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CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.



Collaboration in Disaster Recovery

In the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquakes Arthi worked for DFAT and UNDP to assist 14,000 micro-entrepreneurs recover their livelihoods. This was a high-pressure environment with strained relationships and high expectations. Arthi fostered an adaptive management approach, and with the support of her PBA mentor trialled different forms of brokering, collaboration and reflection. A focus on a higher purpose of recovery for micro-entrepreneurs helped people to break through bureaucratic and institutional hurdles. The paper describes how collaborative practice was fostered and came to be valued by all parties in a pressured environment.

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Collaboration in Disaster Recovery

This paper sets out to analyse and draw lessons from my experience in Nepal as a donor representative and partnership broker in an earthquake recovery project in 2015-16¹. I had been living in Nepal with my family for 12 months when the earthquakes happened and was quickly recalled to work in the Australia Department of Foreign Affairs humanitarian response. I then spent 12 months seconded to the UNDP to deliver Australia's disaster recovery project for microentrepreneurs. Using a collaborative approach the recovery project supported 14,000 earthquake survivors to rebuild their livelihoods by June 2016. The project was an island of success in a time when many other recovery initiatives stalled in Nepal.

Part 1 sets out the context in Nepal, part 2 follows my journey as a broker and change agent, and in part 3 I attempt to generate some understanding of the place of collaboration in the wider context of disaster recovery; and the role of the "donor – broker".

The Context

In April and May 2015 devastating earthquakes in Nepal killed 9000 people, destroyed 750,000 homes, plus schools, hospitals, roads and other economic infrastructure. The earthquake impact was in 14 mid and high hill districts, out of 74 districts across the country. Over 70-80% of the population of Nepal relies on subsistence agriculture and self-employment. The emergency response focused on immediate life-saving support – rescue, health care, food, shelter, water/sanitation and safety. Concurrently recovery initiatives were started, such as debris clearance, temporary schools and hospitals with co-ordination led by district authorities. Families and individuals tried to restart their livelihoods which were their main source of food and income.

The Government of Nepal (GoN) held a conference in June 2015 securing pledges of US\$4bn for a Disaster Reconstruction Plan, to be implemented by a new National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). Due to political wrangling the NRA was not established for another six months. Recovery action was further hampered by a blockade by the Indian Government of fuel and other supplies along the southern border of Nepal. The GoN has been criticised for delay in reconstruction. Challenges continue with substantial numbers of earthquake survivors still in temporary shelters.

Against this backdrop from June 2015-June 2016 the UNDP and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) delivered the Rapid Enterprise and Livelihood Recovery Project (RELRP) to 14,000 people in seven earthquake affected districts. For over 15 years the UNDP have implemented a micro enterprise development program (MEDEP). Thousands of poor, mostly women, have moved out of poverty through this program. DFAT is the key donor in the current phase. Within weeks of the April earthquake UNDP made a recovery proposal to DFA. The

¹ The author worked in AusAID/DFAT from 2002 – 2016. The views expressed in this article are her personal views and not those of any organisation.

livelihoods of 12,000 previously supported micro-entrepreneurs (MEs) had been destroyed. DFAT is a small donor in Nepal and decided to target recovery assistance to areas of existing programming including livelihoods. There was lively debate in DFAT about the wisdom of working with UNDP. The MEDEP program, while successful at the coalface, was mired with management challenges as the UNDP attempted to institutionalise the MEDEP model within government structures. The relationships between all parties - UNDP and DFAT, MEDEP and GoN, were strained. DFAT had little confidence that MEDEP, working through GoN systems, could deliver rapid recovery support. Eventually DFAT agreed to an investment of AUD8million, with two provisos: secondment of a DFAT officer into UNDP to support collaboration; and direct implementation by UNDP of a recovery project rather than through national execution, the modality used in MEDEP. DFAT's key concern was to see rapid, effective recovery for micro-entrepreneurs within 12 months.

I had been living in Nepal for a year with my family when the earthquake happened. While my family and I were physically fine, the experience changed our lives as we spent the following year working with Nepalis to recover some sense of safety.

I was appointed by DFAT to work with the UNDP and my riding orders were to ensure flexibility and rapid, effective delivery. My terms of reference were open, requiring me to collaborate with and support the UNDP. I was authorised to make wide ranging decisions within the parameters of the funding agreement. The UNDP Rapid Enterprise and Livelihood Recovery Project (RELRP) started in June and I joined in August 2015. This was the birth of my partnership journey in Nepal.

My Journey as a Broker and Change Agent

I had worked in AusAID since 2002 and been experimenting for some years with different ways to do development – to build strengths and common values and respond to complexity, rather than the contractual, supply driven approach widely used by AusAID/DFAT. The partnership work of PBA helped me to frame my experiments in a deliberate process, with a framework and tools for building and managing partnerships. As a Social Development Specialist in DFAT I used some of these techniques to build professional skills in poverty analysis and community driven development – advocating, bringing like-minded people together, identifying shared activity and reviewing and identifying next steps. This work was largely within DFAT. The work in Nepal allowed me to build collaboration between institutions.

When I started my role in RELRP in Nepal I was conscious of the urgency of our work and the challenge of inserting collaborative process into an output and action-oriented situation. There was a backdrop of tension between UNDP and DFAT, the MEDEP program had virtually ground to a halt. As a DFAT staff member there was potential for me to be seen by UNDP as a spy or spoiler. To build my broker credentials I initially adopted a listening stance, to understand the context, the people and to build trust. I socialised and offered help where I could see challenges. There were a large number of people involved in implementation, and weak role clarification between UNDP, MEDEP and RELRP. I observed a high level of tension and open conflict, particularly within the UNDP. UNDP staff were demanding of the new project team and their behaviour was at times offensive to the team. There was

a lot of blame going around – for failure to set up the project office, for mistakes in the contracting strategy and resultant delays. At times various colleagues tried to enlist me to their “side”. I made a strong effort to remain neutral but grew increasingly concerned about the conflict and confusion. My terms of reference were very open. I began to realise I had to intervene to help build a different way of working together if we were to have any chance of delivering the ambitious recovery project.

The project design included a reference to a “Project Steering Committee”. In the UNDP system this is the overarching, high level governance body. This was not the place to manage issues and conflicts coming up on a day-to-day basis. I came up with the idea of convening a regular management meeting with senior people from UNDP, MEDEP and RELRP. They all agreed to try, partly in deference to me as the donor representative – I had a certain convening power. I chaired the first meeting and was accepted almost as an umpire in the conflicts. Initially the conflict level was high but by using an agenda, asking people to talk one at a time and listen we began to reach consensus decisions. Initially I took minutes, and the project staff then took up this role - developing a new capability.

The minutes recorded action points and served as an accountability tool. These meetings, held every two to three weeks, became a critical forum for problem solving and decision-making. Through the process I noticed my personal preference to move quickly to decisions and consciously tried to slow myself down. I am also not keen on detail so had to make a real effort to ensure the minutes were taken and circulated.

One of the most effective strategies in changing from the blame, problem focused culture was an appeal to our shared purpose – recovery of micro-entrepreneurs from the earthquake. Using open ended questions framed around this commitment I have been able to keep people focused on generating solutions during management meetings. For example “how will this help MEs recover?” “What are MEs telling us they need?” “How can we respond to their needs fast?” Why would we do x, y or z? What will help MEs recover?”² As the larger recovery context in Nepal stalled we could see the importance of getting MEs back up and running and earning an income to help themselves (our working definition of recovery). This focus also helped the management group to push back on distractions from UNDP, something the project team alone could not do. Taking the standpoint of earthquake survivors also sat well with my own personal values, though I recognise there are different ways to define recovery³.

Another change strategy I used was to be as helpful as I could regardless of the nature of the task. I prepared subcontracts with the RELRP team, which UNDP colleagues considered a task below their status. I pushed the role boundaries primarily to get implementation moving, but also to model different behaviour - a

² During level 2 practice I explored different types of questions – using Vogt, Brown and Isaacs “The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action” (2003).

³ Davis I. and Alexander D. identify two standpoints – the government view of recovery and the survivor view of recovery, in *Recovery From Disaster* (2016) Routledge. P22-24

can do, activist, problem solving approach rather than one fixed in hierarchy. With this type of support the project team seemed to flourish and push through obstacles to get delivery to MEs really moving, despite the wider political context and fuel blockade. A few colleagues in the UNDP also started to be more responsive and action oriented. The culture was changing with enough people engaged to make a practical difference. As project implementation started to show results the UNDP felt pleased and engaged further. RELRP was operating in contrast to the wider context – the project rapidly became an island of success for UNDP.

In February 2016 I started PBA Level 2, and this injected more science and reflection into my brokering. First, I systematically reflected on interactions with colleagues and my values, through the log. The regular discussions with my mentor pushed me into new territory, thinking much more about the type of broker I am, my preferences and how to address my weaknesses. This was outside my comfort zone, and it took some time for me to shift into a more reflective stance, but when I did shift it was powerful. A few incidents occurred that really provoked me on a deep level: I have a strong personal commitment to gender equality and when I ran up against male counterparts who saw this as a side issue I became angry and pushy – reverting perhaps to donor type. I later reflected on this. What could I have done differently, was I overbearing, what about the trust I had worked hard to build? I had to navigate to achieve action on gender equality using a different approach to build consensus. In another example I convened a workshop and there was a big misunderstanding about timing. Initially I felt angry and irritated.....This time I checked my irritation and anger, listened to different views and was eventually able to laugh about the situation with others as a funny cross-cultural misunderstanding. This was a powerful moment – by acknowledging my feelings but suspending judgement, asking questions and listening I understood the situation from a completely different perspective. Trust was preserved and I gained some useful insights into organisational culture in Nepal.

Through Level 2 I moved more consciously into the role of broker – focusing on brokering principles such as capacity building and using appropriate tools. I use the mentored practice period to prepare a project completion workshop as I knew, like the start-up phase, ending the project require good co-ordination across the partners. I used new tools, such as force field analysis and interviews, to identify challenges and build consensus for getting to successful project closure. I rediscovered my facilitation skills and provoked lively discussion on the role of collaboration in RELRP. I “came out” as a partnership broker during the workshop – confident to advocate for collaboration in recovery. The whole group started to reflect on our collaborative practice, and most pleasingly the RELRP Finance officer set up (and implemented) a task force with UNDP and MEDEP to manage closure of RELRP operations. The group embraced and recognised collaboration as useful, relevant AND efficient in a recovery setting. They also reflected that the donor/broker role I played was critical in opening a new way to relate to each other, as compared with MEDEP.

My experience as a broker in Nepal doing Level 2 process gave me new tools and skills adapting these to a time pressured environment. I gained confidence to

articulate what I do as a broker, to take up space for collaborative practice and support others to do the same. I am better at ambiguity and understand the fluid and sometimes contradictory roles I play as an internal - donor - broker. Reflection has helped me identify my own values and impact on partners. I am better at asking the right questions, which has helped to open space for the partners to be creative rather than reverting to business as usual. It's been a hugely satisfying experience.

Part 3 The Wider Context

What is the value add of Collaboration in Disaster Recovery?

Recovery situations, such as post-earthquake Nepal, are characterised by uncertainty and overwhelming need. Within this broad context, delivery of “projects” to meet specific needs have to be flexible to respond to rapidly changing circumstances on the ground. MEDEP provided a deep understanding of how micro-entrepreneurship develops in Nepal, but we still needed to adapt that model for recovery and adapt differently in different locations. Specific challenges included damaged infrastructure, road blockages, political crises and fuel shortages, market instability, and most significantly the trauma of earthquake survivors including those implementing the project.

Collaborative practice and the flexibility and the sense of shared purpose it provides supported thoughtful, purposeful adaptation in RELRP. Collaboration was done in a pragmatic, speedy way that engaged the key decision makers, yet did not delay delivery. There was no tolerance amongst the partners for delay and overworking decisions. But over time we did build tolerance for mistakes – seeing them as opportunities to learn and improve future action.

New directions were approved within days, with all members of the management meetings authorised to make decisions for their organisation. Management committee members needed to be courageous to take decisions. The urgency of the situation helped people to take risks they would not be so ready to accept in regular development programming.

As noted in Part 2 the mechanisms for collaboration, and the norms of behaviour between partners developed organically from the management meetings. In between meetings I spent time with each of the partner organisations, checking in on whether and how their interests were being met, encouraging them to meet their commitments and helping them to generate solutions. I also communicated regularly with the DFAT headquarters and the Australian Embassy in Nepal to ensure that project progress, challenges and new directions were well understood.

The efficiency and pragmatism of collaboration in RELRP are in contrast to perceptions of partnership, including those expressed by the RELRP Project Manager⁴ - that it takes a lot of time, that there are many joint processes, meetings and agreements. In RELRP process was pragmatic, and minimal – responding to the

⁴ Interview with Shailendra Thakale, RELRP Project Manager March 2016.

logic of delivery. The design document and my terms of reference were silent on the mechanism for collaboration. I started work three months into project delivery, and I opted to observe the situation before establishing collaboration mechanisms – to manage collaboration and to reflect on and review collaboration as part of the project closure process.

So what or who got left behind in this organic, hasty process? The Project Manager commented to me that collaboration has been one sided – his perception in March, that he and the project team give a lot but get little back from UNDP or MEDEP⁵. He came into UNDP from outside and his observation is valid. However compared to business as usual between UNDP and project teams the situation was more equitable than other scenarios around us. Brokering did help to control distractions and some of the worst behaviour.

It is worth considering other models for project delivery to get a sense of the value of brokering in RELRP. The longstanding MEDEP program was faltering, the with strained relationships between the donor and UNDP, and UNDP and the MEDEP team. There are many issues at play but the most significant seems to be a lack trust and transparency. The program follows a traditional contractual approach, with no consistent approach to managing the relationships between DFAT, UNDP and MEDEP. Difficult issues get bogged down in seemingly intractable interpretations and suspicion continues to grow. DFAT believed that MEDEP could not deliver recovery support and so opted for a parallel structure in the recovery project. Interestingly the RELRP experience led UNDP to acknowledge some of the issues hampering MEDEP delivery. They even requested DFAT to install a similar position to the role I have played to help untangle MEDEP.

Another DFAT recovery model is to provide surge support, deploying a staff member from headquarters to the Embassy. In Nepal's case this position managed a traditional contractual relationship with INGOs for recovery projects. The staff member's experience was often one of frustration "XX INGO are just doing what they want instead of what's in the design".... Trust is weakened and project delays increase. The contract mechanism seems to prevent a deeper engagement between DFAT and the NGO, as that would be seen as "doing their job". The frustration continues.

Through brokering in RELRP we were able to avoid this type of scenario, but it does require a change in thinking and behaviour and resource allocation. DFAT and UNDP were able to focus on the overarching outcomes, while agreeing to flexibility in outputs. Importantly the donor had access to real time information to shape decisions and reinforce trust. This type of information is much harder to convey in six-monthly meetings or even three-monthly monitoring visits where the implementers are showcasing their best efforts.

In terms of cost the investment made by DFAT is roughly the same with either surge support in the Embassy or a secondment of a broker. So clearly there is a cost, but

⁵ Ibid

often additional human resources are deployed by DFAT to support recovery work. There is a strong case for DFAT to reconsider how those positions are structured, and to ensure employees have skills for collaboration.

The success of RELRP now seems surprising to all of the partners, like some sort of magic that cannot be replicated and was solely reliant on individuals. Brokering however, was the critical success factor.

Donor as broker

My placement into the UNDP to support collaboration was an experiment for DFAT. The experiment paid off in terms of delivery of project outcomes, as well as potential learning about effective donor engagement in recovery⁶. DFAT has already built a call down workforce for humanitarian situations – the Australian Civilian Corps. These “technical experts” sit outside the regular DFAT staff and were initially recruited for technical skills. After three to four years of experience DFAT has recognised the need to recruit for “soft skills”⁷. These are needed particularly as recovery work is complex, addressing both immediate needs as well as long term sustainability. My own experience shows that the soft skills or behaviours can very usefully be complemented with “hard skills”⁸ such as tools for facilitation, reflection and action learning. These skills considerably increased the value delivered by my role.

Looking back at the RELRP experience DFAT could have been more deliberate in the early stages of the project - articulating what collaboration means and creating some space in the design for fit for purpose collaborative process to be developed. The DFAT Broker/Donor TORs could also be more instructive. In particular the role requires a level of flexibility and comfort with uncertainty that can be quite confronting for donor staff.

It is particularly important that the donor/ broker becomes part of the team and not the leader, not the constant voice of authority that often characterises a contractual relationship. That line has to be carefully policed by the broker through reflection – how can I help without taking over? How can I support leadership of others, and also express and pursue the donor interests? How do I ethically manage a conflict between the broker and donor role? The person has to be comfortable with a level of ambiguity to be both part of the implementing team, and the donor representative. At times the balance of the role will tip to representative, for example when I negotiated an extension for RELRP and ensured the contracts were quickly amended I was strongly in the traditional donor role. This was in DFAT’s

⁶ PBAs 10 Things Donors Can Bring to the Partnering Paradigm (PBA Website accessed 25 May 2016) were in evidence in DFAT’s experiment, including engagement, funding, modeling and sharing. There is still more to do to learn from the partnership and place it in the long view for DFAT’s recovery work.

⁷ Quote from Andrew Egan, Head of DFAT Stabilisation and Recovery Branch, Canberra, during discussion on DFAT’s humanitarian partnerships 27 April 2016. By soft skills he meant many of the behaviours and attributes of brokers – empathy, listening, facilitation, coaching and capacity building.

⁸ Votja M, “Building Competencies for Co-Creative Partnering for Local, Adaptive Development” the author makes this useful distinction between Hard skills and soft skills. *Betwixt and Between* Issue No.5 May 2015.

interests but also served to reinforce the trust between UNDP and DFAT. I had to be explicit to UNDP about where the extension decision would be made, and what might or might not be acceptable to DFAT.

Building the science as well as art of brokering into DFATs humanitarian workforce and establishing a mentoring system to support reflection during deployments would be ways of sustaining and building brokering practice into the future.

Conclusion

RELRP has been remarkably successful, delivering real improvements in the lives of 14,000 earthquake survivors, in a time when many other recovery initiatives stalled in Nepal. The huge personal commitment of UNDP, RELRP, MEDEP and DFAT staff played an important part in this success. The critical factor though was brokering and collaboration. We were able to breakthrough numerous operational, personality and physical challenges, few of which could have been predicted at design stage. DFAT's willingness to deploy me in a novel role and give me flexibility and authority together with the willingness, expertise and resources of the UNDP, RELRP and MEDEP teams were powerful forces that created change. My personal journey was incredibly rich. I learnt the value of reflection, built my confidence and used and adapted tools to promote collaboration and capacity development. I got better at ambiguity, and the use of questions to generate creativity. The next challenge for me and DFAT will be to replicate and sustain this new way of operating in recovery work.