# Original Article

# Partnerships as Interpellation

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**Abstract**    This article explores the consequences of labelling international development relations as partnerships, as has gained prominence over the past decades. It contributes to a growing literature on the ethnography of development by suggesting that 'partner' identity is destabilized and renegotiable rather than stable and predictable. By exploring how partnership works within a system of discursive interpellation we illustrate that donors and recipients are given a new set of possibilities and constraints in the practice of shaping their relation. We exemplify this through ethnographic analyses of the political partnership between Liberia and the European Union, and the partnership between a South African and a Danish NGO. Both illustrate how neither donor nor recipient, as it is otherwise often assumed, can univocally announce a partnership. Rather, representatives of the institutions involved mutually interpellate and constantly negotiate partner identities.

Cet article analyse les conséquences de l'étiquetage des relations de développement international comme « partenariats », ce qui a pris plus d'importance ces dix dernières années. On contribue à la littérature sur l'ethnographie du développement, en suggérant que l'identité du 'partner' n'est pas stable et prévisible, mais plutôt renégociable et instable. On explore comment les partenariats fonctionnent au sein d'un système d'interpellation discursive, et on illustre comment les donneurs et les récipiendaires ont plusieurs possibilités et contraintes dans le processus qui donne forme à leur relation. On exemplifie ce procès à travers l'analyse ethnographique du partenariat entre la Liberia et l'Union Européenne, et le partenariat entre une ONG de l'Afrique du Sud et une ONG Danoise. Ces deux exemples illustrent comme ni le donneur ni le récipiendaire peuvent annoncer un partenariat non équivoquement, au contraire de ce qu'indiquent d'autres approches. Plutôt, c'est les représentatives de les institutions qui renégocient constamment et interpellent mutuellement les identités des deux partenaires.

## Introduction

The idea of partnership has gained prominence within development circles across the globe over the past decade. Among practitioners and policymakers, partnerships are seen as a possible way out of skewed donor–beneficiary power relations, donor-driven development, and the disempowerment of developing countries and communities. The notion of partnership has entered development speak from the international level in the relationship between states, as well as between supranational entities like the European Union and the African, Pacific and Caribbean countries (ACP countries) to the very local level between NGOs in the North and in the global South (European Commission, 1996; OECD-DAC, 1996). While partnerships are seen by some as a potential for development engagement on more equal terms, there are also criticisms.

Within the world of development, the criticisms are often of a technical nature, pertaining to how specific partnerships are formulated. However, there are also more fundamental criticisms, where some observers, as referenced below, suggest that partnerships are yet another way of depoliticizing development and obscuring power relations between North and South, rather than addressing them as simply 'donor speak' with no consequence. Seen from this perspective, the partnership paradigm serves as an illustration of the donor's upper hand in formulating the terms for development co-operation, rooted in historical global inequality and Western dominance. While the purpose of this article is not to lever between these positions, our claim is that for the institutions involved there are identity-related issues at stake in the partnership paradigm that cut across (and may potentially add nuance to) existing conclusions in the field. We argue that the label 'partner' is something that is constantly negotiated and earned, and that a status as partner therefore depends on a mutual recognition between the institutions in question. We also suggest that the partner label in some contexts has obtained value to such a degree that it may destabilize relations between partner institutions, and be used instrumentally to achieve other gains by donors as well as recipients.

We reach these conclusions based on ethnographic engagements with development projects. As such, our argument contributes to an emerging ethnography of development, focusing on processes of development as an ethnographic object (for example, Mosse, 2004; Olivier de Sardan, 2005; Li, 2007; Mosse and Lewis, 2008). In order to grapple conceptually with discursive and identity-related effects of labelling donors and recipients as partners, we suggest Judith Butler's notion of interpellation as a framework for such an ethnographically based analysis of partnerships. From this perspective, partnership is seen as not only a policy with specific rules and implications, but indeed also as a label of identity that bears significance to donor as well as recipient, and hence opens a discursive terrain upon which the institutions involved, over time, attempt to destabilize and renegotiate their respective partner identities. By exploring practices of partnership interpellation ethnographically, we might therefore gain insights into how partnership actors respond to and possibly instrumentalize the partner label that they have been attributed by the partnership discourse, in contrast to their previous status as either donor or recipient (Butler, 1997, 2004).

In order to explore these questions, we begin by outlining how partnership has emerged as a perceived privileged entry point to changing or addressing global inequalities within international development relations, and how this approach has been criticized from a number of different perspectives. Although these criticisms have different conclusions as to the power relations instituted or reproduced by partnerships, they tend to perceive identities of international development actors as stable and directly dependent on their position in a global hierarchy. However, exploring how partnership plays out in practice among representatives of partner institutions, institutional identities appear rather destabilized and renegotiable over time. We suggest Butler's notion of interpellation as a meaningful framework to render visible the discursive possibilities and constraints inherent to the partnership label. To illustrate these potentials and constraints empirically, in the second and third sections of the article, we move the analysis to Africa and to two concrete examples of partnerships. In the first empirical section of the article, we explore the fraught political partnership between EU representatives in Liberia, and the Liberian state. This analysis suggests that, despite the evidently different positions in the global hierarchy occupied by these two 'partners' and the dependency of this small African state on the EU as a donor, the discourse of political partnership has produced for the EU a form of dependency on Liberia's acknowledgement of its status as partner, and hence has necessitated a renegotiation of power relations between the two. In the following section, we explore the partnership between a South African NGO and a

Danish human rights organization to illustrate just how destabilized and negotiated their institutional identities were.

Part of the reason for the complex nature of partnership is evident the moment we engage the often entangled institutional identities of donors and recipients. We believe there is an important methodological point in this. When we explore the relations and the acts of interpellation from an ethnographic point of view, actors become more rounded, caught between different (and in some cases contradictory) institutional mandates, requirements and identities. Notably in our analysis of the EU–Liberia partnership, these complex day-to-day institutional dynamics become apparent. While the aim is to understand the EU as an actor in relation to Liberia, when dealing with EU and member state representatives on the ground, it quickly becomes clear that they act as manifestations of the EU as a whole; as the member state they may represent; and as negotiators or mediators (Merry, 2006) between institutional demands from EU headquarters in Brussels, own interpretations of policy documents, and their day-to-day relations to Liberian officials. This should also be understood in the context of the multiple institutional and state actors comprising the EU, representing a myriad of different and often opposing agendas and demands, and at the same time striving towards recognition as one global actor (in external relations). The EU is very obviously a highly complex and composite actor; we argue that this element of complexity and identity struggle must be taken into account in any analysis of partnerships between 'international actors'. As such, the same goes for our analysis of the partnership encounter between the two NGOs. Both cases show the importance of focusing on implicated actors in partnership through situated (ethnographic) analyses rather than only relying on textual analyses of policy documents. At the same time, in describing the two partnership relations, we find it necessary to use the labels 'the EU', 'Liberia' and so on, as what our analysis aims to show is how these accumulated (if not imagined) identities are represented and reproduced.

Apart from theoretical and policy literature on partnerships, the empirical material for this analysis consists of interviews and observations in Monrovia in June 2010, carried out by Sigrid.[1] The objective of this field study was to gather accounts about the EU–Liberia partnership from officials from both sides in the partnership, resulting in recorded conversations with nine European officials and eight Liberian government officials. The second case study is based on process evaluations, reports, conversations and reflections on a long-standing engagement in the partnership in which Steffen has been involved, between a Danish and a South African NGO.[2] Our analysis is clearly not comparative in the sense of concluding on the similarities or differences between the two partnerships; rather it explores the usefulness of the concept of partnership as interpellation through the lens of different ethnographic archives. In this way, it resembles what Melhuus (2002) has called a 'cross-cultural comparison' in which we look at a concept from different ethnographic angles in order to explore its theoretical usefulness.

## Partnership Conceptualized

Especially within the last decade, partnership has become a preferred description by development actors of aid relationships between donors in the North and recipients in the South. This discursive renaming of donor–recipient relations implies a distribution of roles where donors to a lesser degree than has previously been the case prescribe and condition the aid they give. This 're-naming' also ascribes a more active role to recipient countries, expected to take ownership and responsibility for their development (Maxwell and Riddell, 1998; Fowler, 2000; Abrahamsen, 2004; Baaz, 2005; Mosse and Lewis, 2008). In this respect,

partnership as a discourse signifies a shift from unequal power relations where donors possess both the funds and the initiative to distribute them, allegedly towards a more equal relation where recipients are, in the words of the World Bank, 'in the driver's seat' of their own development; in this rendition, donors merely assist developing countries in achieving their goals (OECD-DAC, 1996; Mercer, 2003; Abrahamsen, 2004; Baaz, 2005).

Partnership strategies within development circles gained prominence in the mid-1990s as trendsetting donor agencies began to suggest that a transformation of donor and recipient roles was necessary to achieve the aims of long-term development. With the 'Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness' of 2005, partnership emerged as a framework for cooperation among more than one hundred donor- and developing-country governments, multilateral donor agencies and regional development banks (Foresti *et al*, 2006; Andersen and Therkildsen, 2007). Partnership was understood by protagonists as being in contrast to donor-formulated economic and political conditionalities, criticized for being inconsistent with developing countries' sovereignty and perceived by some as 'paternalistic' in predefining what would be strategically best for developing countries (Holland, 2002; Baaz, 2005). As Maxwell and Riddell (1998) suggest, it draws upon 'participatory' approaches to development, in which power relations between donors and recipients are transformed through the application of local resources and knowledge to the formulation of development strategies, rather than of donor-imposed ideas. Following the participatory philosophy, participation contributes to empowering the 'poor, excluded, marginalised, subordinate and powerless' (Chambers, 2009, p. 101), to the benefit of both donors and recipients. In the same way, partnership can be seen as based upon the idea that power relations can be changed, and that this change does not necessitate a loss for any of the parties involved; rather it is beneficial for donors and recipients alike (Chambers, 2009).

However, the partnership approach has also been met with criticism from the worlds of both development and academia. These discussions have been rich in detail and scope and will not be rehearsed here in detail. For the purpose of this article, we find it useful to divide the criticisms into three positions that, while different, share certain analytical baggage. The first critical position views partnership strategies as well-meaning initiatives facing technical challenges in relation to composition and implementation. Representative of this position, Maxwell and Riddell (1998) stress the contractual aspect of partnerships, and focus on what elements have been integrated into a given partnership model. In this way, the contractual aspects render it flexible and predictable for both sides in the partnership; it is hence possible to 'flesh the rhetoric of partnership into the reality of a working relationship' (Maxwell and Riddell, 1998, p. 267).

In contrast, a second position argues that partnership is mere rhetoric or political spin, or as Fowler (2000) puts it, a 'something nothing word' that requires critical development analysts to ask, 'who gains, who loses and why?' (p. 3). Partnerships will not address fundamental imbalances between donors and recipients; at best they are irrelevant, and at worst they are counterproductive to the empowerment of developing countries. Here, the focus is on partnership as a result of a skewed power balance between the partners, or simply as 'donor speak'. Since partnerships are contractual agreements with mutual commitments, more often than not they risk becoming a new kind of conditionality, reproducing donor and Western dominance (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 1998). As Crawford concludes in his 2003 study of the partnership between Indonesia, and the UNDP and the World Bank, the partnership was 'externally shaped, driven and influenced by international agencies', and hence merely reproduced existing power relations (Crawford, 2003).

A third strand of partnership literature draws attention to the partnership discourse and its ability to shape identities. One of its most prominent contributors, Abrahamsen (2004), informed by Foucault's work on governmentality, argues that partnership discourse works as a form of

productive, disciplinary power, shaping the behaviour and interests of states and state actors, and constituting developing countries as 'capable agents, responsible for their own future' (p. 1464). Seen from this critical perspective, partnerships are at once voluntary and coercive, as developing countries are not necessarily forced into them, but face negative consequences if they do not join or comply (Abrahamsen, 2004). Baaz' (2005) post-colonial perspective on partnership relations similarly explores how the recipient remains in the eyes of the donor an object for improvement, its avenues for resistance limited to '[creating spaces] for manoeuvre within the rules set up by the donor' – a behaviour that from a donor's point of view, according to Baaz, will only emphasize the need for corrective measures (p. 75).

The governmentality perspective and likeminded identity perspectives on partnership (for example, Harrison, 2004; Baaz, 2005) stress how zero-sum or plus-sum perceptions of power are not entirely descriptive of comprehensive development discourses, and that partnership discourses also work productively (Li, 2007). With its focus on technologies of governance, however, this perspective, as it has been used so far, does not sufficiently examine the possibilities of rejecting, subverting or re-signifying partner identity, but rather seems to agree to the assumption that donors and recipients are in fact locked in predictable, historical power relations and that their position in this relation will determine their degree of exposure to the partnership discourse. Proponents of the 'technical' approach such as Mallarangeng and Van Tuijl (2004) criticize this view, and insist – as a direct response to Crawford's (2003) criticism – that partnerships may indeed be devised and designed by both recipient and donor (Mallarangeng and Van Tuijl, 2004). However, while acknowledging the possibility of recipient agency, this position is, again, based on an assumption that both partners see benefits in engaging in a development partnership in the first place. What we would like to know is, rather, what happens if one part does not accept the concept of partnership to begin with – and what approach would help us understand this aspect of partnership in more detail.

While the above perspectives do look into the power of partnership, we find that certain questions remain unanswered in existing analyses: Is the degree of agency of the respective partners – or the subjectifying effects of the partnership discourse – necessarily dependent on an *a priori* perceived underlying power balance? If partnership discourse is so strong, and potentially works as a subtle kind of conditionality, why does it seldom produce desired outcomes in the form of (self-)disciplined developed liberal democracies fulfilling donor demands of good governance and human rights? Finally, and perhaps most overlooked by other comparable analyses, how do partnerships transform the donor's identity, and to what consequence? In many ways, this approach resonates with Mosse and Lewis' (2008) exploration of brokerage in development, as well as scholars like Olivier de Sardan (2005), and their focus on the practices and actors that populate the world of development, and how discourses and practices are translated through development networks (see also Jensen and Jefferson, 2009). By approaching partnership from the perspective of 'interpellation', we may deal with the above sets of questions heads on, as the analytical focus shifts towards the effects and importance of the partner label itself. With this perspective, we also take into account that partnership is a mutual effort to which both donors and recipients are susceptible. These effects do not depend entirely on a perceived macro-level power balance; they are continuously negotiated on a micro-level among various institutional representations. While we are indebted to and inspired by the governmentality approach to partnership, in our analysis Butler's take on interpellation helps us focus directly on the fragility of a discourse, as it not only brings a subject into being but also provides tools for appropriation and resistance (Hansson and Hellberg, 2015). In the following, we give a more detailed account of the interpellation concept and its relevance to the analysis of partnerships.

## Partnership as Interpellation

The concept of interpellation, as put forward by Butler, describes a process through which a subject is constituted discursively as a consequence of it being recognized and named. Naming, in Butler's (1997, 2004) perspective, constitutes subjects rather than simply affecting them; it confers a specific identity upon them. Butler (1997), most known for her work within gender studies, has introduced the concept as part of her general theory on speech acts and political discourse, with an interest in not only understanding how discourses in general and naming in particular may affect their subjects, but also how subjects may 'disrupt and subvert the effects produced by speech', and use them as 'scenes of agency'. How does this approach help us understand partnerships? Within the partnership paradigm, donors and recipients are subjected to new aid modalities and a new sharing of responsibility, but also to a new *identity* as 'partners'. Looking at development partnerships through the lens of interpellation allows us to understand partnerships as processes of subjectification, within which donors and recipients negotiate and temporarily fix their partner identities. In this process, through the 'partnership address', specific identity is conferred upon donors and recipients. This brings with it specific connotations and constraints, while at the same time allowing for donors and recipients to ascribe new meaning to the partner identity through their performances. 'Performances' are here to be understood as the reiterative material or discursive everyday practices that seek to sustain the idea of coherent identities and that are carried out by the actors that represent these identities – in this case, the identities of aid donors and recipients. As a consequence, interpellation allows us to look at the donor–recipient relation as an ongoing performance between 'multilayered, contradictory, translocal ensemble[s] of institutions, practices and people' (Sharma and Gupta, 2006, p. 6). Hence, partnerships are not relations between coherent and bounded entities with an *a priori* established division of power. This shifts the analysis of partnership from the abstract partnership between international actors – states or NGOs – described in most of the existing literature, towards the everyday partnership between donor and recipient representatives, within which hierarchy, power and identity are fragile entities and subject to continuous negotiation.

As subjects within the interpellation framework are *called* into being, they never exist in isolation, but always in relation to other subjects that address them through interpellation (Butler, 2004, p. 130). Interpellation hence entails an understanding of subjectivity as relational and mutually constitutive. In relation to partnership, this suggests that the recipient is dependent on the donor's recognition in order to meaningfully be able to call itself a partner and vice versa (Butler, 1997). In this way, partnership can be understood as a mutually constitutive endeavour; it might establish a fragile position also for the donor, insofar as the donor attaches importance to its identity as a partner: the recipient is left with some leeway to define the relation, and hence with a possibility to refuse to address the donor as a partner.

In Butler's theory, this degree of 'discursive agency' is granted to subjects because speech is always already removed from its source and hence from its expressed intent and authority (Jagger, 2008). This opens up the possibility for the partnership interpellation to be interpreted differently from what might have been strategically and originally intended. As partnership is continuously performed by donors and recipients, its meaning is repeated, but also potentially re-signified. Hence, while interpellation is a matter of constituting a subject, it always 'runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use the language to counter the [interpellation]' (Butler, 1997, p. 2). In relation to our concern here, partnership can be played out as a relation of mutual dependence of donors and recipients that to some extent has the power to fragment or even dissolve institutional identity. Below we will illustrate how the status as 'partner' may in itself be desirable to the donor, and that partnership can in this way leave the donor in a vulnerable position, dependent upon the recipient's acknowledgement of its partner

identity. This vulnerable position is brought about by Butler's insistence that identity cannot just be understood as something one chooses freely; it is constituted relationally.

## Negotiations of Partnerships

Seeing partnerships as interpellation allows for a perception of power in donor–recipient relations that is not only discursively constitutive for recipients, but also for donors, and which not only constitutes its subjects but also opens for discursive agency in the form of 'unexpected and enabling response[s]' (Butler, 1997, p. 2). Actors in partnership are cast as mutually dependent, as they fundamentally depend on the address by their counterparts for their constitution as 'partners' (Butler, 1997), and while they may very well be in the throes of structural economic inequality, their navigation in the everyday practice of partnership can not only be seen as directly informed by a hierarchical position of a stable institution in an economic system, but also as an ongoing negotiation between destabilized and fragile institutional actors. As the two following case studies suggest, rather than reproducing the image of Northern dominance in Africa, a study of partnership as interpellation illustrates how partnership might offer discursive agency not only to donors but to recipients as well. In the first case, we trace the fraught partnership between the EU and the state of Liberia, illustrating that – in spite of the enormous financial power of the EU aid system – the EU and its member state representatives struggle to become visible and relevant as partners towards the Liberian government, while the latter, through what can be seen as discursive agency, in some instances has refused the EU's partnership ambitions, and in others manages to use the EU's invisibility to attain its own goals. In the second case, we explore the relationship between a Danish and a South African NGO, and follow how institutional identities were constantly renegotiated and even re-appropriated by staff of both organizations reconfiguring the relationship in ways that cannot be explained by the financial differential between the two organizations.

### The Liberia–EU Partnership

The relationship between the EU and Liberia, as part of a broader partnership framework between the EU and 78 ACP countries, has since its inception been signified as a 'partnership' in contrast to a historical and postcolonial relationship. Since the 1990s, equal relations characterized by mutual responsibility and with developing country ownership have been guiding principles for the partnership's aid programmes. The partnership discourse has lately been further entrenched through the introduction of bilateral 'political dialogues', where the EU and its partners discuss issues of democracy, human rights and good governance. While these initiatives are infused by ideals of creating 'real partnerships', there have been questions raised whether the partnership strategies are tools for the EU to influence issues otherwise considered internal and sovereign to its development country partners. In other words, following critiques of the partnership discourse, might partnerships obscure an inherently unequal relation in which the EU calls the shots and overrules ACP country sovereignty?

   The interviews conducted with officials from EU member states and EU institutions in Liberia in 2010 suggest that partnership is acted out differently from its ideal, but for reasons other than the economic and institutionalized power differential between the EU and Liberia. EU and EU member state officials in Liberia explain how they are assigned inferior positions, especially as compared with representatives from the United States.[3] Much to their frustration, they get the impression that the Liberian government does not take the EU seriously as a partner and does not act in accordance with partnership ideals.[4] Despite the fact that the EU is the second largest donor

to Liberia, the former, according to these representatives, is almost invisible in the minds of the Liberian government and the general Liberian population, and is not accorded the recognition and influence it deserves.[5] The invisibility of member states and EU institutions assumes almost physical manifestation in the limited number of comparatively small EU member state delegations in the Liberian capital of Monrovia. It is with some frustration verging on resignation that officials explain how the 'political dialogue' intrinsic to partnership has rarely taken place in Liberia, and is most of the time replaced by a 'silent dialogue' where only the EU is speaking.

One EU representative describes the relation as one in which the Liberian government – and specifically the president – is 'not taking [us] serious as a partner … or, maybe [the president] is taking us seriously as a partner, but she's not giving the room for discussions. (…) It's just, you don't have any voice. You are not invited to discuss'.[6] The European officials expect to be assigned a position in which 'you have something to say and your opinion is valued'. The representative contrasts the situation in Liberia to the EU's relation to Sierra Leone, where the EU is allegedly respected, and seen as 'something important' (see note 6).

Several of the officials cite, as an illustration of the dynamics of the EU–Liberia relation, the case of Liberia reintroducing the death penalty into national legislation in 2008. This went against the official EU-ACP position on death penalty as agreed within the framework of the partnership agreement, and a collective Council of the European Union in Brussels had officially stated their objection to the decision. After receiving no official response from the Liberian government, however, EU and member state officials in Liberia refrained from taking further steps to influence the decision through political dialogue or from taking retributive measures. One EU representative described how Liberia's response – or lack thereof – was unsatisfactory, while not altogether surprising, being symptomatic of the relation.[7] Another representative of the Delegation of the European Union in Liberia explains that the concept of political dialogue is perceived in general as practically 'utopian' within the framework of the current EU–Liberia relation.[8] This is backed up by the comments of a member state representative, explaining that in their view, the Liberian government would 'feel they are being examined. I don't think they see us as a partner to talk to and discuss openly'.[9]

Shifting the focus to how Liberia performs as a 'partner', interviews with Liberian officials support a narrative in which the EU as a donor plays a relatively minor role, and in which, if anything, the EU is perceived as a partner in line with any other of Liberia's donors, with no particularly unique demands. As such, none of these officials recognized the specific political partnership between Liberia and the EU. Liberian officials dealing with both the political and financial aspects of donor relations describe how the motivation for engaging in any form of cooperation with the EU relates to its financial importance. As such, political partnership – or partnership altogether – is reduced to a matter of simply complying with donor demands. One Liberian official from the Ministry of Finance describes the relation as one in which Liberia maintains its eligibility to receive funds by honouring EU demands.[10] He describes the disbursement of aid funds as a bargain in which the donor has to live up to its commitments and disburse funds as soon as the recipient has met its obligations. For Liberia, the official explains, meeting donor obligations can sometimes be challenging, but as the country is so 'destroyed', immediate disbursement from the donors is crucial (see note 10). As an official in the Ministry of Public Works explains, when donors pose demands to Liberia, it is rarely a question for Liberia *whether* to accommodate these demands, but *how* to accommodate them, as they are 'a matter of compliance', prompted by the fact that '[the donors] really, really want to help us … and we really, really need the help'.[11] In this way, partnership is presented as a form of conditionality, and Liberia is presented as a passive, economically dependent recipient in contrast to the ideal image of the active partner country that takes initiative and ownership of its own development.

Ironically, performing a role of weakness is key to economic 'success'. As Liberia in this way remains passive towards the EU's interpellation attempts, Liberia also succeeds in redefining the meaning of partnership by reproducing a well-known give-and-take relation between a weaker and a dominant part.

The narrative of the weak state in the throes of conditionality can be seen repeated by the Liberian president in her speech on the occasion of the annual 'Europe Day' in 2010. Here, first, the EU's ambassador had expressed hopes that the EU–Liberia relation would grow into a closer and more political partnership as '(t)here are values and principles that we share, there are concerns, objectives, ideas and suggestions that we need to discuss in the spirit of the political dialogue we agreed to hold under the Cotonou Partnership Agreement (…)' (Delegation of the European Union to Liberia, 2010). In her response, the Liberian president expressed gratitude for the EU's continued financial contributions to Liberia. She described the EU–Liberia relation as a 'strong partnership', however, with no references to more political dimensions of partnership. Instead, the president highlighted Liberia's status as a 'fragile state' and the derived need for increased funds from foreign donors such as the EU, by stating that the government welcomed the EU's recognition of Liberia as a 'fragile state'. This had been long overdue, she noted, adding that Liberia also welcomed the additional resources made available as a consequence of this recognition (Government of Liberia, 2010).

By insisting on and internalizing its economically inferior, dependent and passive position, the president contributed to deepening the disjuncture between the two partners' partnership narratives, through what can be called discursive agency. In some ways, this contrasts with Abrahamsen's (2004, p. 1462) claim (paraphrasing Mercer, 2003) that '[d]ifferent actors in development partnerships employ different strategies to achieve particular outcomes, depending on where they are positioned within an asymmetrical framework of power relations. Even for some of the weaker partners there may be good reasons for "performing their role in the partnership" '. In this particular case, the 'weaker' partner successfully refuses to perform the partnership role cut out for it in the partnership agreement. Instead, Liberia sticks to a position of weakness that legitimizes a continued flow of aid funds while ignoring the increased political responsibility and ownership associated with the partnership paradigm. This is potentially subversive as the donor cannot in its sole discretion turn around the unequal relation between a strong donor and a weak recipient. In a paradoxical way, this demonstration of power evens out the relation – while frustrating the EU's expectations of an 'equal partnership'.

In summary, analysing partnerships as interpellation explains how partnership might be an identity attractive to both the recipient country and the donor. The donor's potentially strong wish to be perceived as a 'partner' might hence become an instrument of power in the hands of the recipient, and opens up the possibility for the recipient of refusing to recognize the donor's identity as partner. Partnership is therefore not only a question of aid modalities in a strictly technical sense (a division of responsibilities, recipient ownership of poverty reduction strategies and so forth), it relates closely to perceptions of identities and the specific relations that are performed against the financial exchange between the global North and the global South. Hence, when donors strive to perform a specific role, they are to some extent left vulnerable and dependent, much like a recipient country striving for equality or eligibility of funds from its donors. As partnerships are mutually constitutive, the EU and its member state representatives in ACP countries are dependent upon the partner countries' willingness to become partners. If the recipient countries are not willing to play along, paraphrasing Taussig (1999), the EU institutions in Liberia and in Brussels are defaced as donor, frustratingly caught in the discursive position of historical oppressor rather than contemporary benefactor.

**The NGO Partnership**

While the previous section described a high-level partnership between global and national players like the EU and Liberia, in this section we focus on the equally fraught relationship between two human rights organizations – one Danish and the other one South African – in which we were involved as participant observers. While there are huge differences in scale, arguably the relative power differential between northern and southern NGOs was not incomparable to the EU–Liberia partnership, especially on the ground in Monrovia. Furthermore, from the beginning partnership was a central component in how the Danish NGO (henceforth DK) understood the relationship with the South African organization (henceforth ZA). Finally, as in the EU–Liberia partnership, the relationship was constituted by individuals as much as by institutions.[12]

The DK–ZA partnership began in 2004 on the assumptions of a shared human rights platform and an avowed commitment to learn from one another as equal partners. Both organizations were seen to have strengths to bring to the table in terms of experiences and knowledge. The commitment to partnership was inscribed centrally in policy documents and project descriptions. However, relatively quickly, it turned into a classical relationship between a donor, never quite happy with the performances of the partner, and a recipient organization constantly anxious about its standing with the moneyed men and women of the north. As the relationship became an issue of narrative reports, logical framework, indicators and performance, questions about the quality of the partnership were raised on both sides. DK staff began to question the (e)quality of its partner. As with the EU–Liberia partnership, the aspirations of partnership seemed frustrated as ZA voiced increasing hesitations about the requirements of its donor. One ZA project coordinator asserted that 'we are being showered in mails', hence pointing to the unreasonable demands from a donor concerned with control, not partnership. DK staff became increasingly frustrated at being assigned the position of 'donor' and saw remarks such as the one above as attempts to disguise the real administrative incompetency and the lack of communication on the part of its partner. Not willing to act like the donor and tell its dependent what to do, but clearly not considered a partner, DK staff were positioned uncomfortably between two chairs.

However, after a difficult beginning, in 2007 the relationship improved during an annual meeting designed to strengthen the partnership between the two organizations. First, and central for the change, was that the collaboration had been upgraded in ZA and more senior and highly competent people were in charge. DK saw this as an indication of how seriously ZA took the partnership. Second, what became known as an 'advisory group' was formalized, where all actors in the two organizations involved with the project were present. Thus, the group comprised administrative staff, project staff and researchers. Within the group, staff members from each of the two organizations were paired in professional relationships. Third, a process evaluation of the partnership was organized, facilitated by an outside consultant, rather than a standard output-focused evaluation. The work with the process evaluation between late 2007 and mid-2008 led to complaints and power relations being discussed relatively openly.

The external consultant, well versed in organizational processes, carried out interviews in Denmark and South Africa with key staff of both organizations about the partnership, its successes and shortcomings. For both DK and ZA staff, the report made for difficult reading. Among DK staff the reaction was one of relative frustration. In one conversation, one DK staff member said, 'We have done all this work and the evaluation, and still they are complaining about the mails and the reporting. It is as if they haven't been listening'. ZA staff were equally upset about the response of DK staff, as well as about the findings of the consultant. In one conversation between Steffen and a centrally placed ZA staff, the latter reminisced, 'She (the consultant) wrote that we acted like victims. We said, "Hey, we don't act like victims" but

maybe we did. That got us thinking'. The same soul-searching took place among DK staff. Indeed, DK staff working with ZA tried to export the idea of the process evaluation inside the main organization – although with little success.

These activities, the process evaluation and the advisory group, helped to destabilize the institutional identities and hierarchies in different ways. For instance, in relation to the cross-institutional collaboration, two health professionals, involved in assessing health needs of torture survivors, affiliated to the DK and ZA, respectively, teamed up and co-authored several articles. A DK researcher and a ZA legal expert teamed up and finalized a research project on the prevalence of violence as reported in the media. A DK legal advisor worked with a central ZA advocacy person around new opportunities opened up by international legal reforms on the right to rehabilitation for disabled. A DK health professional teamed up with a ZA researcher to design a new (highly innovative) M&E system. Finally, ZA and DK administrative staff collaborated on improving financial management and reporting in the partnership. These cross-institutional collaborations acted as catalysts for establishing spaces in which it was possible temporarily to destabilize institutional identities in ways that did not compromise institutional loyalties. These cross-institutional collaborations evolved and developed incrementally over time to achieve the status of strategy, especially after the process evaluation. What became increasingly clear was that partnership depended on staff members from both organizations taking responsibility for the other's well-being. Hence, when one DK staff member (Steffen) declined the invitation to co-author an article on the grounds that he did not think he had contributed enough to warrant co-authorship, it was discussed in the process evaluation as refusing common responsibility and recognition.

These cross-institutional collaborations enabled a temporary respite from (and destabilization of) institutional identities and hierarchies because they involved common responsibilities, common tasks and little concern for financial issues. They were not based – to the same extent as institutional duties – on an administrative culture of accountability (narrative reports, budgets, logical framework and so forth) that forms an important part of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness from 2005 and the DAC criteria from the mid-1990s. Rather, because people were made responsible for each other across the different organizations, the relationship in these professionally based teams was built on trust and professional ethics rather than money. Power relations were not disbanded or done away with; rather, they were temporarily relegated and confined to parts of the relationship between the organizations allowing other parts, also temporarily, to exist in a different space with different professional rules. Hence, the destabilization of identities allowed for the establishment of spaces where money and therefore the inequality were potentially less intrusive, rather than in our first case study where paradoxically the 'strong' ended up feeling frustration and a sense of emasculation. Crucially, these spaces were based on the realization that partnership, understood as equal relations between unequal actors, is constitutively impossible to establish. Power can be navigated only by realizing its omnipotence. These dynamics are difficult to account for within much existing literature on partnership. We have proposed exploring such destabilized identities and hierarchies through the lens of interpellation; interpellation theory works exactly with the notion that identities are relational rather than given and stable positions. However, illustrating another of Butler's (1993, p. 15) points, such relations are inherently unstable and need to be performed over and over again, reiterated, to be tangibly real. Hence, in 2011 to the initial irritation of DK staff (Steffen especially), ZA expressed renewed misgivings about the quality of the partnership. As one ZA staff said during a meeting, 'It is not just about the money; it is the way we talk where you can hear the differences between the North and the South'. These remarks, absolutely fair but less well received (Steffen whispered to a colleague from DK, 'Here she goes again …'), necessitated

yet another round of deliberation and confrontation over power, hierarchies, colonial histories and identities.

## Partnership Revisited

In this article we have argued that exploring partnership as interpellation allows for understanding it as a discourse that destabilizes institutional identities and opens for an ongoing renegotiation of power relations through the performance of partnership identity. Building on Butler's radical understanding of identities, we argue that also institutional identities can be understood as relationally constructed through processes of interpellation and through its continued articulation and performance, in addition to (and possibly beyond) the significance of their positions in a global hierarchy. The interpellation perspective offers a view of identity – be it individual or institutional – as formed through relations. Since the partnership paradigm is, if anything, founded on a mutual redefinition of subject categories, both donor and recipient identities can in this perspective be seen as destabilized and opened for negotiation, in the sense that they depend on the other partner's acknowledgement of their self-identification as partner. As a consequence, donors and recipients become co-dependent and are both given the opportunity to refuse recognition of the partnership identity of the other. Partnership in this way offers what Butler calls 'discursive agency' to not only the donor but also the recipient, and the various attempts at discursive agency therefore become the focus for the analysis.

This is in contrast to much scholarly work on partnership, where some describe partnership as a way out of unequal global relationships, others as an approach that needs fine-tuning, and others again as a subtle or self-disciplinary form of conditionality, obscuring insurmountable inequalities between the North and South. Contrary to this, we suggest a focus on the ongoing negotiations of identity between the partners; not only on an abstract, institutional or 'international' level, but also in the everyday performances of the relation among the actors that represent different partners.

The two partnerships analysed in our case studies illustrate the constitutive fragility of the partnership paradigm, which might not be immediately visible in all partnerships, but which is nevertheless a predicament for them as it is for all other processes of subjectification: one side cannot univocally and successfully announce a partnership; one can only become a partner if the other partner interpellates one as such. In the analysis of the EU–Liberia partnership, we argued that EU and EU member countries in Liberia attributed such importance to the partnership label that Liberian government officials on their side were in a position to refuse to act as partners to the EU and instead insist on invoking and reproducing the historically unequal relationship between them. In our second case of the DK–ZA partnership, we showed the ongoing negotiations over the meanings of partnership. While a temporarily stabilized and 'true' partnership appeared possible, it was constitutively unstable and always up for renegotiation. In both cases, it was exactly the destabilization of identities that made possible a renegotiation of power relations otherwise deemed to be skewed in favour of the donor. This can be seen in the EU officials' frustration in the face of Liberia's insistence on being the 'weaker' part in some cases, and in others refusing to co-operate on what are officially agreed to be partner issues, as well as the cross-institutional collaboration that developed incrementally over time in the NGO encounter.

One way of exploring such relationships is through examining articulations and everyday performances of the human representatives and performers of the institutional identities, caught in a variety of dilemmas and contradictions, rather than looking at the institutions as abstract,

intangible forms. In this way it becomes visible what meaning, expectations and importance is attributed to the partner label, and it can be used as a means to identify what consequences this might have for other aspects of the relation. While the interpellation perspective does not in itself explain why a specific identity has importance to development actors, it draws attention to the fact that it might have specific importance to begin with, and how we might grasp and conceptualize the consequences thereof.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1. The European officials are from the EU Delegation in Monrovia and from EU member state missions of Germany, France, Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom, partly or entirely dealing with political relations to Liberia. The latter did not have a direct mandate from the EU as an institution, but at the same time did constitute the group of officials that referred to the European Council in Brussels on political matters (the 'Head of Missions' group). Designating them as 'European officials' indicates that these are European representatives, but not necessarily representatives of the EU Delegation in Liberia. The Liberian officials are officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the 'Governance Commission', the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs. As a group, they are not direct counterparts to the European officials. However, all of them represent Liberian government institutions and deal with a diverse range of international partners, including the EU, as an integrated part of their work.
2. The two ethnographic encounters are clearly different as Sigrid encountered her interlocutors as a researcher interested in the political partnership between Liberia and the EU, while Steffen was for all intents and purposes an insider. Both positions have their merits and trade-offs. In the writing of the article as well as during the encounters described, both Sigrid and Steffen have reflected on their own role and its importance for the analysis. As one example described below, Steffen got irritated with the constant mentioning of power relations, drawing on South Africa's racial and colonial past, which he experienced from his South African partners. While writing this article, he realized that this was in fact indicative of how he was being interpellated. only to realize during the writing of this article that this was in fact indicative of the way he was being interpellated.
3. Personal interviews with officials from three EU member state missions, 17 June and 30 June 2010; personal interview with official from the Delegation of the European Union to Liberia, 16 June 2010.
4. Personal interview with official from EU member state mission, 15 June 2010.
5. Personal interviews with officials from four EU member state missions, 17 June, 30 June and 2 July 2010; personal interviews with officials from the Delegation of the European Union to Liberia, 16 June and 23 June 2010.
6. Personal interview with official from EU member state mission, 15 June 2010.
7. Personal interview with official from EU member state mission, 21 June 2010.
8. Personal interview with official from the Delegation of the European Union to Liberia, 16 June 2010.
9. Personal interview with official from EU member state mission, 15 June 2010.
10. Personal interview with official from Liberia's Ministry of Finance, Monrovia, Liberia, 30 June 2010.
11. Personal interview with officials from Liberia's Ministry of Public Works, 17 June 2010.
12. This section is based on years of engagement and collaboration as a researcher from the Danish NGO with the South African organization and it might be a stretch to talk about participant observation. However, Steffen does attempt to remain analytical in this particular article. In this capacity, questions of positionality are clearly central. Given the subject under analysis here, these issues sometimes include race, gender and generation and they always include issues around Northern versus Southern positionality.

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