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CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Reimagining roles, relations, and processes

Margit van Wessel and Tiina Kontinen

Introduction

In this chapter, we establish a conceptual foundation, turning to the academic research literature to investigate the discussions concerning roles, relations, and processes in collaborations among civil society organizations (CSOs) in development. The chapter discusses two main questions. First, we explore the kinds of challenges related to power and privilege that have been identified in the research literature concerning civil society collaborations, explaining how these challenges call for new foundations such as equality and mutuality. Second, we investigate new ideas and practices that have been identified as practical translations of the new foundations for collaboration. The discussion presented in this chapter forms not only an overall conceptual context for the chapters that follow, all of which speak from, but also to this literature and offer new directions for reimagining the investigated CSO roles, relations, and processes.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the concept of imagination as a foundation for social change in general and in the context of civil society collaborations in particular. Second, we scrutinize the challenges and reimaginings concerning CSO roles and relations. Third, we discuss challenges and new imaginings for CSO collaboration processes. In the concluding section of the chapter, we argue that, despite many initiatives and normative prescriptions, there is a great deal of room for reimagining the roles, relations, and processes in CSO collaborations in ways that go beyond the solutions being suggested from within the current aid system.

Imagination

In many contexts and moments in time, the imagination has been a catalyst for social change. Following the French philosopher Ricoeur, imagination, rather

than being only a fantasy to escape reality, can be productive of new realities, as it can help the envisaging of a new reality upon which to act (Geniusas, 2015; Taylor, 2006). From anti-colonial movements to ‘future workshops’ (Jungk & Mullert, 1987) to questioning ‘whose knowledge counts’ (Chambers, 1991) to the #Shiftthepower movement, imagination has been called upon to catalyze actors to work towards change by helping them see a way forward. Imagination can bring into view what need not be, what truth and value may lie beyond actors’ everyday realities, and what could be instead. As Kelley (2002, p. 5), expressing what has been called a radical black imagination, writes, ‘any serious motion towards freedom must begin in the mind’, identifying his mother’s belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination as the catalyst for his political engagement.

In the context of social change, imagination thus starts with denaturalizing rather than simply escaping reality. It is born of a sense that reality can be questioned, in starting and continuing to question it, and in finding and growing the grounds for that questioning. From this foundation, one can envisage alternatives – or find them outside one’s initial reality. Seeing such alternatives facilitates action to realize change.

In development, a major current form of imagining is the call to decolonize collaboration, as one theme within a much larger and long-running debate on decolonizing development (see e.g. Apffel-Marglin & Marglin, 1996; Gudynas, 2011; Plaatjie, 2013). Published work has questioned the realities of collaboration as experienced by many actors in the Global South, envisioning ways to think about and do collaboration differently. Much of the imagining discussed in this previous work revolves around principles of relations among actors in development. CSOs in the Global North commonly conceive collaborations in terms of partnering with CSOs in the Global South to develop and implement development work on the basis of shared agendas and in accountable and efficient ways. However, the literature calls these parameters into question, centring on identifying and denaturalizing power, privilege, and prejudice as foundations for collaboration and pointing out practices of dominance, managerialism, and upward accountability that reveal and reproduce inequality. Alternative approaches imagined to replace these foundations stress the principles of equality and mutuality and emphasize facilitating recognition of diverse capacities, identities, knowledges, rights, and perspectives.

As shown in the introduction to this book, these foundations for collaboration are gaining ground – they are increasingly seen as legitimate, progressively rising from the status of ‘alternative’ counter-views to be understood as self-evidently true, at least in theory. In this chapter, we review the existing research literature offering new imaginings of civil society collaborations in development that are rooted in these new foundations of equality and mutuality. As this book seeks to facilitate the translation of these foundations into practices of collaboration, we focus on three dimensions of civil society collaborations: roles, relations, and processes. ‘Roles’ refers to behaviours built on normative expectations associated

with a position in the collaboration (drawing on Allen & van de Vliert, 1984). ‘Relations’ are ties or sets of ties among actors through which roles in the collaboration are defined and reinforced. We use ‘processes’ to mean a continuous operation or series of operations through which the nature of a collaboration is defined and enacted. We explore the extent and nature of reimaginings of each of these dimensions of collaboration, thus charting the present state of affairs regarding the conceptual foundations, their translation into possible practices, and realized enactment. In this pursuit, we focus on research literature explicitly addressing inequalities among collaborating organizations and on how these inequalities are expressed in the collaborations. Generally, this scholarship has centred on North–South collaborations in the aid system. The imaginings expressed in this literature address various aspects of roles, relations, and processes – denaturalizing and questioning these dimensions of collaboration, as well as advancing alternatives. However, we see little of the decentering of the Global North and recentring of the Global South that can be found in the broader literature on decolonizing development (see e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). This broader literature foregrounds, for example, alternative conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge production that relativize Northern-based forms of expertise and learning (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010) and Southern-centred conceptualizations of ‘the good life’ like *ubuntu* (Moyo, 2021) and *buen vivir* (Gudynas, 2011), which can guide what development should mean in different contexts.

Also, few examples in the research literature show how to move into new ways of relating by illustrating what changes might look like in practice and how new practices could take the place of old ones. This is in line with the experience in practice of change lagging behind principles and promises, as the widespread disappointment on progress on the Grand Bargain illustrates prominently (see e.g. Martin et al., 2021). One reason may be that there are simply few shining examples for researchers to draw on. However, various organizations are experimenting with new ways of collaborating on more equal ground, as discussed in this book’s introduction, and pressure on actors to act to address inequality in civil society collaborations in development has increased in recent years. Signs of stasis and slow progress thus far may not be predictive of the future.

As later chapters will show, reimagining turns out to be happening in many places outside of linear North–South relations and moving beyond power relations as their main focus. Such examples show ongoing efforts to imagine collaboration differently in ways that identify diverse actors as important, relativize the role of Northern CSOs, highlight diverse types of ties among actors, and seek ways of thinking about processes that problematize the focus on management that has thus far dominated concern with processes in CSO relations. With their recentring of imagination, starting from various forms of civil society in the Global South, such reimagining efforts are opening new ground and relativizing the North–South dyad in which the existing imaginings in literature have largely been encapsulated.

Roles and relations

In this section, we discuss CSO collaboration from the point of view of roles and relations, which should be seen as interdependent because role expectations are often relationally constructed. We review how the extant literature discusses the questions of who does what and who matters to whom in a variety of relations. We begin with a brief recap of the critical research literature concerning the manifestations of power. Then, we present four main elements of the reimagining discussion: These reimaginings (1) are based on changes in the mindset of Northern CSOs including notions of reflexivity, mutual learning, and moving from control to trust; (2) draw on the drives to shift the focus away from Northern CSOs' agendas and towards contextualization and localization; (3) are initiated by Southern actors' resistance and alternative ways of operating; and, finally, (4) emphasize fundamental transformations in North–South relations and the idea of development.

Problematizing roles and relations

Power imbalances related to donor–recipient relations in North–South CSO collaborations have been discussed extensively for decades (Banks & Bukenya, 2022; Elbers & Schulpfen, 2013). In such a relation, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and Northern CSOs assume the role of donors who provide funding, determine the content of the collaboration, control the use of resources, and check for Southern actors' adherence to plans. The role of Southern CSOs is thus to be the recipients of funding, reporting its use in detail according to provided templates, accompanied by thorough narrative reports on the implemented activities and achieved outcomes. An alternative relation – partnership – was adopted to conceptualize needed change and move closer to an ideal form of relation. Research has continuously discussed the possibility of authentic (Fowler, 1998) or equal (Lister, 2000) partnership, reflecting the dissonance between the rhetoric of equal partnership and the unequal practices observed in North–South CSO collaborations (Fowler, 2000; Sander, 2021; Schöneberg, 2017).

The conceptualization of power in these discussions has multiple theoretical underpinnings. For instance, Mueller-Hirt (2012) conceptualized monitoring and evaluation practices in North–South relations as manifestations of governmentality as theorized by Michel Foucault, and Girei (2016, 2022) used the lenses of hegemony and resistance as defined by Antonio Gramsci. Moreover, institutional approaches to power as a tendency to modify Southern CSOs to increasingly resemble their Northern counterparts through organizational capacity building have been used (Kühl, 2009). In drafting their strategies for social change, CSOs themselves often draw on the 'power cube' analysis (Gaventa, 2021) to identify the multi-layered power relations towards which they could gear their transformative efforts. Overall, the CSO partnership literature

generally discusses power only in terms of asymmetries and hierarchies related to managerialist practices (Dar & Cooke, 2008; Contu & Girei, 2014).

Therefore, accountability is one of the most discussed relations. In current funding arrangements, financial accountability from South to North is significant, not least because many Northern CSOs act as intermediaries, channelling public aid funding to their Southern partners in an 'aid chain' (Wallace et al., 2006). In financial accountability, the actors' roles are clear – the Northern CSO reports to its back donor, such as a ministry, on the basis of financial reports it receives from its Southern partners. Here, expertise in conducting accounting according to international standards is required. However, relations are not limited to financial accountability, but also include accountability regarding activities, results, and outcomes, which are usually verified through extensive monitoring and evaluation systems (Mueller-Hirth, 2012), as well as accountability to the organizational goals and mission over the long term (Ebrahim, 2005). Here, questions of balance between upwards accountability towards Northern partners and downwards accountability towards constituencies and beneficiaries have been among the main discussions (AbouAssi & Trent, 2016; Ebrahim, 2003; van Zyl & Claeys, 2019). As INGOs and Northern CSOs have moved from a projects approach to a programme approach, the role of Southern CSOs – whether they are local INGO chapters, leading national organizations, or more local CSOs – has often become that of an 'implementing partner' who reports according to decontextualized outcome indicators explicated in the Northern CSO's programme documents. This role exemplifies and fosters the power relations where the North sets the agenda to be realized by Southern CSOs. At the same time, in recent years conceptualizations of accountability have widened to include a wider array of relations and forms, introducing e.g. inter-agency accountability, accountability to country-level state agencies, informal accountability (Hilhorst et al., 2021), and a more internally oriented horizontal accountability (van Zyl & Claeys, 2019). Downward accountability is emphasized as important for local ownership, trust, and effectiveness. But, there has been little research into accountability strategies implemented by local CSOs (van Zyl & Claeys, 2019).

Relatedly, questions of legitimacy in diverse relations have been widely discussed. One topic here is the question of the representative role that INGOs arguably take, speaking on behalf of people in the Global South internationally and, in many cases, having a much more prominent presence than Southern CSOs, while also playing a key role in deciding which Southern CSOs get to speak in international fora and shaping their voices to fit internationally defined understandings and agendas (see e.g. Gibbins, 2011; Holzscheiter, 2016). Relatedly, how collaboration with INGOs and Northern CSOs affects the legitimacy of Southern CSOs in their own contexts is a recurrent topic. Adaptation of Northern agendas, understandings of issues (Bownas, 2017), and ways of working to meet the legitimacy demands of INGOs and

Northern CSOs (such as financial management, proficiency in the English language, proposal development, and reporting requirements) can lead towards NGOization, involving mission drift and professionalization, and away from representation of constituencies and organizations' own agendas, developed from their own understandings (Bownas, 2017; Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Jalali, 2013). Southern CSOs thus face contradictory demands regarding legitimacy, leading them to perform complicated balancing acts (Elbers et al., 2022; Matelski et al., 2021). In addition, it has been suggested that the tendency of INGOs and Northern CSOs to fund consensus-oriented voices and ways of working can lead to the strengthening of those voices and the relative weakening of others with more conflict-oriented stances involving constituency mobilization (Banks et al., 2015; Jalali, 2013), resulting in CSO collaboration potentially skewing the representative roles of Southern CSOs within their own societies.

Going beyond these themes, the postcolonial and decolonial literature locates CSO collaborations within a wider set of asymmetries constituting a continuation of colonialism. The CSO relation has been identified as paternalistic (Eriksson Baaz, 2005) and characterized by 'othering' through a discursive practice by which Northern CSOs are constructed as capable and trustworthy, in contrast to their unreliable and incompetent Southern partners. Relations can also be discriminatory, with differing value attached to the professional authority of posted and local staff (Sundberg, 2019). An emerging theme inspired by the literature on decolonization is epistemological injustice (Malavisi, 2018), which refers to the practice of valuing international knowledge over local and indigenous knowledges, despite frequent claims to appreciate the latter (Fernando, 2003). This literature is critical of relations where Northern actors play the role of knowledgeable experts, while Southern actors are portrayed as in need of capacity building, for instance through training in certain kinds of professional expertise where Northern terminologies, approaches, and ideas are prioritized in a taken-for-granted way. The differentiated valuing of work also comes in here – for example, through critiques in the literature of how the complex 'implementing' roles of in-country development workers are misrecognized, remain invisible, or are discounted (Peters, 2020). These critiques are related to the question of whose knowledge and capacities are appreciated in collaborations and whose expertise is perceived as sufficient – especially when it comes to the division of labour between expatriates and local staff, as well as the degree to which different forms of expertise are valued and remunerated (Sundberg, 2019). Other literature critical of the continuity of colonial relations sees Southern development CSOs' partnerships with Northern CSOs as vehicles of imperialism and global neoliberalism (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Sakue-Collins, 2021) and argues that CSO collaborations function merely as a channel to strengthen the economic and ideological power of the Global North in the Global South.

Reimagining roles and relations

Challenges related to power and privilege in roles and relations in CSO collaborations have been discussed for at least three decades. The literature has also suggested some ways in which these persistent power relations may be counteracted. In the following paragraphs, we discuss four strands of these discussions.

First, there is literature that emphasizes changes in the mindsets and practices of Northern actors that could lead to changes in relations in CSO collaborations. The literature on reflexivity suggests acknowledging the complex power relations prevalent in collaborations (Eyben, 2004; Groves & Hinton, 2004) and building alternatives on the basis of this acknowledgement. One approach contrasts managerial and transformative approaches to collaborations in aid chains (Kamstra, 2020) while identifying the challenges achieving intended transformation with much of existing managerialist logics and practices remaining in place (Kamstra, 2020; Kumi & Saharan, 2022; van Wessel et al., 2020). Others have suggested that collaborations should be characterized by mutual learning rather than mainly knowledge transfer and capacity building from North to South (Eade, 2007), and a shift from a control-based to a trust-based relation has also been discussed (Mawdsley et al., 2005). These ways of reimagining relations in CSO collaborations share an emphasis on how transformations in these relations will be a consequence of changes in the mindsets of Northern CSOs and their individual staff members, followed by their intentional engagement in mutual learning and trustful relations. Moreover, the importance of individuals' willingness to learn and build close and trustful personal relations has been brought up. Thus, this literature suggests novel relations where both Northern and Southern actors learn from each other instead of assuming the roles of the knowledgeable North educating the needy South. Additionally, the idea of trust rather than control as the basis for the relation challenges the role commonly attributed to Northern CSOs as trustworthy managers who need to observe their 'backward and unreliable partners' (Eriksson Baaz, 2005). However, as Kontinen (2018, p. 33) has argued, learning as reformation or transformation of power relations in development CSOs requires a combination of individual, organizational, and institutional aspects, where learning manifests in actual practices of 'doing differently' and in changes in institutional settings rather than in individual attitudes or mindsets. Kontinen (2018, pp. 100–103) has also pointed out the challenging requirement of unlearning and forgetting long-standing practices as part of learning new ones; the dynamics of this process should receive more attention in discussions of the actual translation of new foundations of collaboration in practice.

A second line of discussion emphasizes the significance of context. In this literature, the general argument is that paying attention to different contexts and so-called 'local actors' offers a major means of changing the dynamics of collaborations. A central concept here is localization, an idea that originated in debates on humanitarian action (Roepstorff, 2020) but that has been taken

up increasingly widely. In other domains, the concept of local ownership covers similar topics and is similarly embraced, as reported in the existing literature. Localization and local ownership both primarily involve contextualizing through shifting control and initiative to local actors, giving them more control over funding and decision making. With localization, we also see the moving of headquarters to Southern contexts, the hiring of more local staff for leadership positions, more visibility of Southern CSOs, and higher appreciation of local development expertise (Byskov, 2017). However, questions are frequently raised regarding what ‘the local’ actually means and how diverging understandings of this problematize the envisioning, justification, and enactment of localization (Melis & Apthorpe, 2020; Roepstorff, 2020). Localization has also been assessed as rooted in Northern dominance and reproducing inequalities in its own right, calling for ‘critical localism’ (Mac Ginty, 2015).

With the increasingly extensive emphasis on context, there is an emerging literature that reimagines civil society collaborations while moving away from questions centred on North–South CSO collaboration. Some of this literature addresses South–South networking and partnering, also introducing the role of diasporas and relativizing the North–South dyad (Appel, 2022; Garbe, 2022). A similarly nascent literature addresses the need to study CSO roles and collaborations more from within domestic settings, relativizing the transnational processes dominating the literature on CSO collaborations in development thus far (van Wessel et al., 2021). More bottom-up processes of collaboration, starting from adequate understandings of local settings, as held by local actors (Seay, 2015), are emphasized in this literature. Deveaux (2021, p. 113), for example, stresses the key role of place-based movements in generating authentic development alternatives. Occasionally, publications question Northern involvement with Southern CSOs’ work (Pallas & Nguyen, 2018).

A third debate revolves around Southern CSOs’ resistance and autonomy claims. For instance, Claeys (2014; in the context of South Africa), Girei (2016, 2022; drawing examples from Uganda and East Africa in general), Sander (2021; discussing women’s organizations in Jordan), and Dar (2015; investigating alternative accountabilities in Indian CSOs) have shown how Southern CSOs exercise everyday resistance towards required reporting practices stemming from managerialism. Southern CSOs have been observed to emphasize maintaining local relations over reporting to Northern partners, prioritize oral narratives over quantitative measurement, and refuse to provide required information or to collaborate in alignment with the agendas of Northern partners when these are considered irrelevant for their own actions. The capability to resist and to refuse entering into certain partnerships is related to the balance between Southern CSOs’ autonomy and their dependency on Northern partners (Banks et al., 2015; Brehm et al., 2004). The overall idea is that, when the relation is one between two or more autonomous actors that share the same interests and agendas, the roles are those of equal collaborators, and the Southern actors can have an equal voice concerning, for instance, how outcome reporting should be conducted.

A fourth debate has considered more fundamental transformations in the relations in CSO collaborations, drawing on wider ideas on development and postcolonialism (McEvan, 2009), decolonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), and post-development (Ziai, 2007). Drawing on this literature, instead of partnership, which has become one of the ‘buzzwords’ circulating within the development system (Cornwall, 2007), relations taking forms different from those common in current CSO collaborations in development should be identified and prioritized. Relations based on solidarity have been proposed as an alternative to donor–recipient relations between CSOs (Kajese, 1987) and to managerialism (Dar & Cooke, 2008, p. 3). Solidarity, traditionally, is used in the context of social movements, where it forms a basis for collective action to address common grievances. In the context of CSO collaborations and the inequalities involved in these, authors have used the concept of solidarity in reference to the centrality of Southern CSOs’ agency, understandings, and agendas as starting points for collaboration (Deveaux, 2021; Garbe, 2022). Outsiders like INGOs can then take supportive and complementary roles (Deveaux, 2021; Hellmüller & Santschi, 2014; van Wessel et al., 2021). However, solidarity can, for example, mean exerting pressure for a Southern-led campaign internationally, or supporting Southern social movements’ self-identified goals and helping to facilitate their actions (Deveaux, 2019; Garbe, 2022). Solidarity is a complex notion in some of this literature, which acknowledges, for example, how solidarity can be rooted in and reproduce inequality, pointing to the need for deep reflection among the privileged and raising questions around particularity and universality (Garbe, 2022; Wilson, 2017). Drawing on research into transnational advocacy of and with the Mapuche, Garbe (2022) conceptualizes the praxis of solidarity from a critical consciousness, as involving social praxis of presence and participation bringing people together, renouncement of privilege and making them useful for a cause, and sharing between those involved.

In most reimaginings of CSO collaboration, however, the reality of aid-chain relations centred on funding provided through INGOs or Northern CSOs is not tackled. Northern funding is accepted as a vital lifeline for Southern CSOs. Fundamental transformation of donor–recipient relations is thus far even hardly explored in the research literature on CSO development collaboration. It appears that global inequalities related to financial resources continue to be accepted as a given. Direct funding has found limited uptake, and there is little research available on it (see Lewis & Sobhan, 1999). The recently expanding #Shiffthepower movement propagates the common practice of community philanthropy as a route towards locally rooted, autonomous development and emancipation. To date, however, there are only a few research publications framing community philanthropy in these terms (Hodgson, 2020; Kilmurray, 2015). Similarly, there are forms of direct funding from donor states in the Global North to CSOs in the Global South, such as the Dutch ‘Strengthening Civil Society’ policy programme, but these forms have not yet been addressed in research publications. More research is available on other funding

alternatives, including work on civil society initiatives in the Global South funded by members of the diaspora (Appel & Oreg, 2020), by private foundations and businesses (Vestergaard et al., 2021), by individuals through small-scale initiatives (Kinsbergen et al., 2017), or through Internet-based donation platforms (Schwittay, 2019). None of these previous publications has presented these forms of funding as a way of addressing or circumventing inequalities in CSO collaborations, but they do call attention to other forms of relations and roles in development collaborations.

Processes: how to work together

In this section, we build on the discussion above, focusing on processes of collaboration. We start by discussing how collaboration processes have thus far been problematized, before discussing three ways in which collaborations have been reimagined: (1) adaptive management to fit changing conditions for better results, (2) building and sustaining relations of mutuality, and (3) facilitation as central to collaboration.

Problematizing processes

Critiques of the current processes shaping civil society collaborations in development centre on how collaboration has become increasingly defined by managerialist approaches. These developments have been partly discussed above; here, we focus on their impact on processes in CSO collaborations. Managerialism, rooted primarily in instrumental rationality and concerns with control and effectiveness, has brought about an emphasis on strategic planning, efficiency, and outcomes (Eagleton-Pierce, 2020). In practice, this has led to the creation of collaboration processes centred on procedures defining and monitoring programmes and their results in predefined and (often) quantified terms. These stress financial management as an important concern shaping collaboration, seeking to guarantee value for money and adherence to ‘due diligence’. Practices for risk management may also place conditions on release of funds in ways that may impact receiving CSOs’ space to develop and act (see e.g. Kumi & Elbers, 2022). Procedures such as the reporting requirements discussed above require a great deal of attention. Increasingly, work published in recent years has rejected these approaches, especially those limiting flexibility and ownership. Scholars have criticized the tendency of such approaches to invoke a compliance orientation and to overburden and ‘NGOize’ civil society in the Global South, taking focus away from the actual work and representation of constituencies (Banks et al., 2015; Crewe, 2014; Jaoul, 2018).

Some of the existing literature problematizing managerialist processes points to how CSOs in the Global South resist the imposed conditions by navigating them. Studies have shown, for example, how Southern CSOs engage in practices of perception management and resistance, escaping or shifting the conditions of

collaboration with which they are faced (Crewe, 2014; Elbers et al., 2021; Sander, 2021). Most of the literature, however, addresses the problems of collaboration by changing relations and ways of working. The linearity and control sought and suggested by managerial approaches and practices are typically presented as inadequate for addressing complex changes, noting local actors should have a leading role in many of the alternative imaginings that have emerged, understanding and responding to conditions and opportunities flexibly. Four ways of reimagining processes of CSO collaboration that have been proposed are discussed in the following paragraphs. These are generally rooted in a reconsideration of North–South relations.

Reimagining processes

One major alternative is that of adaptive management. This idea has been defined in various ways, but always in terms that centre on decision making as an iterative process, facing dynamics of uncertain environments to fit changing conditions for better results. Theory of Change is one prominent approach that can be categorized as adaptive management. This approach has replaced log frames as the leading ‘tool’ for planning, monitoring, and evaluation in many corners of the aid system (see e.g. van Wessel et al., 2020). With Theory of Change, the focus has not been, however, on shifting relations in the development sector towards more local ownership, but rather on reflection, learning, and adaptation. Furthermore, the record on that front has shown that achieving flexibility can be difficult given how the aid system is otherwise structured (e.g. van Es & Guijt, 2015). Another prominent incarnation of the adaptive management idea that more radically addresses collaboration between organizations is the Doing development differently (DDD) manifesto (Doing development differently community, 2014), which has inspired many actors in the years since it first appeared. This manifesto emphasizes achieving contextualization through process qualities. For example, the DDD manifesto presents development as a locally owned process, working through local convenors mobilizing all those with a stake in progress; blending design and implementation through rapid cycles of planning, action, reflection, and revision; and drawing on local knowledge, feedback, and energy. Currently, a limited amount of research is available on the adoption of adaptive management, but the idea has been widely embraced, at least in theory (Honig & Gulrajani, 2018) if not as much in practice (Gutheil, 2021). Gutheil (2021, p. 63) has also questioned the transformative potential of adaptive management, as it is driven by Northern actors. At the same time and in line with the manifesto, imagined alternatives relating to the principles of adaptive management often aim for processes that are flexibly geared towards local contexts and their dynamics and actors and that are thus intrinsically tied to questions of ownership. Control as a value should be questioned in terms of whether it facilitates achieving the desired results (Honig, 2018), and it should be rejected to enable more openly understood results. Expressions of adaptive management

approaches working from such notions are, for example, set out in research stressing the need to build programming on an understanding of context. Previously published work has discussed various entry points for this. One is the creation of space for creative and flexible processes for imagining the future (Crewe, 2014). Another is enabling organizations to start from their own strengths (Kacou et al., 2022). Attention has also been dedicated to space for emergence, created by allowing local actors to manoeuvre through their contexts on the basis of their own interpretations (Arensman et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2020). This approach can help build effectiveness on alternative fundamental building blocks such as motivation and autonomy (Honig & Gulrajani, 2018).

A second form of imagining centres on building and sustaining relations of mutuality among CSOs. For some, this imagining centres on mutual coordination and communication as crucial for effective and just collaboration processes, building inclusivity and mutuality through adherence to principles (e.g. of information sharing) in daily practices of collaboration. Relations have also been addressed in fundamental terms. Processes seen as needed here are those that reflect partnership, defined in terms of joint commitment, shared responsibility, reciprocity, and mutual accountability (Jordan & van Tuijl, 2000; Olawoore & Kamruzzaman, 2019). Notably, while some concepts like co-creation, co-production abound as buzzwords in the aid world and have been taken up widely in research on development, to date, they have received little attention in research on civil society collaboration.

Relatedly, a review of research analysing adaptive management involving CSOs conducted by Gutheil (2021) showed that the CSOs saw investment in relationship building and collaborations as the most important aspect of adaptive management, emphasizing trust building as particularly fundamental. Trust, in these CSOs' view, leads to 'more communication, better capacity to respond to changing circumstances because of close relationships, enhanced local ownership and leadership because team members feel that they are taken seriously and can make a difference' (Gutheil, 2021, p. 68) – thus closely connecting the capacity to adapt to the local context with the capacity to relate at a personal level. Similarly, a recent analysis of localization in humanitarian response (Roepstorff, 2021) emphasized a failure of localization because of a lack of trust among the actors involved. In the studied case, the actors held divergent understandings of localization and the best way to implement it, which created conflict and hampered joint efforts of international and local humanitarian actors. Roepstorff (2021, p. 3) found that below the surface lay a deep-seated mistrust among the different actors, and he concluded that

to fill localization with meaning and implement it in humanitarian practice, the humanitarian sector needs to turn its attention to trust-building between the different actors and invest in the fostering of positive relations between them. This requires also addressing underlying structural and systemic issues of (neo)colonialism, racism and classism.

These imaginations are in line with older and influential work by Lister (2000), who emphasized the role of personal relations in partnerships, calling for more actor-oriented approaches, rather than organizational processes such as capacity strengthening, which are still much more stressed in development practice.

While such imaginings foresee better collaboration by building closer relations and also transforming these fundamentally through personal investment and readiness to give up privilege and abandon prejudice, a third type of imagining seeks to achieve the same goal by establishing distance. Taking facilitation, rather than closeness and mutuality, as central to collaboration processes puts INGOs at the service of their partners. Facilitation works to make Southern leadership possible by centring collaboration on the self-defined needs of Southern CSOs. Such ‘hands-off’ approaches can reinvigorate Southern CSOs in their ambitions to build and act on their own agendas and political roles in their societies by creating an enabling environment by stepping back (Banks et al., 2015), supporting the strengthening of capacities from self-defined needs (Matturi, 2016), and employing the capacities of Northern-based experts to accompany, connect, and coach Southern-based CSO staff in their work (van Wessel, 2021).

Conclusion

We began this chapter with an idea of imagination as a catalyst for social change, referring to a process that starts with denaturalizing taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. We further proposed imagination as a lens through which to review the research literature on CSO collaborations to examine, first, how this literature problematizes some prevalent practices embedded in unequal power relations, and second, what kinds of ideas for reimagining these relations it provides. We showed how the taken-for-granted power asymmetries and the need to transform them in North–South relations in CSO collaborations have been critically discussed for decades, especially from the point of view of management, accountability, and legitimacy.

The main alternatives that have been explored, adaptive management, building close relations of mutuality, and the establishment of distance, can be characterized as reimaginings within the current aid system. They tend to respond to the challenges of management with ideas for modified management, rather than transforming or reimagining the entire institutional set-up of collaborations. Additionally, many of the suggestions emphasize individual conduct and learning as well as the importance of relations among individuals, rather than addressing the underlying mechanisms that make individuals behave in certain ways when they enter the field of CSO collaboration.

Some approaches, such as those centring on solidarity, international support to Southern CSOs with a more ‘hands-off’ approach, and community philanthropy are more transformative in nature. Academic research on these appears to

be relatively limited though and does not feed much into other lines of research that are more embedded in the existing aid system.

Many proposals for alternative roles, relations, and processes are prescriptive. They articulate, for instance, the necessity of trust and mutuality or further fundamental changes in power relations for the South to take the lead. However, descriptions and analyses of actual processes of ‘doing differently’ in certain contexts are rare. Here, we sense the risk of continuously re-inventing and re-experiencing challenges on the ground, as the prescriptive ideals turn into nice buzzwords with little relevance for practice. In this sense, CSOs can live in ‘perpetual presence’ (Lewis, 2009), where few lessons are learned from the past, despite good intentions.

Finally, although debates on decolonization are prominent among practitioners, not much literature has reimagined CSO collaborations from this perspective. Collaborations led by Southern agendas or ideas of ‘the good life’ and characterized by the decentering of the Northern expertise and epistemologies they build on have not been extensively identified or analysed. Relatedly, there has also been little academic research into the issue of racism in CSO collaborations (but see Garbe, 2022), while there is some research on racism in development more broadly (Pailey, 2020), which could be drawn on.

In light of the existing research and its limitations, we suggest a reimagining of CSO collaborations that offers alternative visions that can promote practices and analysis transcending the ongoing critique of power that suggests ‘partnership’ as a solution, and provides a critique of managerialism suggesting alternative forms of management as a remedy. Although these ideas have served as fertile ground for reflection and for uncovering the challenges related to power and privilege, more is needed. We need research on novel roles, relations, and processes that moves beyond questions of management and provides alternatives from other foundations than existing systems. We also need more empirically informed work that can put ideas to the test and provide exemplars that can guide and inspire.

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