

Peer Review on partnership in Humanitarian Aid

**An approach for mutual learning and
cooperation between
organisations (North and South).**

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Summary

As an association of capacity building organisations, PSO constantly searches for approaches to assist members in learning from their and each other's practice. In 2007 and 2008 PSO experimented with a peer review approach focusing on improvement and learning about partnership in humanitarian aid, in response to conflicts and natural disasters. The peer review approach was based on the gathering and sharing of information, experiences and good practices among organisations that are each other's peers. It helped in extracting and reflecting on lessons and identifying ways forward on partnership between North and South. It also aimed to foster a culture of mutual learning both within and between northern and southern NGOs, where they took the opportunity to work together to analyse their partnership and reflect on experiences both good and bad.

This article describes our experiences and lessons learned from the process of a peer review between five Dutch humanitarian organisations and their southern partners. A peer review approach supports research as well as mutual learning between peer organisations, building upon and creating trust and openness, and a learning instead of accountability atmosphere. The perceptions and dynamics involved in a peer review are quite variable, but "peer review always rests on the premise that professionals who develop and follow standards of excellence in their own work are best equipped to evaluate the work of their colleagues." Main impression is that the peer review approach has a lot of value and potential when you want to learn from other practices and do research at the same time.

In short two important lessons were learned from this peer review process. A specific actor-approach in designing the peer review is useful: what actors to involve, who needs to learn from whom, what kind of dynamics do you need in the process to realise specific learning processes? When you want to stimulate mutual learning, all parties involved should feel some ownership of the process from the beginning. In our peer review we saw Dutch NGOs as each other's peers, while along the way we realised we could have made the peer review much stronger by seeing Dutch NGOs and Southern NGOs as each other's peers.

The second lesson learned relates to the learning processes you want to stimulate with a peer review. To us, organisational learning was key. How can you transfer insights and reflections done by peer reviewers to the organisational level, improving organisational practice and policies? This relates to who do you select as peer reviewers, what is their profile and expertise? In what way is the management of participating organisations involved? And how do you design an organisational learning process from the beginning?

1. Why a peer review approach?

As an association of capacity building organisations, PSO constantly searches for approaches to assist members in learning from their and each other's practice. Learning which takes place in an environment characterised by complexity, diversity, north-south relations and power dynamics. In 2007 and 2008 PSO experimented with a peer review approach focusing on improving and learning about partnership in humanitarian aid. The peer review approach was based on the gathering and sharing of information, experiences and good practices among organisations that are one another's peer. It helped in extracting and reflecting on lessons and identifying ways forward on partnership between north and south. It also aimed to foster a culture of mutual learning both within and between northern and southern NGOs.

This article describes our experiences from the process of the peer review between five Dutch humanitarian NGOs and their southern partners. The first chapter addresses the question of why we chose a peer review approach and describes the expectations we had from the start. There exist very different interpretations of the concept 'peer review'. What images do exist, and what choices were made in the present peer review on partnership. You read more about the design principles we used for the peer review in chapter two. In the last chapter we reflect on our experiences with the peer review and describe some lessons learned.

1.1 Where did this all start?

The idea of launching a peer review was based upon a dialogue on partnership in humanitarian assistance between Dutch NGOs, facilitated by PSO in 2004. Key questions in this dialogue were: what does partnership mean in practice? How can you organise humanitarian aid locally or form partnerships with local NGOs? What are the most important parameters that determine the relationship between NGOs and governments in crisis situations? Based on the results of this dialogue, a booklet appeared with the title 'Partnership in Practice' (Hillhorst, 2005), with a personal reflection written by Richard Blewitt: *"This whole domain has been under searched and there has been a lack of sharing of experiences to close the gap between lofty intentions and reality on the ground. The concept of partnership is used too loosely in the humanitarian sector. In reality, many so-called partnerships are really just contractual relationships."* His advice was to continue doing research on the policy – practice area to help humanitarian NGOs move towards becoming effective organizations that are accountable in the contexts they serve the people they serve.

Motivated to explore and improve partnership further, PSO, together with five Netherlands-based humanitarian agencies, and Disaster Studies at Wageningen University initiated research on partnership in the aid chain of crisis-related interventions. This research was aimed at understanding the realities of partnership in emergencies and at strengthening partnership within the participating NGOs, as well as within the humanitarian community in general. But what would be a suitable approach for such research? We could organise an external evaluation, ask organisations to describe their experiences with partnership, hire a few consultants to do the job. But would this be suitable for extracting useful information, reflecting on lessons learned, and identifying ways forward? In such a dynamic environment and on a fundamental issue that requires respect and trust to share real experiences?

We were looking for an approach that supports a process of mutual learning. Not a research done by external consultants, who in the end learn the most. And an approach that takes into account the inequality of power which may exist within northern and southern relationships. PSO member organisations all have a specific focus on capacity development, which requires a relationship based on the continuous improvement of capacities necessary to 'do the job'. In recent years many organisations invested in their partnership with southern NGOs, in the belief that to be effective as a northern NGO, we should build relationships with southern NGOs based upon respect, working together, adding to each other's passion and strengths.

1.2 Peer review for research and mutual learning

Our aim with the research was to provide participating NGOs with a better understanding of the possibilities for viable and effective partnership in crises-related interventions. We launched the idea to undertake a peer review process, particularly seeking to identify examples of good practice that could be implemented by participating organisations and shared with an even broader audience.

Benefits of peer review in general

If well designed, a peer review might offer a number of benefits (based upon an overview made by IEEP, 2006):

- External perspectives: peers can bring new ideas, knowledge, experience and perspectives to the subject, and help counter any tendency to be excessively inward looking.
- Capacity building: peer reviews can support the sharing of information and skills, to the benefit of the review and the peer organisations. This can include enhancing skills in relation to certain evaluation methodologies. Developing countries can, for example, bring a wider expertise and experience in relation to development strategies.
- Networking, communication and dialogue: peer reviews can lead to enhanced cooperation within and between organisations and practitioners, contributing to better understanding of processes and challenges they all face.
- Promoting a positive work atmosphere: mutual evaluation and the opportunity for all parties to learn from the review can contribute to creating a friendly atmosphere, which may be important for the successful ownership and follow-up of the review.
- Increased focus on major cross-cutting issues: peers can help to ensure a balanced approach to development issues. Reviewed organisations can also choose to focus on specific areas of their strategy which they believe are of particular importance.
- Cost effectiveness: peer review can be relatively economical compared to extensive evaluations by consultants (although the two approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive). Participating organisations can access expertise from each other 'for free'.
- Self-reflection: peer reviews may force participants to reflect upon their own work, which may contribute to a productive reassessment of day-to-day work and stimulate internal discussions about personal work and performance.
- Self-esteem: last but not least, peer reviews can contribute to increased self-esteem and a better working atmosphere. For participants it is often satisfying to see that others struggle with similar problems and that there are not always quick fixes.

From the start we chose specifically for a research and learning approach with some expectations in mind. Not always that explicit, but reflecting on it, we did expect from the peer review that it would:

- provide valuable and verified information and experiences from practice with the subject of research;

- support mutual learning between the peer reviewers, participating organisations, and north-south relationships;
- build upon and create trust and openness in the dialogue between northern and southern organisations because of a learning atmosphere;
- be a starting point for more dialogue on the value of partnership in crisis-related interventions with the people working within the peer review.

2. What does the peer review look like?

It is not so easy to describe what ‘the’ peer review looks like. Kerkhoven & Langen (2008) found through literature review and talking to fellow practitioners that people and organisations have very different interpretations of the concept ‘peer review’. This chapter briefly describes a few different ‘designs’ of peer review and pays attention to an important commonality of all peer reviews: the role of peers in the approach. From there, we give a draft of the peer review process we designed for the research on partnership in humanitarian aid, and an overview of the most important principles we used for the design process.

2.1 Different ‘design’ examples

For some, peer review is linked to the review process of scientific papers by recognized expert academics. Others see peer review as the interactive review by fellow practitioners, a form of horizontal or joint learning. It becomes obvious that the perceptions of and dynamics involved in a peer review are quite variable, even more so as there is insufficient (published) practice. PSO has used the peer review approach before as an alternative to an external evaluation of the organisation, addressing a learning perspective instead of accountability purposes. A short description of this peer review process:

Peer review for external evaluation of the organisation (example of PSO)

There was a team of five ‘outsiders’ or review members who were recognised as knowledgeable and experienced in one or more appropriate domains linked to international development and civil society. Those reviewers had no working relationship with PSO, to ensure some critical distance. They were provided with the main goals of this peer review, five days working together in one room, all kinds of PSO documents, laptops, flipcharts and mobile phones. They had dinner meetings with people working with PSO, made visits to PSO member organisations, and had a final meeting with important stakeholders and practitioners from PSO to share their observations, findings and thoughts.

Another example is a peer review process developed for higher education. Inspiring because of the focus on actual observation in the work situation, and working in pairs which makes the peer process a mutual process.

Peer review in higher education (AAHE)

The American Association of Higher Education developed a peer review model in which colleagues are invited to review a staff member's teaching. The process examines three aspects of teaching: (1) Intellectual content of a course. Each member of a faculty pair selects a course that he or she would like to have reviewed. The pair exchanges documents, and the reviewer reads and comments on the material based on the instructor's goals, an understanding of the subject matter and concepts of good practice, (2) Teaching practices. Faculty pairs exchange goal statements for particular class periods with students and the rationale for the planned activities. Peer colleagues visit those settings several times, and exchange written comments on how well the planned goals were achieved, and (3) Student learning. Faculty pairs exchange copies of exams, written assignments, and other student feedback. They comment in writing on the quality of understanding asked for and the depth of understanding students actually achieve.

What those designs have in common is the use of all kinds of materials from the working practice. Nothing is especially designed for the peer review. Both have a research perspective, meant to collect insights and lessons from practice. And the process is designed in such way that mutual learning takes place between all people involved. The role of peers in both designs is key. As Patrizi (2006) says: *"Peer review rests on the premise that professionals who develop and follow standards of excellence in their own work are best equipped to evaluate the work of their colleagues."* Peers understand the issues and challenges at stake. There is more scope for mutual learning and exchange, because peers 'evaluate' each other.

2.2 Design of the peer review on partnership

The peer review on partnership in humanitarian aid (crisis-related interventions) had the following design. Five Dutch humanitarian organisations (Cordaid, ICCO and Kerk in Actie, the Netherlands Red Cross, Oxfam Novib and War Child Holland) joined because of their shared interest in partnership issues. "The peer review was developed in order to come to a more complete and nuanced understanding of the realities of partnership in crisis-related interventions. In particular, it focused on the experiences and viewpoints of organizations in crisis-affected regions. With this knowledge it was hoped to provide the necessary basis for promoting stronger and more effective partnerships, both within the participating agencies and within the humanitarian community more in general" (Hillhorst and ter Haar, 2008).

Wageningen University participated in the peer review from a scientific and research point of view. PSO facilitated the process with a capacity development and learning perspective. Each Dutch NGO selected a peer reviewer from its staff who would prepare the peer review and carry out three weeks of field work in one of the selected countries. Five cases were selected based on the interests of the participating NGOs: Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Southern Sudan, and the Tsunami affected area of southern India. In each of these crisis regions, partners of three Dutch NGOs were selected. The selection of partners was proposed by the respective program staff and reflected a wide variety of local organizations, in terms of their sizes, missions, organizational set up, and duration of the partnership. Partners were invited to share their experiences, concerns and reflections about partnership and how it could be strengthened.

During the peer review process (which took about seven months) we had several meetings to collectively prepare the peer review, the country visits, share experiences in between visits, and analyse the findings in the end. In all visited countries a meeting was organised with participating local organisations. Each peer reviewer had a feedback session in their own organisation. And the process was finalised by a report of the peer review and an international dialogue on the results of the peer review in a face-to-face meeting.

2.3 Design principles used

As you can see from previous examples, a peer review process can be designed in quite different ways. The final design depends on the principles you use. Below you find an overview of the main design principles we used for the peer review on partnership.

Design principles	
Joint enthusiasm for the subject	We strongly believe in the idea that you only get better at something when you are really interested in it. The subject might be broad and important to all humanitarian organisations, but in what way does it get priority in the organisation? What makes you as a manager interested? These questions were important in preliminary conversations.
Commitment by the management	The peer review in itself is a means to improve the practice of participating organisations. Therefore, it is crucial to have strong commitment from higher management; they are key persons in making changes in policy, working patterns and culture; in supporting organisational learning.
Northern and Southern participating organisations	Who are the 'peers' in this peer review? We began with five Northern organisations who are each other's peers. And we designed the peer review in such a way that these organisations would benefit from the review by learning with and from each other. During the process we paid more and more attention to the involvement of Southern organisations. In the next paragraph we reflect on this principle and the effect it has had on the peer review process.
Individual, organisational and institutional learning	We want to stimulate learning on three levels: people directly participating in the peer review would benefit from the experience; participating organisations would receive feedback from their partners and peer organisations in order to improve their practice; and the humanitarian aid sector would learn from the research outcomes.
Practitioners as peer reviewers	We were explicitly not looking for people with a typical research background. Peer review is such a different research approach compared to more scientific methods, that it requires an open attitude. Important were capabilities such as creating a trusted atmosphere, asking open questions, creating a valuable dialogue with partners, and making a synthesis based on information gathered through conversations. We asked each organisation to select one practitioner with an interest in joining the peer review. We did not have more specific requirements for this selection process. The first PSO peer review worked with a group of peer reviewers who were complementary to each other regarding their capacity and expertise. In our peer review the peer reviewers worked relatively independently from one another, more like someone delegated from the participating organisation.

Participating organisations key in defining leading questions	The peer review is in the first place a learning process for the participating organisations. What are their learning questions? What are they curious about? What would it be helpful for them to know more about? Asking participants to define their questions makes them feel more ownership of the research, which is very important for organisational learning. It also helps to create an atmosphere of openness and trust.
Participating organisations create own 'research area'	Which partners would you like to involve in this peer review? With whom would you like to reflect on the partnership you have build in recent years? Having participating organisations define their own partners in this learning process creates commitment.
Collaborative design process	The design phase of a peer review is a valuable learning process: sharing learning questions, finding focus, developing questions to ask others, thinking about the transfer to one's own organisation, designing the whole process with partner organisations. We organised a few design sessions with all practitioner-researchers together which also helped in creating some 'team feeling'.
Emergent nature of the process	We defined the framework of the subject and approach beforehand: main questions and ways to create a dialogue with partner organisations. There was a lot of 'free space' to adapt the approach to your personal style as a reviewer and the local situation.
Practice and science connected	Wageningen University played an important role in the peer review as 'peers from a scientific point of view'. By working together they were not 'outsiders' in the review, but they could use their knowledge and experience while working together.
Results shared in dialogue	Collective analysis and dialogue during the process were important elements in stimulating mutual learning. From the perspective that you learn by sharing thoughts, impressions and experiences with others.

3. Experiences with the peer review

Did we meet our own expectations with the peer review in humanitarian assistance? Was this peer review approach suitable for combining research and learning? Were conversations open enough to address the real aspects around partnership? In this chapter you can read our reflections. We finish this article with some general suggestions for 'next time'.

Overall we can say that the peer review was worth trying and useful as a research and learning approach. The peer reviewers expressed their feelings in a few words: real experiment, the highest time, dynamic approach, exciting, inspiring, challenging, valuable learning experience. Did we meet our expectations? Did the peer review:

- (1) provided valuable information and insights into the subject: partnership in crisis-related interventions?
- (2) create an environment in which there could be an open dialogue between northern and southern organisations?
- (3) support mutual learning horizontally as well as vertically?
- (4) act as a starting point for more dialogue on the subject?

Below you find our reflections and lessons learned for each of these expectations.

3.1 Did the peer review provide valuable insights on partnership?

A peer review is not objective

The peer review provided very valuable information and insights on partnership. Although there was a constant struggle around the question of how to deal with aspects like objectivity, representativity, validity and relevance. We saw peer review as an alternative approach for doing research. A way to collect useful information on the subject of partnership in crisis-related interventions. And at the same time a method to stimulate and support learning. Are these processes you can combine? With the involvement of Wageningen University, the focus on scientific research with characteristics of objectivity, representativity, validity and relevance, was present. How should we deal with those characteristics in the peer review? Peer review is not objective. Peer review is based on mutual exchange, narratives, images people have, experiences, stories, ideas, and values. We worked as much as possible towards objectivity and representativity by having a certain number of partners involved, a list of core interview questions, and analysis of what we heard without too much interpretation. An important lesson from this constant struggle is that we should have addressed this issue during the process. Make it a point for discussion and decide on what we find most important: objectivity or meaningful inter-subjectivity.

Peer review from a Northern perspective – who are the peers?

From the beginning we focused on Northern organisations as the peers in the review. We worked around their learning needs. We designed a process in which they learned as much as possible from the results. The mutual aspect of the learning process was directed to learning between Northern organisations. But was this enough? Or was this the right focus for the peer review? During the design process we specified the actors involved by asking ourselves questions like: who should be involved, who needs to learn from whom, what is the role of Southern organisations, how can we involve them? When you want to stimulate mutual learning, all parties involved should feel ownership of the process from the beginning. And from this perspective the Southern partners should have been taken into account much more seriously. During the design phase, we realised the importance of involving southern NGOs. We did not want to approach them as 'our interviewees' but as equal partners in this experiment. For creating an environment for dialogue and mutual learning, it seemed important to have shared ownership of the design, to design the learning questions together, and to have shared responsibility for the outcome and impact of the peer review. We organised a learning session in the various countries involved. But we did not design a mutual learning process between Northern and Southern organisations. Due to time restrictions, financial considerations and logistics we did as much as possible to involve southern partners (communication, working with a local reviewer, meeting on partnership locally, participation in the final meeting) from that moment. There is a strong lesson in that, a next time, we would start the initiative with southern and northern NGOs together, as equal partners in the process.

Some other reflections:

- The approach offers a good opportunity for southern as well as northern NGOs to work together on an important subject in daily practice.
- Most conversations between North and South are on project, programme and finance related themes. Our approach made it possible to work on other subjects around partnership, e.g. downward accountability. This made the conversations around partnership somewhat 'relaxing'.
- The subject of the peer review is current and worthwhile continuing. There is so much more to share and discuss. Southern NGOs indicate their wish to continue talking about the subject.

- The fact that members of the review team faced many of the same problems in their own organisations made the exercise less threatening than typical evaluations and fostered greater empathy.

3.2 Has the peer review created an environment for dialogue?

Exchange instead of interview

The question arose of how to invite southern partners to participate from a perspective of mutual learning. One of our strong beliefs within the peer review was that by using peer review as the research approach, we were, at the same time, working on the partnership. Partnership is about trust, respect, understanding, sharing values and beliefs, and openness towards each other. When using a pure interview technique, the practitioner-reviewers are the ones 'collecting' the information. We used methods that stimulate a reciprocal conversation, a dialogue or exchange instead of a question-answer setting.

Reaction of a researcher: "Space was created by being very clear at the start about the objectives and confidentiality of the peer review. It was easier to create space with the partners of ICCO and Cordaid. The partner of Oxfam Novib had received assistance through an intermediate NGO during the Tsunamis response. It had failed so far to establish a direct partnership relation with Oxfam Novib. Their ambition to collaborate directly with Oxfam Novib was clearly part of their agenda for the meeting. This might have influenced their openness."

Collective design process

During the process we organised several 'design' and analysis' meetings with all practitioner-researchers. These meetings were very effective for creating team spirit, involvement in and contribution to the design process, and collective reflection in between. During those meetings we had interesting dialogues about the content as well as the process of the peer review.

Some other reflections:

- Southern NGOs appreciated the initiative very much, because of the learning approach and the invitation they got to share their experiences on such a valuable subject as partnership. They appreciated the attention they got, the wish by northern NGOs to hear their experiences from a perspective of trust, openness and exchange of thoughts.
- Some organisations work through field offices. Conversations with the representatives of these field offices were more difficult than conversations with local organisations. The reason might be that the power difference between funder – partner was felt to be more obvious.
- We explicitly paid attention to the first phase of getting to know each other: introducing yourself from a personal point of view, investing time in building a first relationship, sharing your interest in the subject, as well as in some way 'explaining' what a peer review process is. With the idea that this would contribute to an atmosphere in which everyone can talk openly. Making others understand the idea of peer review seemed easier than it was. Words you use in the explanation are key. The term 'interview' has very strong associations with evaluation. The involvement of Wageningen University made people think of more formal research. Investing and spending time together was useful, conversations changed during the day.
- Thinking about the future appeared to be somewhat difficult for some southern partners.

3.3 Did the peer review support mutual learning?

Individual learning by peer reviewers

The peer reviewers learned a lot themselves. Their motivation to join the peer review began with a personal interest. The country visits were very valuable and worthwhile. And during the process we organised several 'design and analysis' meetings with all peer reviewers. These meetings were very effective for creating team spirit, involvement in and contribution to the design process, and collective reflection in between. The connection with the organisation was made through the support of the management. But this connection was quite low; in the design we had no specific elements focusing on the peer reviewer – management relationship. The peer reviewers had to invest a considerable amount of time and energy in the peer review and they had the feeling that their job was done after the collective analysis. For the peer review, individual learning is definitely not enough. From a learning perspective it is most valuable when results are transferred to participating organisations. When NGOs involved learn something from the feedback and reflections they got. This appeared to be more difficult than we had expected. We wanted the peer reviewers to transfer their impressions, reflections and learning insights to their organisation. During the process it turned out to be difficult for the peer reviewers to play this role. They felt somewhat 'alone' in presenting the results to their organisation, were their observations the right observations? They might have missed the objectivity of measurement. What we learned from this is that it is very important to have a clear idea of the role of the peer reviewer from the beginning; to include some explicit activities in the design for translating individual findings and insights to the organisation

Organisational learning requires management involvement

As mentioned above, embedding the learning results in the participating organisations appeared to be more difficult than we thought. Four out of five peer reviewers even switched jobs shortly after the peer review. Two lessons learned come up when reflecting on the aspect of organisational learning:

- We chose to work with peer reviewers who had a personal interest in the subject of the peer review. We did not pay a lot of attention to their ability to create awareness and attention for the research results in their own organisation; to support and facilitate a learning atmosphere in the organisation; or to show colleagues and management the importance of learning from the peer review results.
- In the start-up phase of the peer review we involved the management of participating organisations, asking for their commitment. Commitment at the beginning might not be sufficient. To really learn from results, continuous interaction and dialogue might be necessary. Having a specific role as a manager. Contact between the design group, peer reviewers, and management. We could have organised several moments during the process to work with the management. Those kinds of activities might have strengthened their involvement and increased their commitment.

Lots of interest for exchange between southern organisations

The Southern partner organisations were very willing to exchange experience and thoughts on partnership with each other. In every country we visited (except Israel and Palestine Territories), a meeting was organised for all participating local NGOs. This idea came up during the process as we wanted to create a process useful to northern as well as southern organisations. The meeting was meant as a feedback moment on the results collected in that specific country as well as a starting point

for further dialogue between southern NGOs. There was a lot of interest and enthusiasm for these meetings.

International seminar stimulates reflection in the humanitarian sector

A final seminar was held for humanitarian aid organisations in the Netherlands, with some southern partner organisations participating in this meeting as well. This meeting was meant for sharing the results with a broader audience, and elaborating on the findings using the practice and recognition of more organisations.

Online working environment needs more facilitation and integration

During the peer review we made use of an online working environment (a wiki) where we collected all documents and articles concerning the peer review and the subject itself. At first we hoped this online working environment would be a vehicle for stimulating exchange and interaction between the peer reviewers in between meetings. It did not work out that way. It rather became a place where people could find recent documents, a place where we collected all the materials produced. And when working on the peer review in another country, you could easily access the documents online.

Smaller reflections:

- According to the peer reviewers the peer review was very useful and instructive. It helped in sharpening their own ideas and images, helped them to see common patterns and approaches, and to appreciate different perspectives. A conversation about commonalities and differences was, in particular, highly appreciated.
- Practitioner-researchers worked together with a researcher from Disaster Studies Wageningen University. In this collaboration practical and more scientific knowledge were exchanged which turned out to be quite useful in the interviews and the analysis afterwards.
- Reviewers valued gaining in-depth understanding of other agencies and widening their network of contacts with colleagues.
- The peer review foresees in a need to exchange with southern organisations on subjects like partnership. Questions asked by the peer reviewers stimulated thinking. The conversation was a valuable reflection on their practice for many local partners.
- Meetings locally are highly appreciated: “Why haven’t we organised this before?”

3.4 Has the peer review worked as a starting point for more dialogue?

With the peer review we make a start on a dialogue about partnership. This is not to say that NGOs don’t already invest in their partnership. In previous years, building a partnership relation with southern partners has been an important focus for many humanitarian aid organisations. But for continuous improving, dialogue is essential. Working towards more equality (within the boundaries this has regarding the financial aspect in the relationship) and shared responsibility requires sharing beliefs and values, investing time in each other, trying to understand the local situation and the requirements of this environment on the actions at stake. During the peer review process, we thought about interventions that would help continue the dialogue. We organised local meetings and an international conference with practitioners with a special interest in partnership. In a next design, we could also think about opportunities for continuous north-south

We had no time to study the formal policies concerning partnership of Cordaid and ICCO before the field work. This worked out to be an advantage. We were less biased in our own perception by knowing the standards and more open to the southern perspective.

conversations. In this first experiment, we left this possibility to the participating NGOs, but next time we could build a kind of infrastructure during the peer review process as a basis for further collaboration.

Smaller reflections:

- One lesson learned is that the success of the review process depends on the level of voluntary participation. When southern organisations have the feeling that it is their own choice to join the peer review (and not some implicit expectation from a funder) there is more chance of creating a climate of mutual respect, sharing and trust.
- A statement made by one of the practitioner-researchers: “Interesting to have these kinds of conversations. It made me think of the time when I was a student: how open and curious you can step into a dialogue. Without any specific objective, message or agenda stemming from your organisation”.
- As practitioner-researchers we had a clear identity in the peer review: we wanted to learn from other practices, we had no postulated agenda, interesting insights were immediately useful for our own work, and we did not have an explicit research background which allowed us to ask all kind of questions. This clear identity contributed to an open and trustful climate.

4 Our conclusion

There are a lot of valuable lessons to learn from the above-mentioned reflections. Some are more concrete than others. What we can say is that the peer review approach is valuable and has potential when you want to learn from other practices and do research at the same time. Our experience is that this combination works very well, but you have to be clear about the type of research you want to do. Or what outsiders expect from the research aspect. A specific actor-approach in designing a peer review might be very useful: thinking about important actors involved, who needs to learn what from whom, who are each others peers, who should be involved at what phase, with whom are you going to design the whole process?

A peer reviewer about what she learned from the peer review: “Never impose a peer review on partners abroad. The initiative should come from the south, or together. A sense of a good humour is important to establish contact and get the trust & confidence of people. This to have open conversations. And I learned how to get people speaking about their job & organisation. I was glad all the people I interviewed loved their job so they were very willing to exchange.”

An important lesson learned in relation to this is that when you really want to stimulate mutual learning, all parties involved should feel ownership of the process from the beginning. In case of a North-South peer review we recommend involving southern organisations from the beginning by involving them in the design process (what is our shared interest, when are we satisfied, what are our main learning questions, what do we do with the results for a broader audience).

Another interesting question remains how to design such a process so that you stimulate individual learning (by the practitioner-researchers, the people participating in the conversations) as well as organisational learning. One of the purposes of the peer review is to help participating NGOs to learn about their practice: what reflections made by others are useful to consider, what do the results of the peer review mean for our way of working, and where should we continue and improve our partnerships?

Reflection by peer reviewer: “Looking back, I think we (and particularly myself) should have invested more time and energy during the preparation in thinking of how to make our organisations participate in the set-up of the peer review.”

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