

# ERNOP Research Note



Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

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## What Keeps Development Partnerships Unequal — Resources or Racialised Power?

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This article examines inequality in North–South development partnerships and is relevant for philanthropy because it shows how everyday funding practices and unspoken perceptions quietly block genuine power-shifting.

**Key research question:** How do mutual perceptions, including racial ones, play a role in hindering and fostering more equitable partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs?

Inequality in development partnerships is sustained by both structural funding arrangements and deeply embedded racialised perceptions. Financial conditions alone do not explain who ends up with power. Without deliberate attention to these perceptions, reforms to funding practices alone risk reproducing hierarchies under the banner of partnership.

[#PowerDynamics](#) [#NorthSouth](#) [#FundingPractices](#) [#RacialBias](#) [#ShiftThePower](#)

### Background & Context



- **Funding shapes power - but not fully:** Development partnerships often remain unequal because organisations controlling funds set conditions, priorities, and accountability rules. Money strongly influences decision-making power, but financial explanations alone cannot explain variation between partnerships.
- **Perceptions shape interactions:** Northern organisations often hold assumptions about Southern partners' skills, reliability, and morality. These perceptions influence trust, control, and willingness to share power, even when formal partnership rhetoric emphasises equality.
- **Racial histories still shape development practice:** International development has colonial roots that continue to affect how expertise and authority are recognised. Racialised ideas of competence and professionalism persist, often unconsciously, shaping organisational behaviour.
- **Resources and perceptions reinforce each other:** Strict funding rules can deepen distrust and negative perceptions, while negative perceptions justify tighter control over resources. This creates self-reinforcing cycles of inequality rather than pathways toward partnership.
- **Power does not shift through technical fixes alone:** Initiatives that focus only on capacity building or financial independence of Southern organisations risk missing the root causes. Without addressing mutual perceptions, reforms remain superficial.

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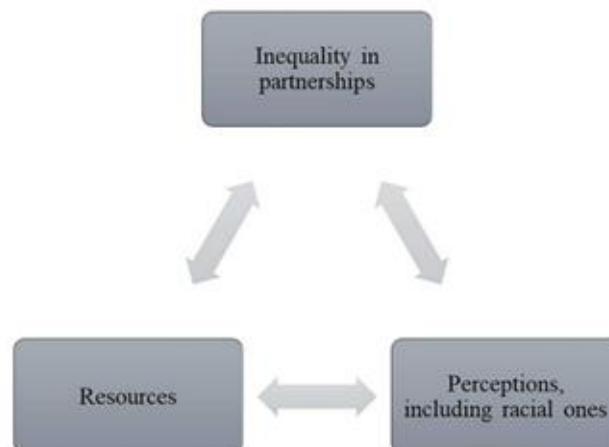
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The study uses a **mixed-methods design**, combining **surveys and in-depth interviews** with 52 respondents involved in **26 Dutch–African development partnerships in Ghana, Kenya, and Burkina Faso**.

### Take aways & Learnings



- **Three partnership narratives shape outcomes:** Northern organisations operate with negative, internally inconsistent, or reflective narratives about Southern partners. Reflective narratives are associated with more inclusive and equitable partnerships.
- **Negative perceptions lead to restrictive funding practices:** Where partners are viewed as incapable or untrustworthy, donors impose tighter controls, reducing autonomy and reinforcing inequality rather than improving effectiveness.
- **Money alone does not explain inequality:** The study finds no clear link between the share of funding provided and partnership equality. How money is governed matters more than how much is given.
- **Perceptions and funding rules co-produce inequality:** Funding mechanisms and perceptions interact continuously. Changing one without addressing the other risks reproducing existing power hierarchies.
- **Implications for philanthropic practice:** Shifting power requires joint reflection, honest conversations about bias, and changes in donor behaviour. For funders, this means pairing contractual flexibility with spaces for reflection on trust, risk, and bias, not treating these conversations as optional or uncomfortable additions.
- **Moving from vicious to virtuous cycles:** Power shifts when funders and partners actively work on both how money is governed and how partners perceive each other; focusing on only one locks partnerships into inequality.



ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2026/9 is published in March 2026 and has been written by Sarah Greenfield Clark from The Movements Trust. More information can be found at [www.ernop.eu](http://www.ernop.eu).