The combining of organizational expertise and resources is then seen as a means to expand both resources and expertise for both partners. Where there is no need for expansion in order to address the problem domain, collaborations do not form.

Interactive Processes

Collaborations are marked by interactive processes which afford to each partner a form of mutuality. If there is not some form of mutuality in the relationship between the convenor and the convened, no collaboration exists – only acquisitions and/or hostile mergers. The interactive process provides some benefits to all partners,

otherwise there would be no collaboration. Given that mutuality is benefit, it behooves stakeholders to be interactive, regardless of the steepness of the hierarchy. In collaboration, mutuality allows stakeholders to develop coping mechanisms to deal with power, politics, and unexpected change (Gray, 1989; Via, 2008). Importantly for hierarchically steep non-dominant partnerships, when convened partners perceive the distribution of benefits (even an unequal distribution of benefits) from the partnership as satisfactory, they are willing to enter into collaborations, even when they are unequal (Rawls, 1971).

Shared Rules, Norms, and Structures

Collaborations always exist in negotiated space. As Phillips and Hardy (2000) point out, each organization brings with it an institutional field that operates in the problem domain. These institutional fields are never identical. If they were, there would be no value added to the collaboration. These distinct institutional fields require that the collaboration partners come to mutual understanding regarding how the collaboration will occur, what norms will govern the collaboration, and what structures will be in place to regulate the interactions between the partners. It is here that the partners, even in unequal collaborations, can ensure that the outcomes of the collaboration are satisfactory. Norms in a collaboration epitomize trust and reciprocity, even when the contributions and benefits of the collaboration are unequal. Trust is gained through relationship building (Kanter, 1994). Similarly, relationships (especially past positive ones) beget trust, which provides a groundwork for shared understanding and communication between partners. In general, while communication spans all stages of collaboration (Gray, 1989; Gray & Wood, 1991; Thomson, 2001; Via, 2008), the quality of the interaction during those communications becomes crucial for non-dominator approaches.

Decision Making

Finally, there is decision making. Based on the established rules, norms, and structures, decisions are made in an agreed-upon way. If the partners have properly negotiated their space in the collaboration, this decision-making activity should produce satisfactory levels of participation from all collaboration partners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In any cooperative effort, whether between nation-states, individual persons, or some other grouping of entities, exact equality between the participants within that cooperative effort is only rarely, if ever, achieved. The hierarchical power dynamics that emerge from these inequalities can be assessed not only ethically but also pragmatically along a continuum from domination to partnership in terms of whether *both* (or all) parties are satisfied by both the outcomes and the dynamics of the interaction (Eisler, 1994), even in cases where the distribution of benefits is unequal (Rawls, 1971).

Outside of examples listed in partnership studies, the practice of cooperative linkages between governments and non-government entities often exhibits a lack of clarity about definition, boundaries, and even goals (e.g., collective outcomes) (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Moriniere & Vaughan-Lee, 2018). Despite this lack of clarity, such cooperative linkages are frequently criticized for unnecessary overhead of resources and logistics; lack of, or only vaguely realized, comparative advantage; and often unaddressed problems of power dynamics, especially in global North-South contexts (Agnandji et al., 2012; Amutabi, 2006; Anderson & Steneck, 2011; Lotia & Hardy, 2008; Lutomia, 2019; Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004). Partly these criticisms arise either directly or indirectly from assumptions within resource-based and resource dependency frameworks for thinking about organizations, which center *advantage* solely in terms of the well-being, comparative advantage, or strategic resource access of each organization, taken in isolation (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010; Klipsch, 2011; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Sherer & Lee, 2002), rather than in partnership terms of the well-being, mutual advantage, or supportive access to resources for *all* parties to the interaction.

As such, these resource-based and resource dependency frameworks (and their logical opposition to partnerships generally) presuppose a dominant paradigm that operates via unsustainable self-interest alone. More precisely, in any hierarchically

unequal interaction, the rights and responsibilities of both parties are similarly unequal, such that the more the convening party in a partnership fails to follow through on their responsibilities while demanding their rights, the more the interaction veers toward domination and away from mutuality.

It is helpful to invoke parallels with patron-client relations, given that very often government partnerships arise in a consultancy context, in which the consulted partnering entity has been chosen to provide a specific, already-decided good or service (Raco, 2018). In this context, participatory frameworks, egalitarian decision making, and flattened hierarchies may be absent or highly constrained by the already-set agenda, project outcome, and vision of the GCP partner (Lukiyanto et al., 2018). Nevertheless, when such partnerships are conducted according to agreements reached at the beginning—i.e., when both parties honor their respective rights and responsibilities over the course of their interaction—a satisfactory outcome can often be reached for all parties (Lutomia, 2019). In contrast, when the honoring of those rights and responsibilities breaks down, the collaboration may not only become a great source of bitterness for participants (Lutomia, 2019; Madela, 2020; Moyi Okwaro & Geissler, 2015), but also can have strikingly useless, even harmful, local effects from the project outcomes (Jentsch & Pilley, 2003).

Besides honoring one's agreements (whether contractual or implied by the partnership itself), interactive *qualities* between parties—particularly the values of trust and mutual respect—highlight a crucial distinction between domination and partnership paradigms, whether that respect happens between people in organizations, between people and built (artificial) environments, between people and other living beings in the environment, or between people and the world in its totality (Fry & Souillac, 2017; Han & Onchwari, 2018; Hozak et al., 2016; Kurtz, 2017; Larson, 2018; Payumo et al., 2019). This reciprocity of trust and mutual respect—even across differences in power, class, and/or social status—also tends to characterize instances of mutually beneficial patron-client relations (Taylor, 2010). Indeed, with regard to successful international government/NGO partnerships, "one key aspect of the strategy calls for strengthening the coordination and policy

coherence among all actors (*Stakeholders*) in the development community" (Helmich, 2013, p. 3, italics in original).

CASE STUDY

In 2019, the convened partner (CdP) in this case's government partnership was approached by an international development interagency governmental convening partner (GCP) to produce global-scale educational materials to support COVID-19 prevention. In this case study, the GCP held two of the three reins of power – formal authority and control of critical resources. The CdP partner held the third, discursive legitimacy. Economically, the hierarchical distinction between the entities is very steep, with the GCP having an operational budget in the tens of billions of dollars, and the CdP having a highly variable annual operating budget dependent on grants, but several orders of magnitude less than the GCP's at any one time.

Importantly, as will emerge below, the entities had collaborated on other similar projects previously. In this way, both partnership members were generally familiar with the institutional domain of the other, including culture, practices, and expectations. Moreover, as a consultancy relationship in which the GCP had already established the agenda and collective outcome for a specific product, this familiarity helped to restrict and simplify the rights and responsibilities of both parties with respect to project completion. Positive-outcome results for the GCP would be signaled by the on-time delivery of the specified anti-COVID-19 educational materials. To analyze how the project was able to deliver positive outcomes for both the GCP and the CdP, in spite of the steeply hierarchical nature of the relationship between the collaboration managers, project managers reflected on the theoretical framework themes outlined above: organizational autonomy; shared problem domain; interactive processes; shared rules, norms, and structures; and decision making. Important elements in understanding this case study derive from the mechanisms that were put in place through the negotiated shared problem domain,

including reciprocity, support, exchange, and communication; and norms, including respect, relationship, confidence, and commitment.

Organizational Autonomy

Although both groups act autonomously, each team brings to the table knowledge, skills, and viewpoints that make it a synergistic interaction towards a common set of goals. Both teams exist in the limitations and opportunities associated with organizational infrastructure, and each team turns to the other team to understand how their systems function. A good working relationship is needed for us to maneuver our respective organizations towards common goals. (Project Manager 1).

Each group was committed to complementing the weakness of the other and emphasizing the strengths toward accomplishing the objectives. For instance, government partnership often focuses on an ample network of stakeholders who can serve as trust deployers to reach target audience. In the case of educational programs, this rich network based on trust, experience, and commitment supports new initiatives with common goals. Each group keeps their own autonomy, identity, and priorities but incorporating aspects that strengthen their positionality. (Project Manager 2)

We listen carefully to our partner organizations in understanding their needs, and make efforts to make sure that our efforts are responsive to their needs. (Project Manager 3)

Shared Problem Domain

Both the [GCP] and we as implementers had a desire to address the crisis in which we found our global community. Neither of us alone had all the tools necessary to achieve a comprehensive response. We actually took the first step, offering out tools as a means of addressing the situation. (Project Manager 1)

It was frustrating to see such a serious and on-going global crisis rising before our very eyes and not have the wherewithal to respond. We know that what we had in hand could make a huge difference by reaching literally millions, if not billions of people globally. But we needed the funding to get it launched. Partnering with [GCP] gave us just the leverage we needed to reach the networks available to both of us. (Project Manager 2)

I could not imagine a better partner. We have worked with them in the past and we knew what they were capable of doing. Fortunately, on this project, our interest coincided, and we were able to focus on the challenge before us. (Project Manager 3)

Interactive Processes: Reciprocity, Support, Exchange, and Communication

Most of our team members, on both sides, are very nuts-and-bolts pragmatically focused. This working relationship is built off previous collaborations and long-term working relationships, many of which have been formed in previous projects over many years. It creates a situation where they trusted us to do what we do, and we trusted them to let us do it. (Project Manager 1)

Our research focus has covered on some of the contextual factors that provide for success, like: how trust involves mutual understanding and common objectives. It is important to recognize the importance of building and maintaining trust that leads to the growth of the partnership. Mutual goals contribute to positive outcomes that can deepen the inclusivity of potential outsiders as part of the extensive network of any given partner. (Project Manager 2)

The frequency of communication is the difference between success and failure. (Project Manager 3)

Rules, Norms, and Structures: Trust, Respect, Relationship, Confidence, and Commitment

COVID-19 has been catastrophic at so many levels. However, it has also shifted paradigms in how we work. It has flipped the equation on my time use. Working from home has made it easier sometimes to get things done in virtual space and far easier to connect with people. Additionally, I have noticed a shift in openness toward different paradigms for doing business. The fact that people are not travelling for work means it is easier to push for projects with them, and I feel there a better routine to push things forward. (Project Manager 1)

The accepted norms of our approach to partnership are based on trust-building through tangible objectives. The ultimate goal is the anticipated benefit to the community in areas of interest that we share, especially around agriculture, health, and women's empowerment. Our unwritten norms are based on mutual understanding of the defined and negotiated goals we propose before we engage with other groups. For this reason, our research is based on measuring the impact of the partnership. This means working together through accepted norms to reach impact that otherwise we could not accomplish. (Project Manager 2)

We are just in the beginning stages here [of the long-term aspects of this collaboration], but more rather than less communication increases the chances of developing a relationship of trust. (Project Manager 3)

Decision Making

Working with [GCP] is not always easy. I mean, it is like a David and Goliath scenario, without the conflict. They are huge, and we are tiny by comparison. So how do you make decisions when there is such an imbalance. To their credit, they have been encouraging, supportive, and very inclusive about the way we approach decisions. (Project Manager 1)

It's not that we always agree. They have their interests and we have ours. But they didn't bully us or intimidate us. They worked with us as equals and allowed us full say in the decisions that were made. They could have just taken charge and dictated what they wanted, and there were times when their choices overrode ours, but they made every effort to respect our expertise and defer to us on decision where they did not have the experience or expertise. (Project Manager 2)

I felt that we were truly partners in this. We were able to voice our opinions and be heard. Decisions were made together. It's not like we took a vote, but we all worked together to achieve consensus. Some discussions took some time to resolve. Some took several conversations, but there was always a sense of mutuality in the way that decisions were made. For a behemoth like [GCP] to voluntarily set aside its advantage in this relationship and agree to enter a decision making process that elevated us as partners to a status of peers is a tribute to the quality of the people that we worked with. (Project Manager 3)

DISCUSSION

Themes that emerged from data analysis on the reflections above underscore the *qualities of interaction* between the partners (including trust, autonomy, open communication, and respect) and *the ground for supporting those qualities* (above all, the pre-existing relationship, past satisfactory interactions between the partners, and, to a lesser degree, shifts in work flow due to COVID). These two themes exemplify elements in the theoretical framework (e.g., autonomy, trust, and interactive dynamics as norms within the partnership).

Qualities of Interaction

The reflection, "They trusted us to do what we do, and we trusted them to let us do it." (Program Manager 1), highlights the themes of autonomy, trust, openness,

and flexibility in inter-organizational communications despite the geographic and technological challenges and new opportunities of COVID. These elements, especially trust, often contribute significantly to non-dominating contexts (Bragadóttir et al., 2020; Chung & Davies, 2016; de Azevedo Hanks, 2015; Spreitzer, 1995). However, while a wide range of research underscores the importance of trust for successful partnerships (Child, 2001; Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2013; Gambetta, 1988; Kerasidou, 2019; Lutomia, 2019; Naik, 2018; Nameth & Wheeler, 2018), without the reciprocal, bi-directional quality cited by the quotation above, trust alone does not guarantee moving away from the domination end of the domination/partnership continuum. For example, Gambetta (1988) described trust as follows:

> When we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability that he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him. (Gambetta, 1988, p. 217)

This calculation of probabilities is rational but mechanical and explicitly self-interested; it considers no potential benefit of the interaction for the other partner. In contrast, Nameth and Wheeler (2018) asserted with respect to a partnership, "It is important to note that we were able to act [as we did] because our partnership was based on trust *and* mutual respect" (p. 3). This regard for the well-being of the other in a partnership underscores a key paradigm shift in non-dominator interactions: "Each group was committed to complementing the weakness of the other and emphasizing the strengths toward accomplishing the objectives" (Project Manager 2).

In the present case, while the greater reliance on virtual workflows can facilitate more access between stakeholders—especially given that "the frequency of communication is the difference between success and failure" (Project Manager 3)— this reliance also brings "a shift in openness toward different paradigms for doing business" (Project Manager 1), including more patience, flexibility, and

understanding between the parties. Dodgson (1993) similarly emphasized affording flexibility to stakeholders as a key element of both trust and successful project outcomes. Naik (2018) highlights the practical advantages this affords; even "if the technical design fails, but there is a sound strategy to maintain trust, ensure buy-in, and continue ongoing communication, projects still have the opportunity to rebound and succeed" (p. 3). Such successful outcomes will not only meet the GCP's collective outcome goals, but also can elicit in junior/consultant partners the satisfaction of a job well done as well (Lutomia, 2019; Madela, 2020), and thus a non-domination dynamic despite steep hierarchical relations between partners. In this way, "Each group keeps their own autonomy, identity, and priorities but incorporating aspects that strengthen their positionality" (Project Manager 2).

Moreover, both the flexibility of communication and the enabling of the CdP to initiate and troubleshoot technological (and other) problems as they arose also exhibit the trust, autonomy, and respect accorded to them. Here again, these combined qualities of trust and mutual respect resonate with partnership linkages between other domains, whether person-to-person, person-to-environment, or person-to-world (Fry & Souillac, 2017; Han & Onchwari, 2018; Hozak et al., 2016; Kurtz, 2017; Larson, 2018; Payumo et al., 2019)

Grounding of Interactions

Government partnerships are marked by extremely steep hierarchical differences between partners. Partnership scholars suggest that the steeper the slope of hierarchical inequalities between partners, the more necessary the flattening of that slope toward more egalitarian and genuinely participatory, mutually beneficial interactions (Fry & Souillac, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017). However, the present case suggests that non-domination (or at least the experience of non-domination by consulted partners in such a context) is possible. For example, "Although both groups act autonomously, each team brings to the table knowledge, skills, and viewpoints that make it a synergistic interaction towards a common set of goals" (Project Manager 1). At the same time, evidence from disastrous unequal

partnerships illustrates that such positive outcomes are by no means guaranteed (c.f., Jentsch & Pilley, 2003).

In the present case, the prior history of interactions between the GCP and CdP provided the background for supporting not only a non-dominating government partnership despite the steep inequality of the partners, but also the prospects of future partnerships. "In the case of educational programs, this rich network based on trust, experience, and commitment supports new initiatives with common goals" (Project Manager 2). Indeed, positive past interactions often motivate future ones; participants in Lutomia (2019) expressly referred to past favorable collaborations with others as a reason for pursuing new ones in the future. While this background affords the pragmatic advantage that both parties have some knowledge in advance about the culture, practices, and expectations of one another, it does not yet necessarily offset potential domination elements.

For instance, while considerable literature contrasts specifically "good" and "bad" collaborations both in principle and in practice (Coetzee, 2019; Hoekman et al., 2010; Intriligator, 1990; Jermann et al., 2011; Lutomia, 2019; Madela, 2020; Moyi Okwaro & Geissler, 2015; Ordóñez-Matamoros et al., 2011), other literature describes "unpleasant" collaborations (Cocchiara et al., 2020; Youtie & Bozeman, 2016; Hajmohammad & Vachon, 2016; Kalinga, 2019; Mose, 2019; Musila, 2019; Omanga & Mainye, 2019). These latter reports comprise collaborative interactions that might repeat despite being unpleasant, in contrast to bad collaborative interactions that forestall any future work. In these unpleasant scenarios—whether with co-authors (Youtie & Bozeman, 2016), co-workers (Cocchiara et al., 2020), or a supplier with a monopoly on materials needed for conducting a business (Hajmohammad & Vachon, 2016)—some circumstance in play may effectively force or require further interactions between partners despite past unfavorable ones, which suggests no small measure of domination at work in the partnership.

Characteristic of the unpleasant partnerships cited above is a sense of frustration, silencing, or even a risk of punishment for attempting to communicate negative

elements or problems within a given interaction (Kerasidou, 2019; Kokwaro & Kariuki, 2001; Madela, 2020). In contrast, this current case study's emphasis on the necessity of openness of communication suggests at least one factor that may help to avoid unpleasant partnerships in the present while also preventing discouragement from future partnerships due to unpleasant dominator aspects in otherwise steeply hierarchical contexts.

Despite the general goodwill, trust, autonomy, and respect in this case study's government partnership, the steep hierarchical inequalities in it might still have threatened considerable force and risk. In general, failure is highly consequential, and speaking up to even a highly benevolent and respectful GCP partner risks reprisals (Eggensperger, 2006). Shared values between partners can play a crucial role in shaping how each party's behaviors are perceived; Iutzi and Jensen (2019), for instance, invoke their "faith that people with shared values might disagree about strategies yet still work together" (p. 10).

Past collaborations can help ground this shared understanding; "Our unwritten norms are based on mutual understanding of the defined and negotiated goals we propose before we engage with other groups" (Project Manager 2). However, that these norms can remain *unwritten* or assumed points to a risk, as they may fail to be communicated and thus not actually be understood or shared by all parties; "More rather than less communication increases the chances of developing a relationship of trust" (Project Manager 3). Clearly established shared values facilitate agreements about means and ends in a project, but also assure that differences of strategy or approach don't look like sabotage or misguided actions by the other partner. Clearly established shared values help maintain good-faith interactions.

CONCLUSION

While the justifications for non-dominant partnerships are well-established in partnership studies, implementation remains a challenge, especially in large-scale,

steeply hierarchical, and consultancy-based government partnerships. Nevertheless, this case study illustrates factors that can make non-dominant paradigms possible, even in steeply hierarchical partnership settings. Of greatest importance are the downstream effects that arise from past successful partnerships, including (1) established trust that affords organizational autonomy, (2) shared values and understanding around the culture, practices, and expectations of both parties, and (3) a sense of mutuality about the other in a partnership (rather than an assumption that the other will see to its own self-interests and well-being alone). This article is generative in highlighting opportunities for organizational leaders to build relationships and harness them when engaged in contexts or projects that are otherwise hierarchical.

In the present case study, a non-dominant paradigm was created in part because of the explicit consultancy role of the CdP in the partnership, which constrained any inputs and pre-established the project's agenda. However, the elements of trust, mutuality, and open communication meant that the partnership achieved more than a satisfactory product for the GCP and a paycheck for the CdP. Rather, as an instance of "trust-building through tangible objectives" (Project Manager 2), it also contributed to a "rich network based on trust, experience, and commitment" that supports not only "new initiatives with common goals" (Project Manager 2) but also the mutual well-being of both partners. As such, it affords more sustainable interactions even between steeply hierarchically differentiated partners in a partnership.

These elements (established trust, shared values, and a sense of mutuality) highlight some of the ways that otherwise steeply hierarchical GCP/CdP partnerships can empower consulted partners, above all by engendering spaces where the voice of the consulted partner achieves relatively equalized input at various decision points throughout the collaborative process. This, in turn, can improve communication and morale, buy-in to and quality of the work process itself, and ultimately the quality and fit of project outcomes to the community problems being addressed. Because

of the steep hierarchical relationship, relative equalization of inputs requires the GCP partner's willingness to implement it.

In the present case study, past mutually beneficial collaborations afforded a pre-established relationship of trust and respect between the entities. For new or first-time partnerships, establishing this trust and respect at the outset is more difficult. Insofar as contractual agreements are themselves the major instrument for establishing the expectations between parties about the various tasks, deadlines, responsibilities, and outcomes involved in a partnership, contractual negotiations may afford the earliest (perhaps the only) moment for ensuring that such equalization of inputs on decision-making at certain key spots during the collaboration becomes an element of the partnership's interaction. In this sense, candid and clear communications at the outset become paramount for advocating for this equalization.

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Anne Namatsi Lutomia, BEd, MA, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Scientific Animations Without Borders (SAWBO) program at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI, USA. She holds a doctoral degree in Human Resource Education with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA. Her research focuses on scientific knowledge production and networking, learning technologies, leadership, adult learning, and gender. Her current research explores mitigating secondary, especially economic, effects of the COVID-19 crisis and food resilience in Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. She has published several book chapters and refereed journal articles in *Feminist Africa, International Journal of Education & Development using Information & Communication Technology,* and *the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies.*

Julia Bello-Bravo, LLB, MA, MBA, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Food Sciences and Human Nutrition at Michigan State University and a co-founder and co-director of Scientific Animations Without Borders (SAWBO). Dr. Bello-Bravo's research interests lie at the intersection of effective communication and education, specializing in informal education and communication strategies to reach low- or non-literate learners in developing and developed countries. Areas of research include identifying, developing, and deploying scalable strategies for effective educational knowledge transfer and solution uptake to the approximately 800 million low- and non-literate learners globally. Much of her research involves rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa—over a dozen countries to date—investigating the appeal and learning gains delivered by animated educational videos viewed on mobile phones. Future research includes developing further means to scale-up this educational delivery, to increase through-put and access for anyone with a video-enabled cellphone and access to the Internet who wishes to share educational knowledge in their own community, to collaborate further with global and local knowledge-holders in the development of locally feasible solutions to problems affecting countless communities globally, and especially to empower the disempowered, disenfranchised, marginalized, or simply overlooked people at a grassroots level so as to enable everyone's access to more economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable solutions to problems facing them and the world.

John Medendorp, BA, MA, PhD, holds a PhD in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong education with a specialization in international development from Michigan State University. John has worked

internationally for several NGOs over the last forty years in community development, leadership training, and agricultural education and training systems. He has served in various administrative posts for Latin American universities including chancellor of a three-campus university system. He currently serves as Director of the Borlaug Higher Education for Agricultural Research and Development (BHEARD) program as well as Deputy Director of the Legumes Systems Research Innovation Lab, and Co-Principal Investigator for the SAWBO-RAPID scaling program at Michigan State University with a special emphasis on human and institutional capacity development programs. As such, he has managed and supported ten capacity development projects for USAID and USDA in 27 developing countries. John's research focuses on Agricultural Education and Extension system development and Agricultural Innovation Systems with a special interest in human capacity development, human capital accumulation, and human capital migration within and between knowledge systems. He is also expert in learning organizations and institutions. He conducted his dissertation research in China, analyzing motivation for return among foreign-trained Chinese PhDs using an economic rational choice model. He has presented his research on learning system development and capacity building at academic conferences around the world and continues to do research on human and institutional capacity development in food and agriculture systems. He has authored two major studies on capacity development, one on the Ethiopian land administration sector and another on the Rwandan higher education sector. He is currently conducting research on biotechnology capacity development in Indonesia and Bangladesh as well as agricultural research capacity development through the BHEARD program and adult learning systems using educational animations in the SAWBO-RAPID scaling program. He has also authored a report on human and institutional capacity development and gender practices in the Feed the Future Innovation Labs for USAID.

Barry Robert Pittendrigh, BSC, MS, PhD. Dr. Pittendrigh's program spans the areas of structural and functional genomics of insect toxicology, population genetics of pest populations, international development, integrated pest management, and high throughput delivery systems for outreach/extension. He works on a diversity of insect systems including *Drosophila*, human lice (he directed the body louse genome sequencing/annotation project), and pest species of cowpea. Prior to becoming a Michigan State University (MSU) Foundation Professor (2016-present), he held the C.W. Kerns, C.L. Metcalf and W.P. Flint Endowed Chair in Insect Toxicology position (2008-2016) at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign). He is also the co-founder and co-director of Scientific Animations Without Borders. Dr. Pittendrigh has taught a diversity of courses ranging from host plant resistance to introductory genetics, pesticide toxicology, and international development, primarily in Africa.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Anne Lutomia at lutomiaa@msu.edu.