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'I really appreciate you saying that': the challenges of developing a partnership

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Abstract

Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) is a community of teacher-educators in HEIs across Africa, led by the Open University UK. FAWEMA is the Malawian chapter of FAWE, the Forum for African Women Educationalists, committed to girls' and women's education in Malawi. TESSA/OU and FAWEMA have been working together since 2010, and in 2013 are beginning a new 4 year project, funded by DFID Malawi. The project is to facilitate rural women's access to teacher education, by means of a 2 year 'school experience programme' where the women work as Teaching Assistants in local rural schools; and a programme of supported self-study, where the women take the secondary exams which could give them entry to teacher training college. The new project has provided a context for TESSA/OU and FAWEMA to interrogate how each constructs the partnership: the opportunity to look back and look forward. Negotiating the shape of the project, the share of the budget, and the parameters of responsibilities has allowed a much wider reflection on our relationship. The perspective of DfID Malawi has been key: their oversight is both of our project and of the 'Keeping Girls in School' programme, of which this project is one strand. This reflection by TESSA/OU and FAWEMA on our partnership has not been a particularly comfortable process, and this paper focuses on what continue to be some of the challenges ahead, as well as the opportunities.

Introduction

Partnership is a term used frequently in international development to describe the relationship between two organisations working together, a dominant model in development discourse such that the idea of partnership in the MDGs "acts as the key normative concept involved with the organisation and governance of the goals" (Barnes and Wallace 2011, p,166). However the term is under-conceptualised, often idealised in development discourse, and ambiguous. The term is used with a taken-for-grantedness, without interrogation or any exploration of what partnership entails and implies (Downes 2013) and with the implicit assumption that partnership is beneficial.

Interrogation of the term might include for example whose perspective informs the values and principles of the relationship, and whether benefits even with notions such as 'capacity building' actually only benefit a dominant partner (Jentsch 2004). Uncertainties in what defines a partnership can include for example questions around longevity, the extent of joint activity, and whether what we in this paper are calling 'partnership in action' is best characterised as between two organisations or as between individuals belonging to those institutions. Definitions differentiate between 'active partnership' where there is

a dynamic processes of negotiation, debate and occasional conflict and 'dependent' partnership structured and fixed from the outset (Ahmad 2006).

There is scepticism when one organisation is the donor, with the inherent danger of the donor agency imposing its own agenda on a recipient (Jentsch 2004). There are difficulties in developing a partnership based on shared rights and responsibilities and decision-making when the complexities of cross-cultural understanding are often overlaid with issues of power and of funding.

Northern donors in particular should not shrink from the fact that, while the concept of partnership commonly implies an equal distribution of rights and responsibilities among those party to the arrangement, this need not necessarily be the case, and is indeed frequently not the case empirically either. It is no doubt hard to construct an equal partnership when one party, for example, controls the purse strings (Mason 2011, p,453)

Partnership can be viewed sceptically in view of difficulties caused by unequal power relations and different views of means and ends, and it can be theorised in terms of a 'mutuality gap': the gap between 'espoused theory' and 'theory in action' (Johnson and Wilson 2006). It can also be viewed positively in terms of a mutuality, a rational response to complexity, a positive complementarity which is as importantly defined as much by difference as by sharing and where partnership always involves learning (Johnson and Wilson 2006).

The sceptical view of what we in this paper are calling 'partnership in theory' can be, according to Johnson and Wilson (2006) mitigated through what we are calling 'partnership in practice', the sense of the commonality of professional background, shared 'practitioner to practitioner' discourse, the everyday dialogue involved in solving complex practical problems. It is also mitigated through a sense of negotiation and compromise, of embracing solutions which fit local contexts and of outputs rooted in national cultures, concepts and curriculum.

On a day to day level, 'partnership in practice' can seem to be a relationship between certain individuals, with, at institutional level a more complicated picture with each organisation involved in multiple relationships with different partners. Some of the north-south complexity between organisations described in the literature is interwoven in 'partnership in practice' with other complexities within each organisation. There can be acute tensions within an organisation for example in terms of the balance of a particular partnership in terms of time and resource and people, compared with all others in which the organisation is involved. Any partnership over an extended period inevitably means some changes of personnel and so everyday notions of 'partnership in practice' encompass a shifting landscape over time.

The TESSA/FAWEMA partnership

Both TESSA and FAWEMA could be defined as loosely structured organisations and this itself provides food for thought. FAWEMA is an NGO with a small number (8) of salaried staff, some of whom are part-time, working out of the capital Lilongwe; and approximately 750 volunteer members from all regions of

Malawi, most of whom are key personnel working in the education, business and administration sectors (FAWEMA 2012). Its mission is:

To promote gender equity and quality education in Malawi through policy advocacy, implementation of gender responsive programmes and removal of negative social norms in partnership with stakeholders (FAWEMA <http://fawemalawi.com/>)

For particular projects FAWEMA involves people on a project-specific basis: for example with District Primary Education Advisers (i.e. local government staff) being involved as FAWEMA District Coordinators on our current project.

TESSA is a community of Higher Education Institutions and educational organisations from across Africa. Its objectives are:

- to develop a community of African universities, working alongside The Open University, UK and other international organisations to focus on the education and training needs of teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa
- to support the exploration and development of school based modes of teacher education in which teachers develop their competencies and skills to meet the need of students in their own classrooms
- to design and build an Open Educational Resource (OER) bank, modular and flexible in format, in major languages used in Africa (currently available in Arabic, English, French and KiSwahili) that is freely available to all teacher educators and teachers in the region (TESSA <http://www.tessafrica.net>)

TESSA has a small number (2 plus an intern) of part-time externally funded core staff at the Open University, UK, an Executive Chair based in Ghana, and membership across approximately 20+ HEIs and educational organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa. For particular projects TESSA involves particular partner institutions on a project-specific basis. For example in one of our current projects, the 'Teaching Lower Secondary Science' project, the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, Dar es Salaam University College of Education Tanzania, Egerton University, Kenya, Makerere University, Uganda and University of Zambia are involved.

History of the partnership

The TESSA/FAWEMA partnership came about as a consequence of a small scoping exercise carried out by TESSA in Malawi in 2009, with funding from the Scottish Government. Malawi has a chronic and well-documented shortage of teachers, following the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994 and resulting in one of the highest student:teacher ratios in the world: currently 1:78 nationally (UNESCO 2010) and considerably higher in some of the rural areas, where class sizes of more than 100 can be a regular occurrence. There is considerable gender imbalance in the current rural teacher workforce and a resistance among qualified women teachers to be deployed to rural areas. One possible solution is the recruitment of local people. "Even in remote schools where governments are unable to deploy teachers, there are often people

already in the area with sufficient education to contribute to the teaching within the school” (Mulkeen 2010, p, 58).

In 2010, TESSA/FAWEMA began, as a three year pilot project with funding from the Scottish Government, a project to support rural women - who we call 'Scholars' - through a structured programme of learning to be a Teaching Assistant in a rural primary school, along with supported study for the women to take the secondary examinations which could give them entry to teacher training college. The current project which we are jointly working on was begun in 2013 and is a considerable development and scaling up of the pilot. This four year project with funding from DfID Malawi, is a strand of their large 'Keeping Girls in School' programme which aims to combat the dropout of girls from upper primary school and improve the proportion of girls transitioning into secondary school. The TESSA/FAWEMA project involves these rural women - 'Scholars' - in a 2 year structured programme, where their Teaching Assistant role includes a specific focus on supporting girls' education in school. In both projects the focus is on the Scholars developing as independent learners, so, while supported in their study through weekly tutorials and fortnightly sessions with their mentors, they are engaging in distance learning. The new project also includes programmes of professional development for the primary teachers as mentors and secondary teachers as tutors to the rural women. Altogether over the 4 years, 2000 women will be recruited to the project, and approximately 700 mentors and 300 tutors. The project has a wide geographical spread, including all regions of Malawi, and focusing on 5 of the 10 priority districts as defined by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST): districts seen by the Malawian government as being in greatest need.

Roles in the partnership

Overall project responsibility, grant responsibility, project management, budget management and development, production and printing of materials has with each project rested with TESSA/Open University UK. TESSA/Open University has overall responsibility for all the monitoring and evaluation, including a mid-term review and a final evaluation. TESSA/OU is responsible for training FAWEMA facilitators who are then in turn responsible for leading the professional development of tutors and mentors and the induction and development of the rural women who are the Scholars.

FAWEMA is responsible for all the recruitment of the Scholars, the Mentors and the Tutors and for all aspects of the implementation and progress of the scholarships. FAWEMA is responsible for managing District-based Coordinators, recruited and employed by FAWEMA to ensure the smooth running of the project in each District at local level. FAWEMA is responsible for recruiting FAWEMA facilitators (who typically are educators working at teacher training colleges, headteachers, government education advisers) who then lead on the tutor,

mentor, and Scholar workshops, and are part of the working group which develop all the materials. FAWEMA is responsible for liaising with the District Education Managers, with all the schools involved in the programme, and for ensuring that each Scholar is fully supported on the programme.

With both the Scottish Government funded pilot project and the current DFID Malawi KGIS project, TESSA/OU has committed to contributing to capacity building in FAWEMA. By the end of this project we will have worked together for more than 6 years and FAWEMA will have experience of a long term international partnership and of the organisation of an international project at scale. Our joint belief is that FAWEMA will also build capacity through the knowledge they have developed of TESSA/OU teaching and learning at scale and the production of customised academic materials. The plan is that as the project progresses, TESSA/OU will practice 'fade', taking progressive steps back from the detailed practical face to face work with Scholars, mentors and tutors. And the intention is that FAWEMA will be in a position at the end of the current project to organise themselves in terms of any further expansion of the programme and in a position to apply for their own funding as a result of this partnership.

So far, so typical it might be said, in terms of the sceptical view on partnership expressed in the literature. However we think that there are grounds for a more optimistic view, and we detail these below.

Longevity and learning

Our partnership is already of several years duration and involves close working among those involved. We feel it is a benefit that these two projects - the Scottish Government-funded pilot and the current DfID project recently begun - are so innovative to both of us. FAWEMA has not previously worked at this kind of scale and in a project so grounded in formal education, responsible (in collaboration with District Education Offices and Headteachers) for women working in primary schools and studying for secondary school examinations. In terms of the multiple demands of a project like this, this represent for FAWEMA a significant 'stepping up'. The organisation has not worked on a project which has required the production of complete programmes of materials. Similarly TESSA has not worked before in any large-scale project with an NGO, and has not previously worked on a teacher-education project focusing on those who have not (or not yet) entered teacher training. TESSA's previous work has been university and college-based and the organisation has not worked directly on a project which has so many practical implications, for example the logistics of women in school settings across wide geographical areas and of setting up series of workshops for hundreds of people involved in the project. TESSA has also not previously worked on a project with such an amount of material development which is so country-specific. Previous materials development of open education resources has mainly been on materials which can be used across national contexts in Africa. This is new territory for both organisations and has involved continuous learning, sometimes exciting and sometimes frustrating.

Collaboration

We do believe that our partnership is based on a recognition of the ways in which we complement each other. FAWEMA is a grass-roots organisation with a strong and trusted identity in terms of its missions to support girls' and women's education and with widespread support in rural Malawi. TESSA is an African-based community committing to improving the quality of teaching, whose work since 2005 in producing teaching materials and embedding them in teacher education has always been collaborative, with the materials themselves always context-specific. The OU UK is rightly famous for its understanding of distance learning and its production of materials which enable good quality distance learning, and this is complemented by the key expertise in distance learning developing in Malawi, for example through the recent development of an ODL teacher training programme.

So for example, while TESSA/OU has overall responsibility for the development of the materials, the development and a significant amount of the writing is carried out by expert writing groups constituted by FAWEMA. The current writing group for example, working on the development of the 'School Experience Year 2' (SEY2) programme consists of: a senior teacher educator from Lilongwe Teacher Training College, a senior teacher educator from Domasi Teacher Training College, an educationalist from the Malawi National Exam Board (MANEB); a curriculum designer from Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), and an educationalist working for the MoEST in the Department of Teacher Education and Development (DTED). It is this working group which has determined the framework and the content of all of the 15 units of the SEY2, all of which are based on the curriculum in Standard 7 and Standard 8 in Malawi.

This is not to say that this collaboration is always straightforward. Collaborating at this level with a certain amount of face to face workshoping and a significant amount of work done via email is difficult. Problems have arisen because of a lack of shared understanding, including which particular individual is working on what, the pace at which different individuals are making progress and varying interpretations on matters such as the need to clear rights on, for example, Malawian materials. Two academics from the OU have worked in collaboration with all the writing groups on all the materials since 2010, to try to ensure that a distance education approach is embedded into all the materials, and that all new materials fit with materials developed earlier in the project. There are inevitable tensions about 'ways of doing' in terms of the fact that OU academics are so used to this kind of writing. But the work is embedded in the Malawian context.

It has also been important for our collaboration to spend significant time together in Malawi, to share perspectives and to each develop our understanding of the other's work. Most recently in April 2013 for example, FAWEMA and TESSA/OU were involved in shared practical project activities in Malawi for the whole month, with a series of 2 and 3 day workshops in Lilongwe, then in Salima, then down to the south of Malawi to Nsanje, then to Blantyre and then to Lilongwe (2000 km approximately). TESSA/OU was training facilitators, co-constructing with them the programmes for the Scholar and mentor workshops which the facilitators would be running, and meeting with them at the end of each workshop day to share feedback on successes and challenges, and changes needed for the following day. TESSA/OU was sitting in on and learning from all the workshops which the FAWEMA facilitators were running, was able to gain

first feedback on all the newly developed materials which were being used in the workshops for the first time and learn from day to day involvement, all the detail of the practical management of new project activities which contribute to their success.

As well, collaboration is effected by the fact that our joint work on these projects is guided by a Project Steering Committee constituted in Malawi with meetings held in Lilongwe. The Steering Group is chaired by the Director of Basic Education in Malawi, and includes senior members of MoEST, DTED, MANEB, DfID Malawi, VSO and FAWEMA. Our steer for the projects has thus been from the Government of Malawi and we have been grateful for all the insight about national education policy which has informed all our Steering Group deliberations and the support afforded to our projects.

Negotiation

Our partnership has progressed through negotiation. 'I really appreciate you saying that' is a kind of shorthand in our relationship for an imminent alternative point of view. Looking back on the Scottish Government-funded pilot project, it benefited by adding extra types of activity as it became apparent that these would be advantageous or that they were urgently needed. It has been cumulative learning, which is progressing as the DfID funded project beings to unfold, for example, around the amount of written material needed to guide participants in this project. We continue to negotiate around the length of workshops needed for the professional development of the Mentors and Headteachers. We, in response to what was decided by the Project Steering Group was an urgent need, instigated 'science camps' in the March/April holidays, to help the Scholars understand the practical papers in the Physical Science and Biology secondary school examinations which they would be taking in the June/July. Some negotiations also betray tensions: FAWEMA used to organise 'review meetings' for the Scholars at the end of every term. These were of value both to the Scholars and FAWEMA and to the project overall, but were proving very complicated to organise in terms of the Scholars needing transport to a central location in the district, overnight accommodation and subsistence.

Tensions

Inevitably, just as with the example above, there are tensions, and these tensions will often be characterised by tensions over finances. 'I really appreciate you saying that' can also herald a difficult stretch of conversation in a discussion. The DfID Malawi KGIS project has an accountable grant held by the OU of approximately £1.3 million. Of this more than 80% is budgeted to be spent in Malawi and I think both organisations are proud that the focus of the funding is so firmly inside Malawi. The budget building process was quite transparent we feel between the two organisations but perhaps inevitably, with the process being the responsibility of TESSA/OU, and given the length and complexity of budget negotiation, not every detail was discussed between our two organisations. Inevitably too, FAWEMA does not feel it has control over the finances of the project. This can manifest itself in 'partnership in practice' in the

everyday frustrations of FAWEMA waiting for agreed funds to arrive from the UK so that it can pay bills and begin activities. There are frequently delays in the transfer of funds process. This can also manifest itself in the very understandable view that FAWEMA can 'see' much more immediately that an activity needs greater funding or that a new activity would be of benefit.

But tensions around finances are also manifest for OU/TESSA. Inevitably in our discussions with the funder there are directives, clarifications etc which have an effect on finances and it is not always possible to fully communicate to our partner the extent to which we are operating within revised parameters set by the funder. We also feel at times that our partner organisation does not always get inside the fine detail of the budget for a particular activity and understand that more spent on one activity (assuming it is agreed by the funder) can reduce the amount available for another. And that is perhaps because it may not. Any dealing in budgets across currencies includes the ambiguities of price rises and currency fluctuations. It is at times the complexity of budget matters which can cause tensions.

Communication

We do feel that we depend on frequent, extended and open communication with one another in terms of phone and Skype meetings and email and text messaging. The technology does occasionally fail us, but we are regularly now holding major meetings by phone conference with 3 or 4 of us all in different locations: for example in late July bringing together people in Lilongwe and Nairobi, and in early August people in France, the UK and two different locations in Malawi. The everydayness of communication supports the positive aspects of 'partnership in practice. This is augmented by the fact that up until now there has been relative stability in personnel involved both in FAWEMA and in TESSA/OU meaning that personal relationships have developed over an extended period of time.

There have also been significant opportunities through other-than-project TESSA funding for FAWEMA to become involved with the wider TESSA community. This has included participation in workshops and conferences in Africa: for example in Mozambique, in Ghana and in Kenya. It has afforded opportunities for FAWEMA presentations to the Open University, for example in Edinburgh; and for partnership presentations and papers, for example at the DETA conference in July 2013 in Nairobi, Kenya. This has helped FAWEMA to understand their role as members of the TESSA community and the importance of the work in Malawi in shaping the wider TESSA agenda, which is beginning to involve a larger network of different kinds of educational organisation and different types of teacher education.

Conclusions

We are 7 months into the new DfID Malawi-funded project and at an interesting point in our partnership. The new funding has brought with it new requirements and new opportunities. The increased scale and funding of the project brings with it much greater scrutiny and greater accountability, which may affect the

flexibility which is always desirable in an innovative project. There are tensions within each of our organisations in terms of staffing. It seems likely that the number of FAWEMA and OU staff working on the project is about to increase, which improves capacity, infers a shifting of relationships and involves new learning.

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