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‘Fundermediaries’ in Nairobi, Kenya: Development Partnerships in the Aid Chain

Lise Woensdregt and Lorraine Nencel

ABSTRACT

By representing the voice of communities, community-based organizations (CBOs) are increasingly joining development partnerships. This article explores the inherently contradictory relationship between ‘voice raising’ and the politics of listening. While academia has mostly focused on the inclusion of CBOs, few studies have approached this subject from the perspective of the listening practices of ‘fundermediaries’ (a portmanteau term combining ‘funder’ and ‘intermediary’). This ethnographic research on a CBO led by male sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya, illustrates that the listening ability of fundermediaries hinges on their position in the aid chain, and specifically on the dynamics of their own accountability. The analysis distinguishes between two partnership types. The first uses a pragmatic approach, which ultimately limits the channels for CBOs to be included and heard, resulting in them having to ‘make noise’ to ensure they are heard. The second creates more possibilities to listen, engages in constructive dialogues with partner CBOs, and includes the ideas and expertise of CBOs in development strategies; hence, CBOs feel heard and are positive about these partnerships. Improved listening practices facilitate opportunities to reconfigure the position of the different actors in development partnerships and can benefit both the positions of CBOs in the aid chain and the programmatic outcomes of fundermediaries.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the official development aid (ODA) system increasingly includes community-based organizations (CBOs) in development partnerships. During the 1980s and 1990s, development partnerships arose as a new direction in ‘planned development’ (Li, 2007) as a way to promote horizontal collaborations between Northern and Southern organizations (Contu and Girei, ...
Lise Woensdregt and Lorraine Nencel

The partnership discourse promotes CBOs as vehicles of change. By being locally embedded and connected with communities on the ground, CBOs enjoy legitimacy among their members. Actors in the ODA system consider these complementary capacities of CBOs critical for sustainable and successful development responses (Skovdal et al., 2017).

Despite the wide acceptance of partnerships, what they constitute both theoretically and practically is a matter of debate (Chillag et al., 2002; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The dominant development discourse tends to approach partnerships from a pragmatic-instrumental perspective that treats them as inherently progressive; they are understood to be based on equality, trust and mutuality in relationships and to ensure that recipients of aid are empowered as agents of their own development (Barnes et al., 2016). These optimistic yet vague and possibly euphemistic descriptions of the qualities of partnerships have made the concept popular, evidenced in the diverse set of actors who use it, including NGOs and other organizations (Chandhoke, 2002; Menashy, 2019). Notwithstanding the popularity of partnership approaches in international development practice, and despite the ambitions to include CBOs in development partnerships, evidence increasingly shows that the current structuring of aid chains limits CBOs’ possibilities to participate, as the structure is inherently unequal from the start (Aveling, 2010; Cornish et al., 2012; Skovdal et al., 2017).

Although the precise structure of aid-chain partnerships varies for each project, organization and CBO, it generally involves at least three core actors: the donor, a ‘fundermediary’ NGO that may be based or located in the global South but receives funding from the global North,1 and a CBO that is often located in the global South. The use of the term ‘fundermediary’ (a portmanteau of ‘funder’ and ‘intermediary’) merits further explanation. We understand fundermediaries to be distinct actors in the aid chain. They have direct access to substantial, mostly Northern-based funding, which they distribute to CBOs through contracts to implement groundwork (Kelly and Birdsall, 2010). Conceptualizing these NGOs as fundermediaries draws attention to their institutionalized place in the aid chain and distinguishes them from other NGOs who do not distribute funding to CBOs, but rather who offer CBOs resources through services, training or other actions. As we will illustrate below, due to this set-up, the Northern partners remain in disproportional control of financial and programmatic decision making.

This article explores the implementation of partnerships in the aid chain in practice. It specifically examines two intimately related practices in partnerships that are essential to promoting democratic collaboration: listening, and what has been labelled in the literature as the ‘inclusion of voices’

1. Rather than seeing these in terms of geographical location only, we identify as ‘Northern’ those NGOs that have direct access to substantial, mostly Northern-based funding, and distribute this funding to other organizations, many of which are in the global South (see van Wessel et al., 2020).
of marginalized communities (Kamstra, 2017; Narayanan et al., 2015). Indeed, partnership policies increasingly promote the inclusion of community voices as a prerequisite for funding collective strategic action (Cornish et al., 2012; Skovdal et al., 2017). Until now, scholars have primarily addressed the significance of including the voices of marginalized communities in development partnerships (e.g. Kamstra, 2017; de Vries et al., 2019). In contrast, the listening practices of fundermediaries have largely gone unnoticed. We know little about the terms or conditions under which ‘marginalized voices’ are listened to. For the purpose of this contribution, we define listening practices as the ways fundermediaries pay attention to, recognize and register the uniqueness of others’ narratives (Bassel, 2017; Couldry, 2010). We argue that efforts to include the voices of marginalized communities are futile if the more powerful actors do not listen, or listen selectively, only hearing what they choose to hear. We also contend that it is not the inclusion of voices but rather the politics of inclusion that is at stake here: who decides who is included, who is given voice and who defines the conditions of the inclusion of marginalized communities.

This article is part of a larger ethnographic study (see also van Stapele et al., 2019b; Woensdregt, 2022a; Woensdregt and Nencel, 2022a, 2022b) with a Kenya-based sex worker-led CBO (henceforth SWL-CBO). The in-depth interviews at the heart of this article were conducted with 15 professionals working in fundermediaries, who worked directly with the participating CBO in our study. Until now, little has been known about professionals’ perspectives on how these partnerships work in practice, and specifically how these professionals listen to the voices of CBOs. By addressing this issue in this way, this study furthers our insight into the politics of inclusion and the politics of listening; this insight in turn clarifies the existing power relations in the development aid chain. In other words, the politics of listening and inclusion are constructed and embedded in the development aid chain.

During our exploration of the politics of listening and inclusion, we observed that two different types of partnerships may be distinguished, based on how the money flows via the aid chain to the CBO (see Figure 1). In this study, partnership Type 1 includes international funding agencies, Kenya-based fundermediaries, the Kenyan government and CBOs. These partnerships work towards the prevention and containment of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). In this aid chain, SWL-CBOs are included and funded to conduct service-delivery activities such as peer education and outreach and the distribution of contraceptives and medicines. Fundermediaries in partnership Type 2 have a broader scope than those in partnership Type 1. The fundermediaries in Type 2 all share a rights-based approach to their work. A rights-based approach is based on international human rights standards and is operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights.
health, sex work and/or sexual minorities. Contrary to Type 1, Type 2 work is conducted independently from the Kenyan government and provides CBOs with core funding\(^3\) and financial support to conduct on-the-ground political activities.

In the following sections, we address the relationship between the inclusion of the voices of marginalized communities and the politics of listening. We elaborate on the research design and methods before discussing the different partnership types, and the ways listening practices are operationalized in practice. We contend that fundermediaries’ ability to listen to the voices of marginalized communities hinges on broader dynamics in the aid chain, particularly the way money is channelled through this system.

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3. Core funding covers the basic ‘core’ organizational and administrative costs of a CBO, including staff salaries, rent, internet costs and other equipment.
THE INCLUSION OF VOICES AND THE POLITICS OF LISTENING

While the politics of inclusion encompasses a multitude of processes leading to the inclusion or exclusion of groups, this article focuses solely on the ways development partnerships ‘include community voices’ (in other words, the politics of voice). The inclusion of community voices aims to promote the representation of marginalized groups such as women, other people who identify as gender minorities, people with disabilities and sex workers (Banik et al., 2019; Narayanan et al., 2015; Sands, 2005). Like ‘partnership’ and other popular buzzwords in the development discourse, the idea of giving marginalized groups a voice typically invites automatic approval due to an inherent feel-good factor and the promise of delivering empowerment to marginalized communities (Cornwall, 2007; Parpart, 2013). But critical scholars have argued that ‘giving voice’ reproduces colonial relationships (Bracke, 2016) and, in practice, powerful Northern development actors remain in a position of vocal control.

As this discussion shows, the inclusion of voices is embedded in politics. Authors who discuss the politics of voice (Bracke, 2016; Couldry, 2008, 2009; Ludden, 2002) have demonstrated how being silenced or going unheard is to be denied a measure of participation and power that all humans are entitled to. Drawing on the idea of a politics of voice, Bickford (1996) explores what she terms ‘political listening’ and proposes the idea of envisioning voice in terms of a hierarchy, reflecting an unequal distribution of narrative resources. This hierarchy is the outcome of patterns of inequality through which some voices are more readily recognized and listened to in dominant discourse and institutional politics than others (see also Couldry, 2010).

When we consider the hierarchy of voices, we should note an important difference between marginalized groups’ voice raising and the more problematic idea of powerful actors giving voice to those who are marginalized. In the former, marginalized groups speak out from the bottom of the hierarchy. Their aim is to be heard and to become visible during discourses. Those who ‘raise their voice’ pay no regard to whether their voice is included or listened to; they simply speak what is on their mind. As we further illustrate below, when sex workers speak out, their aim is to break the silence, be included in conversations about them, and to work towards equality, citizenship and rights. In the case of ‘giving voice’, powerful actors fix groups into subjects who need to be provided with a space to speak instead of entering into a space in which they can speak freely (Bracke, 2016). Accordingly, the act of speaking freely in a shared space with development partners shapes the power relationships involved in the practices of listening.

As with discussions concerning the politics of voice, scholars have highlighted the political aspects underlying listening, and how questions of power, inclusion and privilege shape who and what is heard in dominant discourse and debates (Bassel, 2017). Research in development studies has
illustrated how development actors’ ability to listen often hinges on the broader dynamics in the aid chain. Footitt et al. (2020) have argued, for example, that development actors (and in our case fundermediaries) listen most actively to those they are accountable to. Due to contemporary funding mechanisms and requirements, development actors often feel obliged to listen to funding agencies and donors to secure their own position and future in the development-assistance field. This upward accountability mechanism leads to one-directional communication. Thus, development actors’ incentive to include community voices is partially motivated by their need to meet requirements rather than being informed by intrinsic motivation. This results in a pragmatic and instrumental approach to capturing the voices of communities, for example through surveys, questionnaires and focus groups. Footitt et al. (ibid.) refer to such tools as highly mediated ways of listening, with the primary aim of taking stock of project progress and mapping internal organizational learning. Such mediated listening practices generally fail to include discussions outside the remit of predesigned listening. The authors thus conclude that in most cases, the inclusion of marginalized communities’ voices is tokenistic.

Fundermediaries’ tokenistic approach to inclusion is partially attributable to dominant representations of CBOs’ organizational capacities and thus legitimates fundermediaries’ power over CBOs. In the contemporary ODA system, fundermediaries are often perceived as being more capable of managing development partnerships than CBOs because they usually have greater access to more financial, educational and social networking sources. In contrast, CBOs tend to be portrayed as small, chaotic and informal organizations lacking the financial and managerial skills to operate efficiently, to manage funds or to scale up (Aveling, 2010; Kamstra, 2017). In other words, fundermediaries are often represented as being the more capable intermediary actors, with CBOs portrayed as lacking the qualities necessary to be equal partners. Their position at the bottom of the hierarchy of voices paves the way for them to be undervalued and ignored and their voices silenced. Thus, listening goes beyond hearing what is being said and is an essential condition if the power differences at play are to be challenged (Dreher, 2009). To listen in this way, however, requires that the more powerful actors in development partnerships step back to enable the voices at the margins to enter the space to speak freely.

METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a wider research project investigating how the ODA system enables and/or obstructs CBOs’ political roles. The article builds on

4. For more on the wider research project, see: https://includeplatform.net/theme/cbos-within-official-development-aid-system-kenya/
ethnographic research conducted by the first author, who worked with a male SWL-CBO between 2018 and 2020. This CBO was one of the cases in our wider study. At the time of our research, the CBO was involved in multiple development partnerships reflecting the two different types of relationships discussed above (and see Figure 1).

This analysis is based on field notes derived from participant observations at meetings between the CBO and its partner organizations, including formal and informal meetings, events and other gatherings in the CBO’s office, and at meeting venues organized by their partners. In addition, 37 interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders. To understand the politics of listening, this contribution primarily analyses 15 of the interviews conducted with people employed at fundermediaries. The 15 interview participants were employed by seven different fundermediaries, of which six were based in Kenya and one in The Netherlands. All received funding from, and reported back to, funding agencies in the global North. Most of the participants worked in technical positions. Their tasks included the design and day-to-day management of the partnership and its interventions. The participants maintained contact with CBO staff members, and those who were based in Nairobi regularly met the CBO staff in the CBO’s office. Those based in The Netherlands visited the CBO once or twice a year and used video calling and WhatsApp to keep in touch. To understand the donors’ role in the politics of listening, the first author also interviewed three respondents employed by international agencies based in the global North that channel funding to the fundermediaries included in this study. To understand the role of the Kenyan government, she interviewed three government officials employed in the national HIV programme. Finally, she conducted 16 interviews with representatives of SWL-CBOs and other sex worker activists to understand how they perceived their prospects of being listened to and claiming a voice.

After applying thematic analysis to the data, we examined any themes and patterns of meaning regarding fundermediaries’ approaches to and relationships with the CBO. The first author conducted code development, the actual coding and data analysis. The codes were developed both inductively (those that emerged from the data) and deductively, based on the questions in the interview guides. Both authors reviewed, reorganized and discussed the results together. This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board of Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam.

THE KENYAN CONTEXT

Kenyan SWL-CBOs have increasingly become part of international development partnerships. The origins of these SWL-CBOs, including informal and formal political resistance, can be traced back to the 1990s, when informal and formal groups were founded because of lived experiences of
structural violence,\(^5\) including the violence that sex workers experienced from police officers, clients and the wider community. The organizations often started as support groups to protect members from violence and provide care in times of sickness. Indeed, for many the urgency to organize was particularly acute due to Kenya’s HIV epidemic, which peaked in 2000 when HIV rates in Kenyan adults hovered around 10 per cent (Mgbako, 2016).

Kenyan SWL-CBOs have gained external legitimacy and visibility through their HIV work. Following a wave of development policies promoting the involvement of local communities, between 2010 and 2020 SWL-CBOs were not only included as target groups but were also increasingly included in the decision-making bodies of the national HIV approach. Their inclusion was the outcome of international development policies requiring donors to include sex workers’ groups as well as other key populations in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of health services (Kerrigan et al., 2013; WHO et al., 2013). To fully grasp the meaning of these partnerships, we must emphasize that the Kenyan state criminalizes activities associated with sex work and same-sex sexual practices. Paradoxically, the country’s ‘AIDS Strategic Framework’\(^6\) allows the Kenyan state to work with criminalized populations, drawing from its official mandate to provide all Kenyan citizens access to (HIV) health care. But while CBOs are increasingly invited to join national and international discussions of sex workers’ health, outside the realm of health, engaging in politics is more difficult, and structural violence continues daily (Česnulytė, 2017). Development practitioners working in the national HIV approach recognize sex workers’ issues beyond HIV, yet in general they feel constrained to address them (see also Woensdregt and Nencel, 2022a).

The schism between being accepted as part of the national HIV programme and the difficulties in improving sex workers’ everyday realities of criminalization, stigmatization and marginalization sometimes leads to frustration among Kenyan sex workers. It is this political work that the SWL-CBOs also include in their core business. Their alliance with the HIV partnerships opened doors for sex workers to organize and raise issues and led to increased visibility of the sex worker community. The organizations approach the prevention and containment of HIV from a holistic perspective and consider improving members’ living conditions as essential for increasing their general well-being, and thus promoting the prevention of HIV (Shannon et al., 2015).

One defining characteristic of partnerships between SWL-CBOs and funders in Nairobi is that the relationships are largely ‘local–local’

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5. Structural violence refers to the multiple ways in which social, economic and political systems expose particular populations to risks and vulnerabilities (Farmer, 2009).

in nature, which contrasts with the more common way of thinking about development partnerships as being North–South or global–local (Mosse, 2011; Sundberg, 2020). Most of the respondents in this study were Kenyan nationals (or were born in a neighbouring East African country) who were employed by the national offices of international development organizations. Many of them could be classified as middle class, in contrast to the staff and members of the CBO in our research, of whom most identified as lower class and economically insecure. Fundermediaries in Nairobi are often staffed by professionals who possess Master’s degrees in Public Health or Community Development, or who have worked in government positions before joining the NGO sector (Brown and Green, 2015). These professionals are generally fluent in the global language and the specific practices of the ODA system and hence are more aligned with international development actors than local CBOs. Indeed, one distinguishing factor between NGOs and CBOs is the latter’s lack of embeddedness in the system, which means they enjoy more legitimacy with their local communities. CBOs work ‘on the ground’ and are directly accountable to their local communities (Doyle and Patel, 2008). This difference is conspicuously visible, as most fundermediaries in Nairobi have a mandate to serve the poorer side of town, while their offices are located on the wealthier side. CBOs are based in communities: as community-led organizations, they employ community members, further strengthening their ties to the community. Consequently, a division arises between the type of knowledge fundermediaries possess, characterized as technical expertise, and CBOs’ knowledge, based on lived experiences. While most fundermediaries recognize CBOs’ local knowledge, van Stapele and colleagues (2019a) show that many are not taken seriously as stakeholders and decision makers with the capacity to problem solve. Fundermediaries also rarely hire members of the community in their own organizations, thereby reproducing perceived differences between NGOs and CBOs. In the sections below we discuss the two different partnership types we observed and how listening practices are operationalized in practice in the different types.

**Partnership Type 1: HIV Partnerships**

The Kenyan HIV partnerships include the Kenyan government, specifically the National AIDS and STIs Control Programme (NASCOP), which comprises the national HIV department, a global funding agency, fundermediaries, and various CBOs, including SWL-CBOs. The national HIV partnerships are target driven, focusing on behavioural data and biomedical markers (Woensdregt and Nencel, 2022a). The partnerships’ programme objective is to contain and prevent HIV among Kenyan citizens. Central to the national HIV response are the 95–95–95 ‘cascade targets’, which measure
progress towards the elimination of HIV in the country. While funding originates from international funding agencies, the Kenyan government leads the partnerships in collaboration with fundermediaries, together sharing the power to set the agenda, design the programme and manage implementation. The fundermediaries are also responsible for managing their own funds and those of the CBOs and they are upwardly accountable to the funding agencies. As noted below, this dimension of accountability sets the parameters of their listening practices.

Within these partnerships, CBOs are primarily responsible for outreach to the target groups and within this domain they are listened to regarding strategies to further improve outreach activities. Representatives of Type 1 fundermediaries often framed their partnerships with SWL-CBOs as a more effective means to reach programmatic targets and to boost ‘cascade performance’. For example, one interview participant said that working with CBOs made the work easy: ‘We’re expected to reach 20,000 MSMs [men who have sex with men] … [If] you tell me to look for MSMS, where will I get them? I have no idea where to look for them. The benefit is [the CBO] has the connections, and the population. They know how to reach each other better. I don’t know how to communicate to an MSM’. 8

Notwithstanding the way this representative reduced the CBOs’ members to an epidemiological category of ‘men who have sex with men’, her words illustrate the crucial gatekeeping role that CBOs play in reaching fundermediaries’ target populations, as the fundermediaries themselves often lack the necessary networks to reach sex workers or gay men. Regardless of the role they played, all participants working in Type 1 partnerships agreed that the success of the partnership was attributable to giving CBOs a voice. Yet, as the following quote illustrates, while the fundermediaries theoretically agreed on the importance of voice-giving for success, they listened selectively. In this example, the fundermediary NGO gave its partner CBOs a voice by asking them to provide input in terms of health outreach strategies:

We give a framework that this is what is expected, so tell us how you do it. So … the concept literally comes from them. [We ask them], ‘How do you plan to do outreach work; how do you plan to make the DICE [drop-in centre] more attractive to peer educators?’. And then we work around that. So, they get the idea, and then we fine-tune it with the team.’ 9

This illustrates how fundermediaries might request input from CBOs but have already decided beforehand the type of outreach most appropriate to accomplish their goals, namely through peer educators and the drop-in centre. The quote also illustrates how fundermediaries provide the CBO with

7. Namely that by 2030, 95 per cent of HIV-positive people will know their status, 95 per cent of those will be receiving antiretroviral therapy and 95 per cent of those will achieve viral suppression (see also UNAIDS, 2014).
8. Interview, fundermediary representative, Nairobi, July 2018.
9. Ibid.
the literal framework of what is expected, further demonstrating that the partnership goals are dictated from outside the CBO.

The fundermediary representatives in our study felt confident that they included community knowledge and expertise in their programmes. To explain the inclusion in practice, they referred to specific programmatic instruments such as risk and needs assessments, surveys, interviews and focus groups, as well as more informal (though regulated) meetings with CBO staff and members. While these efforts show the intention of including CBOs’ voices, they were nonetheless generally unreflective regarding the nature of what CBO staff and members told them and the consequences that this type of knowledge could have for their programmes. There was a tacit understanding among the fundermediary representatives in our study that the inclusion of the communities’ voices automatically inferred that the fundermediaries listened. In general they failed to recognize that their listening was predesigned and mediated through programmatic objectives (Footitt et al., 2020).

The following vignette further illustrates how the fundermediaries’ mediated forms of listening failed to hear discussions that fell outside the boundaries of predesigned listening. The passage describes ‘a national data-review meeting’ in which CBOs’ progress in terms of accomplishing the national HIV goals was discussed with fundermediaries. Attending this specific meeting were representatives of CBOs, fundermediaries and the Kenyan government.

During today’s meeting, CBOs one by one presented their achievements of the past few months. After each presentation, the discussion focussed on whether the CBO had met its targets, which strategies it had used to do so and how to move forward. After the CBOs’ presentations, a government representative concluded that CBOs were not performing well enough. Right before the government representative’s presentation, a CBO representative presented a ‘case finding’ of 126, meaning that this particular CBO tested 126 HIV-positive people in the respective period. While this could be interpreted as an applaudable effort, the government official expressed his dissatisfaction and told the CBO representative, ‘You hardly found anybody who is HIV positive’. While sitting amidst CBO representatives, around me I heard [them] mumbling. One of them stood up and asked the government official whether she had understood him correctly: ‘Aren’t we supposed to rejoice that people are negative?’. Someone else stood up and added, ‘Yes, shouldn’t we be happy that we’re able to maintain our people [as HIV] negative?’. The mumbling coming from the CBO representatives continued, suggesting people agreed. Then the government official raised his voice and said, ‘Let me be clear: we don’t want more people positive, but we want more identification’. The woman who’d previously expressed her frustration now said, ‘But those figures aren’t real’. The government official shook his head and said that HIV prevalence among key populations had been determined through previous Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance Survey research, which, as he emphasized, is evidence-based and as such will continue guiding their programmes.10

10. Meeting attended by representatives from CBOs, fundermediaries and government officials, first author’s field notes, Nairobi, April 2018.
This vignette illustrates a recurring bone of contention between CBOs and the more powerful actors in partnership Type 1. The CBO staff members involved in our study continually expressed their frustrations about the fact that their targets were based on the 2010 Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance Survey, which was conducted eight years before the commencement of our research. The CBOs’ own data collection showed a significant decline in HIV incidences among the members of the CBOs. The CBOs were certain that their work had contributed to this decline. The words of a senior programme manager of a SWL-CBO reveal the tensions between technocratic NGO knowledge and community perspectives: ‘They don’t accept our targets, while I’m celebrating the achievements’. In response to these concerns, we observed how CBOs continuously tried to propose different interpretations of the numbers, ones that reflected the reality of their prevention work and thus provided evidence of their activities. The fundermediaries generally dismissed their concerns and frustrations, claiming a lack of scientific evidence.

The above excerpt demonstrates how fundermediaries silence the voices of CBOs and tend to disregard them as potential discussion partners by listening to funders and other actors higher in the aid chain. Indeed, the cascade targets for HIV prevention were designed on international levels before arriving at the fundermediary and CBO level. One fundermediary representative explained that while she recognized the CBO’s concerns about unrealistically high targets, she simultaneously felt restricted in addressing them. She explained that her organization was evaluated on meeting targets designed at the international level. From her perspective, partnerships with CBOs posed a risk. Indeed, the threat of receiving a negative evaluation by their headquarters and thus losing their funding often made fundermediaries reluctant to include CBOs’ voices beyond programmatic objectives.

The ‘NGO-splaining’ Phenomenon

One driving force behind the fundermediaries’ listening practices is the tacit idea that CBOs lack the necessary organizational qualities. Prejudicial stereotypes and assumptions about CBOs, such as being informal and having limited capacities, led to questions regarding their credibility. The fundermediary representatives employed in Type 1 partnerships continuously emphasized that CBOs’ capacities needed to be built, and that it was their

11. Interview, SWL-CBO senior programme manager, Nairobi, April 2018.
12. Interestingly, in 2021 a study on empirical trends in HIV prevalence among female sex workers in Nairobi showed that HIV prevalence among sex workers decreased over time, which the authors linked to a scaling-up of HIV prevention and treatment efforts, both among female sex workers and in the general population (Tago et al., 2021).
13. Interview, fundermediary representative, Nairobi, August 2018.
job to take CBOs by the hand to lead them into equal partnerships. In part, these ideas can be attributed to the structure of the ODA system, which institutionally positions fundermediary NGOs above CBOs. Consequently, fundermediaries tend to ‘NGO-splain’. This term is derived from the concept of ‘mansplaining’, which was introduced to highlight how the power relations between men and women are often enacted by male speakers, who (either intentionally or not) assume they are more knowledgeable than women and thus explain to them what they think they should know (Goodwin, 2019; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019). We conceptualize ‘NGO-splaining’ as a patronizing form of communication: a way of non-listening to what is being said. The following observation illustrates this clearly.

In August 2018, Woensdregt observed a meeting between fundermediary NGO staff members and the SWL-CBO, held at the office of the latter.¹⁴ The fundermediary organization, known for its target-oriented HIV approach, had called a meeting with the CBO that the fundermediary organization said would be concerned with human rights. The CBO representatives were surprised and curious to hear what the NGO representatives would have to say on this subject. The representative explained the NGO’s intention to introduce a new grant, with the objective of training sex workers in advocacy and violence-response systems, which he said were ‘very important issues to address’.¹⁵ The NGO worker started with what felt like a lecture. He explained to the participating sex workers in very simple language about the different types of violence that sex workers might experience, and how sex workers’ lack of human rights informs such violations. The new grant, he explained, would be used to ‘create awareness’ among different groups in society and as such could support the mitigation of sex workers’ experiences of violence. While listening to him, Woensdregt was surprised. She was not used to this NGO addressing sex workers’ advocacy issues, but also wondered what the NGO thought they could teach sex workers in this regard.

One of the senior CBO staff members, who apparently shared her feelings, stood up looking frustrated and angry, and said, ‘What do you understand by “advocacy”? We don’t mean advocacy related to HIV and pretending it is human rights! We’ve been collecting data on violence for you without any funding, and what have you done with that? Nothing! From now on, we’ll stop sharing this data’. One of the NGO workers looked taken aback and soon decided to end the meeting. After the meeting, the CBO staff member excitedly told his colleague, ‘Oh God, can you imagine [the fundermediary] telling you they’re creating awareness? They don’t even understand what human rights are. Human rights are about HIV to them’.¹⁶

We frequently observed this NGO-splaining phenomenon during meetings between fundermediaries and CBOs, in which the former explained

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¹⁴. Author’s field notes, Nairobi, August 2018.
¹⁵. Meeting, NGO worker, Nairobi, August 2018.
¹⁶. Author’s field notes, Nairobi, August 2018.
to CBOs how to run their programmes, what strategies to use, and how to treat and train their employees. This field note excerpt is a lucid illustration of NGO-splaining that shows how the NGO workers did not reflect on whether they had the abilities and knowledge to explain to sex workers their daily lived realities. As such, they did not even consider that sex workers might know more about this than the NGO worker who came in to give the training. This excerpt also shows the frustration that SWL-CBOs felt when fundermediaries finally decided to take up issues other than HIV prevention. SWL-CBOs continuously tried to raise attention for issues outside the realm of HIV, such as widespread violence (see also Woensdregt, 2022b). Generally, the fundermediaries silenced these concerns and only acknowledged them when they were programmatically relevant or when money was specifically allocated to address them. The phenomenon of NGO-splaining illustrates how current partnerships fail to acknowledge that CBOs have a greater understanding of local realities and what is needed to support sex workers than the fundermediaries and funding agencies higher up in the aid chain.

Claiming Voice through Making Noise

To break the silence imposed on them by more powerful actors in the aid chain, sex worker activists strategically ‘make noise’ as a way to claim voice in partnership work. ‘Making noise’ is an emic term frequently used by the sex workers in our research, who explained it as ‘being vocal’ and ‘disruptive’ if necessary. The following conversation that Woensdregt had with one of the CBO’s outreach workers, Cashmama, illustrates how sex workers understand making noise and how they use it in relation to more powerful actors in partnerships. The previous week, Cashmama had attended a conference attended by other CBOs, fundermediaries, funding agencies and NASCOP. He told Woensdregt that he had to make ‘a lot of noise’. He explained that fundermediaries continued to make a case for the ‘partner notification strategy’ (PNS), emphasizing how effective it was in reaching the cascade targets. As part of this strategy, people diagnosed with HIV inform their sexual partners and refer them to receive treatment, thus reducing the risk of further spread. During multiple meetings, Woensdregt observed how the sex workers tried to tell their programmatic partners that PNS does not work for male sex workers, as generally they don’t keep in touch with their sexual partners, and clients might not want to talk to them for privacy reasons. Hence, Cashmama was annoyed that these same programmatic partners raised the strategy again and promoted it as effective:

I let them finish, but when it was my [turn], I said I wanted to say something and I stood up. I told them they should stop speaking on behalf of us. PNS is not good for the community, and it doesn’t work. I asked them, ‘Are you a homosexual, are you a sex worker, or are
you planning to become one in the future? I’m a sex worker; I do sex for money; that’s my business. I don’t do sex for contacts; otherwise, my phone would be loaded’. 17

He added that after his talk, the people who had presented the PNS walked away without responding to what he had said.

Whereas fundermediaries in partnership Type 1 use certain mechanisms to include community voices, making noise is about sex workers speaking out from the margins. Making noise generally happened beyond designated voice-raising moments; the sex workers interrupted ordinary routines at partnership meetings and often made powerful others feel very uncomfortable. In doing so, the sex workers made themselves visible and claimed a voice in the discussions, which may be considered a form of political action (Schramm et al., 2018).

Notably, in response to the sex workers’ noise making, the more powerful actors in Type 1 partnerships frequently referred to sex workers as ‘rude’, ‘aggressive’ and as sabotaging the meetings and partnership more generally. These development actors thus implicitly penalized sex-work activists for speaking up and, rather than listening to them, redirected attention from the content of sex workers’ critique to its delivery. We observed how sex workers in response developed what they termed ‘more diplomatic’ communication approaches, which they considered partly the outcome of trainings received by being part of Type 2 partnerships (see below). Activists explained how they now also invited programmatic partners for coffee to talk about the sex workers’ ideas and wrote them emails and letters to express concerns. This shows how the sex worker activists continuously developed their communication strategies in efforts to make themselves heard and to teach fundermediaries to listen.

**Partnership Type 2: Development Actors Trying to Do Things Differently**

In reaction to the target-driven global public health responses to HIV-prevention fundermediaries used in partnership Type 1, actors in partnership Type 2 generally try to do things differently. Before we highlight the approach taken by Type 2, it is necessary to reflect on the data we use. The listening practices in partnership Type 2, ironically, often become more visible by being invisible. While Woensdregt frequently observed instances of not listening in relation to Type 1, far fewer observations were available in Type 2. Thinking about this lack of data reflexively illustrates the completely different approach used by fundermediaries in Type 2 to communicate. Their communication with CBOs is less intensive and is characterized by less control. Fundermediaries in Type 1 visited the CBO’s office frequently and requested formal meetings regularly. In Type 2, issues were discussed slightly

17. Interview, Cashmama, CBO outreach worker, Nairobi, November 2018.
more informally, and also by telephone, email and WhatsApp. Hence, we learned most about their listening practices through interviews and informal conversations with fundermediaries and CBO representatives.

Fundermediaries employed in Type 2 often contrasted their experiences with the HIV partnerships discussed above. In discussing the HIV partnerships, fundermediary representatives referred to ‘prescriptive’ target-driven approaches and the ‘absurd’ workloads that NGOs subjected CBOs to. In discussing their own approach, fundermediaries generally considered themselves ‘more progressive’ in the ways and extent to which they included CBOs and their communities’ needs in their partnerships. They often emphasized how they collaborated with CBOs as equal partners and listened to what they had to say. These descriptions resonated with many CBO representatives, who described Type 2 fundermediaries as exceptional because they were more attentive to community needs. One CBO representative said that these fundermediaries allowed the CBO to ‘really make a change’ by providing the space for them to set their own agendas without dictating them.18

**Listening Practices**

Fundermediaries working in Type 2 partnerships recognized that their approach to CBOs was largely the outcome of the dynamics in the aid chain, particularly policies designed higher up in the chain. Participants noted that this was possible because the funders were increasing their focus on ‘localizing’ and ‘Southern leadership’. In other words, funders increasingly gave control and leadership to the Southern partners. Consequently, participants felt encouraged to develop more equitable partnerships; their experience was that the CBOs entered the space speaking more freely, and they were listened to.19

Type 2 fundermediaries’ listening practices became visible particularly at the programme-design level. Fundermediaries in these partnerships articulated the intention to refrain from top-down approaches and a preference for listening to the CBOs in order to align the programme with CBOs’ organizational needs, activities and strategies for the future. On this point, a representative of a global grant-making institute reflected on his organization’s approaches:

We try to give [the CBO] the voice and capacity to do what they want to do. In our negotiations with them, we don’t dictate. [The CBO] is very clear where they want to go; they’re very well positioned to do what they want to do, and when we have points of convergence,

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18. Interview, CBO representative, Nairobi, December 2018.
we can support them in the next step. So, our support is more to enable them to do what they want to do, which we allow them to define.\textsuperscript{20}

While he did speak of giving voice, thus implicitly reproducing the hierarchical relation between his organization and the CBO, his words illustrate his recognition of CBOs as actors in their own right. Other respondents similarly emphasized the importance of including sex workers’ voices in an early stage.\textsuperscript{21} To achieve this goal, one grant-making institute worked according to the principles of participatory grant making (Andrasik and Mead, 2019; Gibson, 2017), in which community-led grant-making panels allocate funding to CBOs and other community organizations, as well as the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes and policies that affect them. Other fundermediaries, prior to programme design, organized informal meetings and exploratory conversations to discuss current gaps in funding as a means for CBO representatives to discuss organizational aspirations.

One participant explained that her organization’s partnership work with CBOs was informed by dialogue.\textsuperscript{22} When two representatives of this organization visited the SWL-CBO in August 2018, Woensdregt observed how they implemented this dialogical approach to their partnerships. In their communications with the CBO staff members, the representatives emphasized how they defined the agenda together with the CBO, which provided input in terms of what to discuss. They also took the time to ask the CBO staff members how they were doing, what the organization had done and what had been achieved, and they also asked what their struggles were and how the organization could support them. Woensdregt observed that this dialogical approach and supportive attitude provided the CBO representatives the space to express their concerns more freely regarding the fundermediaries’ expectations and their own needs; this included discussions about maintaining a healthy work–life balance.

Interview participants employed in Type 2 organizations stressed the importance of trust to generate supportive listening practices. The respondents emphasized the trust they had in the CBOs’ ways of working, but they also emphasized the importance of a CBO trusting them so that they would feel free to express themselves when needed. Participants tried to generate trust, for instance, by being available and having frequent moments of informal contact. In this regard, one participant said she tried to be ‘only one WhatsApp away’.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, the Dutch NGO employed a Kenyan professional as a national country focal point. In an interview, this focal person explained that one of her primary responsibilities was to be in touch with all partners.

\textsuperscript{20} Interview, global grant-making institute representative, Nairobi, August 2018.
\textsuperscript{21} Interviews, fundermediary representatives, Nairobi and Amsterdam, 2018–20.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview, fundermediary representative, Amsterdam, October 2018.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview, fundermediary representative, Amsterdam, June 2020.
involved and to anticipate any gaps and concerns the CBOs might raise. This shows that, for international fundermediaries, having a Kenyan national ‘on the ground’ diminishes the distance between them and the CBOs, and hence potentially improves listening possibilities.

Although Type 2 partnerships demonstrate improved listening opportunities, we should nevertheless note that, ultimately, these fundermediaries face the same challenges in the ODA system as those in Type 1, and most particularly against upward accountability to funding agencies. Some participants experienced pressure to report on progress and impact, while some of the more political activities they supported (such as lobbying, advocacy and strategic litigation) were difficult to measure. Yet, interview participants emphasized that although funding agencies may require such accountability, they have also experienced that some of these institutes are open to learn and they welcome alternative ways of reporting. For instance, instead of quantitative reporting systems, one fundermediary organization proposed narratives as a way of monitoring, which would allow partner CBOs to write about their programmes’ (political) accomplishments, rather than monitoring and evaluating performance based on quantitative indicators.

This example shows how Type 2 fundermediaries develop possibilities to create, monitor and manage their own organizational listening practices. Our research also shows how these fundermediaries try to positively influence the listening practices of other actors in the ODA system. The next section further elaborates on these efforts and discusses how fundermediaries create spaces that facilitate CBOs to become more audible in the ODA system.

**Sustaining Important Conversations**

Fundermediaries in Type 2 partnerships have three main strategies to facilitate CBOs’ voices being heard by other actors who normally do not hear them. The first concerns advocacy and aims to consolidate CBOs’ voices into one unified voice. Participants explained how their donor agencies increasingly allocated funds to encourage CBOs to jointly strategize. The importance of funding such activities is exemplified by a strategic meeting Woensdregt attended, organized in response to the repressive legislation introduced in Nairobi to control sex work. Several CBOs came together in the office of one of the grant-making institutes, where they jointly strategized on how to explain to government officials the harms of this legislation for the sex worker community and then how, together, to design less harmful alternatives.

The second strategy allocates funding to CBOs to host meetings and events. The rationale behind this type of funding is that when an event is

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24. Interview, national country focal point person, Nairobi, November 2018.
25. Meeting, CBO representatives, Nairobi, April 2018.
organized by a CBO, inviting more powerful actors into its space, these meetings enable the CBO to set the agenda and control the direction of the meetings (Gaventa, 2006). As one sex worker activist noted: ‘When you host a meeting, you can dictate the agenda’.\(^{26}\) Another participant employed by an African grant-making institute explained that these funded activities contributed to opening up the advocacy space available for civil society actors to include CBOs.\(^{27}\) In this particular case, the grant-maker funded the CBO to host a technical working group meeting, which is a government-initiated network of partner organizations working in Kenya’s HIV programme.

The third strategy is geared towards shifting power dynamics between funding agencies, fundermediaries and CBOs, in favour of the latter. Fundermediaries attempt to do this by strengthening CBOs’ confidence and critical awareness regarding their position in the development partnership. An interview participant employed by the African grant-making institute explained:

> When we were asking about funders and the relationships they [CBOs] have [with them], most said government helps us to do this, government helps us to do that, [and] were underappreciating the role [CBOs] play in these partnerships. A sort of Oliver Twist give-me-something mentality that [CBOs] are beggars from the government. So, part of what we did is an alteration, or shifting, of power [by telling them], ‘Do you see the role you’re playing? Do you see that the government cannot do without you? Do you see how you also contribute for them to recognize this power?’\(^{28}\)

In a similar vein, one interview participant employed by a global grant-making institute explained how his team focused on empowering CBOs ‘to ask difficult questions’ and ‘to push against the government’: ‘We try to work with them to enhance their capacity for self-urgency, to be able to deal with structural inhibitions, mainly resulting from repressive legal regimes and from the socio-cultural environment, replete with a lot of stigma and discrimination and exclusion from opportunities that [do] exist’.\(^{29}\) Reflecting upon the potential outcomes of this strategy, the participants observed that the now more established SWL-CBOs increasingly showed awareness of their own organizational abilities and power, and pushed against the government and other influential actors to promote societal change for sex workers in the country, albeit with varying results.

In comparing the different partnership types, the CBO representatives and other sex worker activists in our research often praised the approach of the fundermediaries in partnership Type 2. They felt that the fundermediaries listened and enabled them to generate change. We also witnessed how these fundermediaries invested more time and energy to further improve their collaborations with, and inclusion of, CBOs in their partnerships. Yet, we also

\(^{26}\) Interview, sex worker activist, Nairobi, December 2018.
\(^{27}\) Interview, African grant-making institute representative, Nairobi, November 2018.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Interview, global grant-making institute representative, Nairobi, August 2018.
must conclude that even these fundermediaries were unable to fully commit to the ambition of equal partnerships with CBOs in their development partnerships. While they continually tried to honour the community-led character of the CBOs and support a community-led approach, they too were affected by managerial demands from their own partners and funders and fell prey to upward accountability and its strict deadlines of project periods.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this article we have discussed the relationship between the inclusion of voices of marginalized communities and the politics of listening within development partnerships in the aid chain. The comparison of two types of partnerships illustrates that efforts to include the voices of marginalized communities will be futile if the more powerful actors do not listen, or if they listen selectively, only hearing what they choose to hear. The comparison also illustrates that the ability of ‘fundermediaries’ to listen to the voices of marginalized communities hinges on dynamics in the aid chain more generally. Demands and accountability made from funders higher up in the chain either limit or encourage particular listening practices. Hence, it is not the inclusion of voices but rather the politics of inclusion that is at stake here: who decides who is included, who is given voice and who defines the conditions of the inclusion of marginalized communities.

While generally considered important partners in the aid chain, CBOs remain at the bottom end of the ‘hierarchy of voices’. Within this hierarchy, upward accountability mechanisms implicitly force fundermediaries to prioritize listening to actors higher up in the aid chain. For fundermediaries that represent the first type of partnerships, listening to the CBOs is far too often limited to what they need to hear to realize their targets. They recognize that CBOs are essential for their work but use their capacity, skills and knowledge instrumentally. While this partnership type engages in ‘voice raising’, one could argue that ultimately, it uses CBOs to supply tokenistic access to communities while failing to take seriously CBOs’ knowledge of local realities and what is required to support sex workers on the ground. For fundermediaries participating in the second type of partnership, the funders more often encourage dialogue and collaboration, thus broadening the fundermediaries’ possibilities to listen to and include CBOs. The CBOs, in turn, are either limited in using their voice and/or are provoked to claim voice (Type 1) or to feel heard (Type 2). Despite the limitations constructed in the ODA system, they feel they can use their voice to contribute to strategies and visions and to improving the programmes they are involved in and feel heard.

This article contributes to the academic literature on the politics of voice and listening (e.g. Bassel, 2017; Couldry, 2010), specifically in the context of international development partnerships (e.g. Footitt et al., 2020).
Attending to the neglected question of a politics of listening provides insight into what is missing and necessary to carve out space for alternative relationships and meaningful inclusion. Our analysis of the politics of listening in this specific context suggests that actors in development partnerships must critically re-evaluate the power relationships embedded in approaches to listening and speaking freely. We argue that to achieve more horizontal partnerships between fundermediaries and CBOs, CBOs must be included from the outset. Rather than more powerful actors inviting CBOs into development partnerships, CBOs’ collaboration is necessary from the beginning for CBOs to have equal power in terms of agenda setting and steering the conversations that concern them. Actors higher up in the aid chain can facilitate these processes. As Gaventa (2006) states, being invited into an existing (political) space leads to limited power, as this means that one is included for certain objectives while often excluded from decision making.

While we believe that the key to meaningful listening lies with funding agencies’ policies, our research suggests that fundermediaries’ own approaches to relationships with CBOs play an important role as well. Funding agencies may provide fundermediaries the space and time to listen to CBOs, but the fundermediaries must be willing to recognize and unlearn power differences in their relations, which are too often un reflexively perceived as ‘natural’. Reflexivity is key for fundermediaries to enable these organizations to consider themselves partners rather than power holders in these processes. Collaborative development partnerships that involve the equitable participation of all participating actors can lead to improved outcomes and decisions. One way to stimulate this development is to employ people who identify as part of the ‘target group’ in the organizations higher up in the hierarchy.

Participatory grant-making approaches, which are already used in partnership Type 2, can help to further shift the power and resources in future development partnerships between fundermediaries and CBOs. By using peer-led grant-making panels, participatory grant making leads to increased self-determination of CBOs, once they become empowered to design, implement and evaluate the programmes and policies that affect them. This way of grant making gives marginalized groups access to systems and financial resources that were previously controlled by other actors in the ODA system.

To summarize, this analysis of the politics of listening and voice between fundermediaries and CBOs has identified the ways power relations institutionalized in the ODA system are manifested in the daily operations of development partnerships. It has also pinpointed the necessary shifts that must occur if development partnerships are to welcome communities into the world of funding and to create opportunities for collective action towards fundamental social change.
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