

The Paradox of the Development Industry

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Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the inherent paradox within the international development industry, where efforts aimed at shifting power imbalance often unwittingly reproduce and reinforce existing disparities. Drawing on two decades of field experience and partnership brokering, the author dissects the multifaceted power imbalances between Western donors and local agency, challenging the sector to undergo a profound transformation. Despite initiatives for reform, such as 'decolonizing aid' and 'localization,' the entrenched power structures within development partnerships largely remain intact. The author posits that development practitioners, while positioned as agents of change, frequently find themselves upholding the status quo due to entrenched operational norms and financial dependencies. The paper explores strategies to counteract institutional, material, structural, and ideational power imbalances, emphasizing the need for critical self-reflection and systemic change within the development practice. It advocates for a reimagined approach that centers on genuine collaboration, local empowerment, and equitable distribution of power. By highlighting the paradoxes faced by development practitioners and offering a candid assessment of the sector's challenges, the paper contributes to the discourse on creating a more just and sustainable framework for international development.

Introduction

In the field of global development, a paradox plays out: efforts to balance power disparities often reinforce and reproduce the very structures they intend to dismantle. My auto-ethnographic insights following two decades in the fieldⁱ, paired with scholarly insights, spotlight this contradiction through the lens of partnership brokering. This evidenced-based opinion piece argues that although partnership brokers and other development actors aim to recalibrate the skewed power dynamics between Western donors and local agencies, they inadvertently perpetuate the cycle. It calls for a radical reimagining of development that truly empowers local agencies, a change that begins with acknowledging and tackling this paradox head-on.

The Persistence of Power Imbalance in Development

Leaving aside important debates around the effectiveness of the international development industryⁱⁱ (see Miller 2012), there is little question that it is built on power imbalances deeply entrenched in historical colonial dynamics. These imbalances manifest in a pervasive narrative that positions developing countries as lesser and in need of rescue by their

developed counterparts—a narrative colored by racial and economic inequities (Pailey 2015). They persist in the language of the sector, in terms like 'locals,' 'specialists,' and 'expatriates,' which reveals problematic binaries and the sheer weightiness of donors' economic and material resources and their ultimate control over them. Yet, despite decades of critique from scholars such as Hau'ofa (1994), Emberson-Bain et al. (1994), Escobar (1995), Sen (1999), Easterly (2002, 2006, 2014), Moyo (2009), Pailey (2019) and Blunt (2022) and the current rise of movements challenging systemic racism advocating for indigenous rights, the promised shift towards more equitable practices remains largely rhetorical.

Calls for 'decolonizing aid' (see Aloudat & Khan (2022) and Peace Direct (2021)) and 'localization' (see DDD Manifesto (2014) & Cornish (2020)) have rippled through the development industry, inspiring guidelines and courses aimed at rebalancing the scales of power (see Tawake et al. 2021). However, the reality is a stark contrast to these aspirations. As someone with two decades in the field, I have observed how donor interests continue to overshadow local agency, with recent years marking, if anything, an increase in such approaches. There are many drawing similar conclusions; see Pailey (2019), Guttenbeil-Likiliki (2022), Blunt et al. (2022). Despite abundant local agency and the occasional short-lived power-sharing initiative, the overall landscape remains one where the development agenda is driven not by the needs of the people it serves but by the priorities of its funders.

The Role of Partnership Brokering in Shifting the Development Paradigm

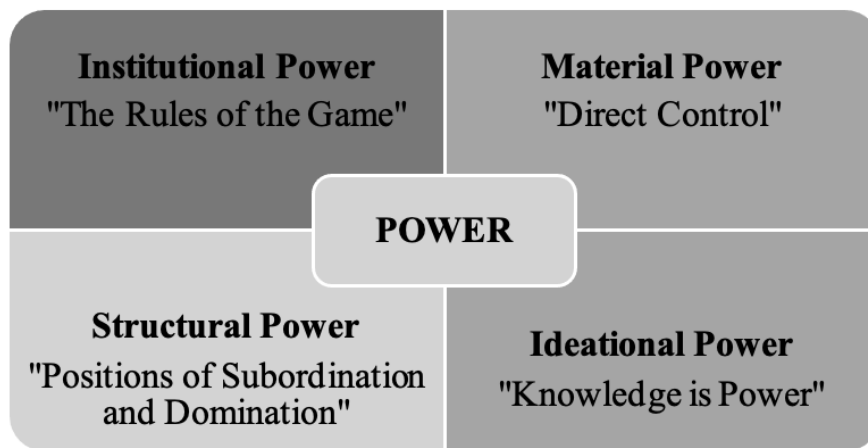
Partnership brokering, though less discussed than 'decolonizing aid' or 'localization,' also seeks to address development's entrenched power imbalances. Emerging over 20 years ago as a concept by Tennyson (1998), the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) today describes brokering as the art of facilitating robust, innovative partnerships via skilled and collaborative management.ⁱⁱⁱ The practice is both an ideological stance—advocating for the essential role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in fostering inclusivity and sustainability—and a material necessity involving the orchestration of resources and logistics.

Practitioners of partnership brokering, often subscribing to ethical tenets such as accountability and reflexivity, harness skills like empathy, negotiation, and coaching to drive social justice and support local agency. Despite the field being predominated by white women, which presents its own set of power dynamics, these brokers are very often tasked with navigating and seeking to dismantle the hierarchical structures within which they operate.

Central to the ethos of partnership brokering is the partnership principles of diversity, openness, equity, mutual benefit, and courage, coupled with a commitment to practices such as co-creation, mutual accountability, and power sharing. Brokers are thus strategically placed to identify and mitigate the impact of power imbalances on partnerships. Moreover, through continuous self-reflection and open dialogue, they critically assess their position within these power structures, striving to understand and reform the complexities of development practice. This viewpoint offers invaluable insights into the systemic challenges of redefining power dynamics in development and highlights the persistent difficulty of instigating true transformational change.

Dissecting the Layers of Power in Development

Before we proceed, we need a framework to dissect power. The dynamics of power within development, as in most fields, are complex, characterized by a spectrum of imbalances that defy simple categorization or hierarchy. As the paper draws upon an array of scholarly work, as well as insights from other Partnership Brokder, including the PBA ‘funders as partners’ project (2022) and reflections of Sloman (2022) and Tennyson (2016), I have used a simple framework to explore power imbalances as they exist in four interrelated types: institutional, material, structural and ideational (or discursive).



Institutional power, as considered by scholars of institutions such as North (1991), is often referred to as the ‘rules of the game.’ In the development industry, both formal and informal rules favor the donor. Donors dictate the formal rules, set terms, hold single accountability of funds, are the ultimate decision-makers, and very often disregard non-Western norms and preferences in their creating systems and processes. The most informal rule of the game is to keep the donor satisfied, onside, and supportive through what Blunt (2022) (as borrowed from David Graeber) refers to as extensive ‘interpretive labor.’ This is the time and effort development actors, including partnership brokers, undertake to understand the whims and wishes of the donor and keep them happy.

Material power, as considered by the realist school, is the ‘direct control of one actor over the conditions of existence and/or the actions of another’ (Barnett & Duvall, 2005: 50-63). There is little question that donors possess vastly greater material power through their financial, economic, and technical resources, of which they assume almost complete control of priorities that align with their agendas.

Structural power, as considered by post-colonial and other critical scholars such as Fanon (1963), Baldwin (1963), and Said (1993), relates to positions of subordination or domination, that one position exists only by virtue of its relations to another and in the struggle between them. This is clearly manifested in the development industry by the persistent dichotomies of ‘developed’ vs. ‘developing,’ ‘white’ vs. ‘brown,’ reflecting a modern-day colonial mindset underpinned by attitudes, values, and norms that are fundamentally colonized and racialized (see (Guttenbeil-Likiliki, 2020 and Blaha, Gonelevu & Katafono 2021).

Discursive power, as conceived by postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers such as Gramsci (1971) and Foucault (1979), relates to our systems of knowledge, those which makes possible or limits our very action and imagination. We see this play out in the development industry in its language. It's the power to define what is 'formal' or 'informal,' what constitutes a 'fragile state,' and who gets to be the 'donor' or the 'recipient.' Ultimately, this language and the ideas that underpin it also underpin our practices. The reflections of Professor Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) demonstrate this power at play when he critically interrogates the colonial legacy of 'belittlement' of Pacific nations as small and dependent—a narrative he argues stifles imagination and reinforces dependency. He also reflects on his own complicity when he asks himself, 'What kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neo-colonialism is all about? To make people believe they have no choice but to depend?'

These layers of power, from the explicit to the implicit, shape not only the practice but also the character and philosophy of development. They dictate who speaks, who listens, and who decides. To shift this paradigm, we must first recognize these imbalances in all their forms before we can even start to begin dismantling them.

The Erosion of Partnership Integrity by Power Disparities

The intricacies of these power dynamics in development, based on my observations, invariably erode both the integrity of partnerships and local agency.

Institutional power imbalances, epitomized by unilateral accountability, erode the mutual sharing of risks and rewards, which is the cornerstone of true partnership. This bias towards Western epistemologies and practices undermines non-Western contributions, often sidelining them in favor of a report-driven, results-oriented approach that values compliance over genuine collaboration. Covert attempts to 'keep the donor happy' while lamenting their behavior challenges the partnership principle of openness as it results in a reality of multiple hidden agendas that are not discussed openly and transparently for fear of displeasing the funder.

Material power imbalance cements a hierarchy favoring donors, where incentives are skewed to satisfy their preferences rather than fostering equitable relationships. This patronage model subverts the very notion of partnership, replacing it with competitive dynamics that prioritize donor satisfaction over cooperative development goals. It presents a fundamental challenge to the partnership principle of mutuality.

Structural power imbalances perpetuate a dominance that is antithetical to the principles of partnership—equity, transparency, and shared goals. The dominance of certain players, often Western entities and actors, marginalizes others, diminishing the value and potential impact of the partnership. The result is a partnership in name only, where power dynamics suppress commitment and investment from those who feel subordinated.

Finally, ideational power imbalances are clear even in the way the development industry has diluted the meaning of 'partnership.' As experienced brokers such as Daw and Smith (2017) note, the term has been co-opted to label traditional organizational relationships, stripping it of its transformative potential. The overuse of 'partnership' as a catch-all term has led to

disillusionment among those who see it as a facade for business as usual rather than as a catalyst for equitable collaboration.

In confronting these imbalances, we must not only acknowledge their existence but actively work to dismantle the structures and narratives that sustain them.

Strategic Approaches to Rebalance Power in Development Partnerships

In navigating these power imbalances and the impact they have on partnerships within development, partnership brokers are active mediators. They employ a suite of strategies aimed at recalibrating the entrenched power dynamics that often dictate the terms and outcomes of development efforts.

Institutional imbalances are tackled through the co-creation of governance structures that embody principles of process-oriented, inclusive decision-making. These structures, imbued with mechanisms for shared control and oversight, challenge the traditional donor-led model by fostering a sense of joint ownership and accountability. For instance, by advocating for and establishing diverse, open dialogues, brokers work to dismantle Western biases, creating a space for all voices to be heard and valued, particularly those that have been historically marginalized.

To address material power imbalances, I've observed and engaged in strategies that recalibrate financial dynamics. This includes de-emphasizing donor funds as the primary resource, thus shifting the focus to a more holistic view of contributions—whether they be local knowledge, networks, or other non-monetary assets. Such an approach not only democratizes the partnership but also underscores the intrinsic value of all forms of capital. Brokers confront structural imbalances by fostering an environment where the 'us vs. them' mentality is replaced with one of shared understanding and respect. Through careful curation of governance and decision-making bodies that reflect the diversity of stakeholders, the power is more evenly distributed, allowing for more equitable and, thus, stronger partnerships. On another level, partnership brokers also constantly engage in self-reflection regarding their role within these power structures. Acknowledging their own positionality—often one of privilege due to Western training and perspectives—is crucial in understanding how they might perpetuate the very imbalances they seek to resolve. This reflexivity is practiced not only to improve their brokering practice but in ensuring that brokers do not consciously or unconsciously replicate colonial power dynamics.

Challenging the language of development is a key front in this battle against ideational power imbalances. By interrogating terms like 'partnership,' 'decolonization,' and 'localization' and what they signify to different stakeholders, brokers can help reshape the narrative, moving away from a vocabulary that reinforces division towards one that promotes true collaboration and mutual respect. Other words and what they embody are also challenged. Words like 'locals,' 'specialist,' 'expatriate,' and 'adviser' all maintain imbalances, and words that have transformative power, such as 'equity,' 'privilege,' 'power,' 'complexity,' 'inclusivity,' can be used to disrupt or bring new meaning.

Such strategic efforts by partnership brokers underscore the *potential* for transformation within the development sector. By questioning the status quo and advocating for systems that genuinely reflect the values of equity and inclusivity, partnership brokers can be catalysts for

meaningful change, steering the development narrative toward a more balanced and just direction.

But Are We Getting Anywhere?

Despite concerted efforts and strategies to mitigate power imbalances in development partnerships and, more broadly, my evaluation, corroborated by the experiences of peers and a wealth of documented cases, indicates a disheartening stagnation and potential worsening. The predominant institutional power dynamics still echo a donor-centric model, often leading to partnerships that resemble traditional donor-led projects rather than the envisioned co-created, co-owned collaborations. This is not conjecture, a reflection echoed within the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) community and beyond. For example, the Funders as Partners Project indicates most partnerships forged around development still ‘end up feeling very much like conventional donor-led projects rather than co-created and co-owned collaborations’ (PBA 2022), and Tennyson (2016) notes partners are actually reluctant to encourage donors to become more involved fearing too much interference and control rather than understanding. The bureaucracy rooted in Western paradigms continues to prioritize written documentation and rigid processes, sidelining the relational, flexible, and diverse approaches crucial for genuine partnership.

As a practitioner in this field, I've witnessed how these entrenched practices persist, frequently discounting non-Western preferences and reinforcing a one-sided narrative that favors donor perspectives.

The material power imbalance, characterized by donor control over resources, remains largely unaltered. A significant portion of development partnerships still operate under the shadow of donor dominance, as evidenced by a 2016 study, ‘Emerging Partnering Lessons from Diverse Contexts,’ which revealed that 70-80% of such partnerships are described as ‘donor-driven.’ The reality is that while material power has the potential to bolster effective partnerships, it is seldom relinquished, often exacerbating existing imbalances. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the control of money makes a ‘true partnership impossible’ (Lister 2000).

As a practitioner, I concur with this. Material power is rarely shared, a trend worsening over the past decade (see also Taylor & Middleby 2023). Donors lack consistent investment in partnership efforts. Power imbalances manifest in sudden funding and priority shifts, driven by donor policy changes and program managers' whims, often eluding recipients' or partnerships' control.

Structurally, there is occasional willingness among those in dominant positions to cede some control, yet more frequently, power is wielded to the detriment of partnership and local agency. This is most evident among inexperienced program managers who, driven by a sense of intellectual superiority, override the expertise and experience of non-Western practitioners. Blunt et al., 2022:21) characterize the program manager role ‘as having a kind of immaculate omniscience and omnipotence, and infallibility, a reflection of power stemming from overwhelming economic and military might and presumptions of civilizational superiority’ noting ‘if everyone treats you as if you were all-knowing, all powerful and incapable of error, it is hardly surprising that before long you start to believe it to be true.’

My experience concurs. Dominant actors occasionally yield in development contexts; however, more often, power is misused. This is especially prevalent among inexperienced program managers who, despite lacking knowledge and experience, exert authority from their positions. Many capable non-Western practitioners doubt their abilities when facing these Western 'experts.' Daily, in the development sector, these competing power dynamics persist, with dominant and subordinate positions vying for control. Increasingly, donor entities exhibit a defensive posture when their traditional approaches are challenged, particularly by non-Western partners. Instead of engaging with criticism to understand and address structural power imbalances, they often respond with accusations, shifting the narrative to comfort those in power rather than addressing the legitimate concerns raised.

Ideational power imbalances also persist, as transformative terms like 'decolonization,' 'localization,' and 'partnership' are co-opted and diluted within the development lexicon. 'Localization' often merely signifies a transfer of contracts or managerial roles rather than a substantive empowerment of local agency. 'Decolonization,' as argued by Tuck & Yang (2012), is 'not a metaphor' and is at risk of being reduced to a buzzword for incremental project improvements rather than a call to fundamentally rethink and rectify the legacies of colonialism. So problematic are these terms that Pacific Scholars Meki & Tarai (2023) have suggested the term 'Decolocalisation' be used instead. Moreover, there is a troubling trend of cultural appropriation within development practices, where the use of local terms and practices occurs without true understanding or respect for their significance. This superficial adoption can further entrench the power imbalances we seek to overcome.

Reflecting on Our Complicity in the Development Paradox

In dissecting the role of development actors, including partnership brokers, we encounter an unsettling paradox. Our endeavors to dismantle institutional power imbalances are often contradicted by our own compliance with the very rules we aim to change. This paradoxical behavior underscores a troubling truth: The rules of the game won't shift if we all keep playing by them. As Sloman (2022) reflects on her own efforts to mentor colleagues to better engage in these development spaces, 'by guiding them through what they needed to do to meet (donor) cultural norms,' she was 'actually reinforcing inequality, western cultural norms, and the status quo.'

So why do we keep playing by these rules? The reality is we often operate within these imbalances because they serve our interests.

Materially, we're sustained by donor funding, aligning our work with donor directives, sometimes at the cost of partnership autonomy and local empowerment. The financial allure is powerful—development professionals, including brokers, are compensated by the donors, a system that can lead to a conflict of interest and a hesitancy to truly challenge the status quo for fear of jeopardizing our standing and the accompanying financial benefits.

Structurally, as experts, we occupy a position of influence and authority that inherently supports the existing power hierarchy. We advocate for the 'localization' of roles, but often within the confines of a framework that continues to validate the supremacy of the 'expert,' thereby maintaining the very structures we critique. As argued by Fanon (2007), colonialists have always actively co-opted elites and also embarked on creating a new form of indigenous elite, educated and trained in the mother countries. Our compensation, vastly exceeding that

of our local counterparts (Strempel 2016), is a manifestation of this imbalance, one that persists despite our awareness and self-reflection on these disparities. Ideationally, we face what might I call our own ‘Epeli moments’ - instances of acute self-awareness where we recognize our own participation in reinforcing harmful narratives and limiting beliefs about development possibilities, when we find ourselves reproducing negative tropes and stereotypes, using problematic binary language or transformation words in a way that undermines their transformational meaning.

Embracing and Managing the Paradox in Development Work

Ultimately, the role of a development actor is fraught with contradictions. While we strive to act as agents of change, we must continually examine and challenge the structures that benefit us—acknowledging that in doing so, we may have to relinquish certain privileges if we are to dismantle power imbalances. Partnership brokers and development practitioners must navigate a complex paradox: our interventions to balance power differentials can inadvertently sustain them, particularly when they align with our own interests. This tension is far more than an occupational hazard; it is a central tenet of the profession, demanding a nuanced understanding that varies with each individual's values and life circumstances. In reflecting upon my journey, I identify three approaches to holding this paradox constructively:

Firstly, I maintain faith that every small action against power imbalances contributes to a larger, systemic shift. These small efforts accumulate, fostering communities and forging genuine connections that can eventually catalyze broader change. Inspired by emergent strategists like Brown (2017), who reflects, ‘small is good, small is all, the large is a reflection of the small,’ I am reminded that monumental change often starts with the smallest of steps. The resilience lies not in the fear of breaking but in the determination to rebuild, time and again.

Secondly, I've learned to honor my doubts, recognizing them as critical signals and being grateful for every 'Epeli moments' that challenges complacency and the status quo. Such self-awareness is crucial, especially when it reveals our own roles in perpetuating the very hierarchies we seek to dismantle. My most powerful ‘Epeli moment’ came when I was told, ‘Pacific led development is all very well Soli, but this is an Australian funded project’. The stakes are high for those of us with the structural and financial power to listen carefully to our own doubts and what moments like this tell us. We have a lot to lose: our livelihoods, status, and identity. When faced with the discomfort of these revelations, it is essential to listen, question, and, if needed, confront our complicity.

Lastly, I seek out transformative opportunities beyond traditional development frameworks, reminding myself that ‘aid is not development’ (Taylor and Middleby, 2023). By engaging with innovative endeavors that lie outside the projects and programs of the development Industry, new perspectives on development emerge. This external vantage point allows for a reimagining of development, shifting away from a deficit-focused narrative to one that emphasizes mutual growth and interdependence. In these spaces, the full potential of partnerships, untethered by the conventional constraints of development, can truly be realized.

In embracing these strategies, I advocate for a practice that not only recognizes its paradoxes but also actively engages with them to forge a path towards more equitable and authentic partnerships.

Reimagining the Development Narrative Through Partnership Brokering

In this discourse, I have endeavored to distill my experiences and observations, as well as those shared by fellow practitioners, to examine the stubborn power imbalances that underpin the Western development industry and how the role of partnership brokering both contributes to and has the capacity to challenge these disparities. The paradox is evident: while brokering and other development efforts seek to equalize power, they can also perpetuate the very imbalances it aims to address, particularly when these actors, knowingly or not, abide by the established rules of the game.

Through this analytical lens, I have evolved from an unwavering confidence in the inherent value of confronting these imbalances to a more nuanced recognition of my own inadvertent complicity in them. This self-awareness has propelled me towards seeking innovative pathways beyond the traditional confines of the industry. I posit that partnership brokers, with their unique position at the intersection of various stakeholders, are exceptionally equipped to navigate the complexities of development. To ‘voyage the audacious ocean’ (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020) together and reimagine a development that genuinely distributes power, prioritizes local agency, and respects the diversity of voices and experiences.

I believe the narrative of development is being rewritten. In this emerging story, power is not hoarded but shared, and our collective efforts—both monumental and minute—are crucial to the generative story that is unfolding. We must all remain vigilant and intentional in our actions, ensuring that each step we take contributes to a more equitable and inclusive global community. This bold rethinking of our practices and principles does have the potential to foster a development ecosystem that is just and equitable, and our efforts, big and small, need to be consciously part of the rewriting.

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ⁱThe auto-ethnographic insights that underpin this paper are derived from two decades of documented engagements and reflective practice within the Pacific region. From my position as a white settler-Australian woman, I have been involved in a diverse array of donor-funded initiatives and sought to foster genuine partnerships. This lived experience is a legitimate and rich source of evidence, encompassing detailed field notes from experiences such as working within Eastern Highlands Provincial Government on coordinating Australian aid, to efforts on the Pacific Partnerships for Development under the leadership of Australian PM Kevin Rudd to negotiating multi-years partnerships with key regional institutions like the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Pacific Community (SPC), University of the South Pacific (USP), and Secretariat of the Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP). These experiences have afforded me a unique vantage point to observe the intricacies of partnership dynamics. Additionally, my role in spearheading the integration of a partnership brokering methodology within the Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) over a three-year period has

provided profound insights into the operationalization of these collaborations. The legitimacy of these insights as evidence is further enriched by ongoing dialogues with my Pacific colleagues and friends, whose perspectives and experiences have been instrumental in shaping my understanding. Complemented by the scholarly work of others in this field, this paper presents a synthesis of real-world practice with academic inquiry, offering a comprehensive exploration of the power imbalances that pervade development partnerships.

ⁱⁱIn defining the international development industry, I am referring to the ecosystem of actors, interests, institutions, and identities that make up official international foreign aid efforts of western nations, generally the OECD DAC Countries. This ecosystem is made up of Government aid agencies, the intermediaries that implement their programs (multilateral agencies, private contractors and consultants, international and local non-government organisations) and those states and societies who receive and engage in their programs.

ⁱⁱⁱFor more detail on this practice see the Partnership Brokers Association documents at www.partnershipbrokers.org