

# STORIES FROM PRACTICE

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## Mediating the power imbalances of development: A paradox for partnership brokers

The western development industry operates on significant, complex, and historical power imbalances that favor the perspectives and interests of donors. This paper examines these imbalances through a brokering lens, exploring how they undermine local agency and partnerships. It also looks at how brokers and other development professionals disrupt, but ultimately, and sometimes unconsciously, reproduce these imbalances through their work. The paper concludes that there is a paradox in trying to transform power imbalances while also maintaining the identities, institutions, and interests that reproduce them. The author hopes to explore new ways of addressing this paradox in order to support meaningful change and a radical rethinking of development.

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## Mediating the power imbalances of 'Development': A Paradox

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The western development industry (development)<sup>1</sup> operates on significant, complex, and historic power imbalances that are heavily weighted towards centring donors' interests and perspectives. Using the author's reflections, observations, and conversations<sup>2</sup> alongside the work of other scholars, this paper explores how these imbalances operate using the practice of partnership brokering as unit of analysis. The paper applies a simple framework that characterises power at institutional, material, structural and ideational levels to unpack how these imbalances work to undermine partnership and local agency and how they are both disrupted and ultimately reproduced. The paper concludes that partnership brokers, and other *development* actors, face a paradox in which their work to transform power imbalances also maintaining the identities, institutions and interests that reproduce them. This paper hopes to open up new possibilities for holding this paradox in ways that supports generative change and a far more radical rethink of *development*.

### **Development: Constructed on Power Imbalance**

Leaving aside the complex and important debates around the actual effectiveness of *development*<sup>3</sup> there should be little doubt that the industry operates on a significant, complex, and historic power imbalance. This imbalance is evidenced in the ideas that underpin *development*, most notably that there is a deficit in subordinate developing and mostly brown countries that can be corrected by the financial and human capital and actions of dominant, mostly white, developed countries.<sup>4</sup> It is evidenced in the language of *development*, in words like 'locals', 'development specialist', 'expatriate', 'adviser', and 'hardship allowance,' which create problematic binaries. It is evidenced in persistent structural inequities of race and gender that have developed over centuries and produce the actors of *development*, the well-resourced, well-educated, healthy *development* experts and those who come to workshops to have their 'capacity built' and watch project cycles repeat again

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term *development* to refer to the 'western development industry,' the ecosystem of actors, interests, institutions, and identities that make up official international foreign aid efforts of western nations, generally the OECD DAC Countries. This ecosystem is made up of Government aid agencies, the intermediaries that implement their programs (multilateral agencies, private contractors and consultants, international and local non-government organisations) and those states and societies who receive and engage in their programs.

<sup>2</sup> The paper is largely drawn from my own documented experiences and reflections as a white settler-Australian female who has been engaged in various donor funded 'partnerships' for the last 20 years in the Pacific region. This includes field notes and observations from working in partnership with the Eastern Highlands Provincial Government to coordinated Australian aid, to progress thinking on the Pacific Partnerships for Development instigated by Australian PM Kevin Rudd, negotiating long term partnerships with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Pacific Community (SPC), University of the South Pacific (USP) and Secretariat of the Regional Environmental (SPREP) as well as the an attempt to institutionalise a partnership brokering approach across the Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) a large multi-country development program over three years. It is also drawn on my conversations with Pacific colleagues and friends over the same period and the work of other scholars and writers.

<sup>3</sup> See discussion in [Miller \(2015\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> See discussion in [Pailey \(2019\)](#)

and again. It is evidenced in the western cultural biases inherent in the institutions of *development* and it is evidenced in the sheer magnitude of donors' economic and material power.

Post-colonial and critical scholars, including many Pacific scholars, have long contested these imbalances, recognising the negative effects of colonisation and racism that have centred white, colonial, western perspectives on 'developing' states and societies.<sup>5</sup> Recent global shifts, including the rise of China and other non-western actors as new development partners, along with the movements such as #BlackLivesMatter #racisminaid and those centring indigenous rights, are further contesting the legitimacy of western, white power.<sup>6</sup> The development industry's own practitioners and policy makers have called for the 'decolonisation' of aid, 'thinking and working politically', 'doing development differently', and 'localisation' as ways to redress power imbalances, even developing 'guidelines' and 'courses' to assist with the yielding and wielding of power within *development*.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these critiques and efforts, many advocates, practitioners, and scholars argue that we are seeing little real change and that, rather than disrupting the significant power imbalances and disparity within *development*, they are only growing more pronounced.<sup>8</sup> Experienced voices in the Pacific argue that 'in the last decade, more so in the last 5-6 years,' donors have become 'more forceful in ways of working rather than listening to their partners on the ground'.<sup>9</sup> My 20 years of experience, reflections and learning concurs with these views. While I have experienced and observed extensive local agency across the region, particularly outside of *development*, as well as some attempts to share power within the partnerships forged in *development*, my experience concludes that power imbalances remain heavily weighted towards the donors' interests and perspectives at the expense of local agency.

### **The Practice of Partnership Brokering**

The practice of Partnership Brokering provides a useful lens through which to unpack this further. While not as prominent in the *development* discourse as 'decolonising aid', 'thinking and working politically', 'doing development differently,' or 'localisation' the practice of 'partnership brokering' also seeks to challenge power imbalances within *development*.

The Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) defines partnership brokering as 'supporting and strengthening partnerships through innovative and skilled management of collaborative

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<sup>5</sup> For example, major works of [Escobar \(1995\)](#), [Pretty \(1994\)](#), [Nustad \(2001\)](#), [Morrison \(1992\)](#) [Pailey \(2019\)](#), [Blunt \(2023\)](#) [Blunt, Escobar & Missos \(2023\)](#), and from our region [Hauofa \(1994\)](#), [Emberson-Bain \(1994\)](#), [Vaai \(2017\)](#), [Fry \(2019\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> See for example [The aid sector must to more to tackle its white supremacy problem \(2020\)](#) and [A hard look in the Mirror \(2020\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> See the [DDD Manifesto \(2014\)](#) & [Cornish \(2020\)](#) for discussions of these approaches and [Tawake et al \(2021\)](#) for guidelines.

<sup>8</sup> See for example [Blunt \(2023\)](#) [Blunt, Escobar & Missos \(2023\)](#), [Guttenbeil-Likiliki \(2022\)](#), [Khan \(2021\)](#), [Mutimbanyoka \(2021\)](#), [Pailey \(2019\)](#), [Green \(2018\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Guttenbeil-Likiliki \(2022\)](#)

processes.<sup>10</sup> As a practice, it is ideational, operating on the belief that ‘multi-stakeholder collaboration is critical if we are to create a more inclusive and sustainable world’<sup>11</sup> and material, in that it requires human beings, meeting rooms, workshop materials, planes, computers, and funding. It is an individual practice, performed by people who subscribe to a set of ethical principles, such as accountability and reflexivity<sup>12</sup>, possess certain skills, such as empathy, negotiation and coaching<sup>13</sup> and often hold certain dispositions towards social justice, including a desire to support local agency.<sup>14</sup> It is also a structural practice in that these individuals, which are predominately while women, operate in a socially recognizable way as an ‘expert/specialist’ within *development*.

While PBA does not specifically define what a ‘partnership’ is they articulate core principles that have emerged over time for their community as fundamental to effective partnering – diversity, openness, equity, mutual benefit, and courage<sup>15</sup> as well as their shared learning of the core attributes of effective partnering including co-creation of work, mutual accountability, and importantly the sharing of power.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, partnership brokers pay careful attention to how power imbalances may undermine (or indeed support) a partnership and have experience in developing and testing strategies to redress these imbalances where it is affecting a partnership.

Because self-reflexivity through journaling and discussion is core to the practice, brokers also pay close attention to their own positionality and the role they may play in maintaining or even reinforcing power imbalances. Accordingly, the perspectives and reflections of partnership brokers provide a rich and insightful viewpoint from which to explore the different ways power imbalance operates within *development* and why it is so hard to shift.

There is already a very good discussion in the literature of brokers’ (and others) reflections and learnings on shifting power and working with power imbalances, including a PBA project called ‘funders as partners’.<sup>17</sup> For this paper I have gathered and sorted my own observations, reflections

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.partnershipbrokers.org/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> These are to be principled and accountable, push boundaries, practice reflection, build skills and confidence in others, enhance own skills and knowledge, acknowledge assumptions and biases, and let go when time is right. See [Principles of Good Practice](#).

<sup>13</sup> These are the ability to hold space, negotiation, empathy, facilitation, synthesizing information and record keeping, articulation and presentation, coaching and capacity building, institution building and reviewing and revising. See [PBA Roles and Skills](#).

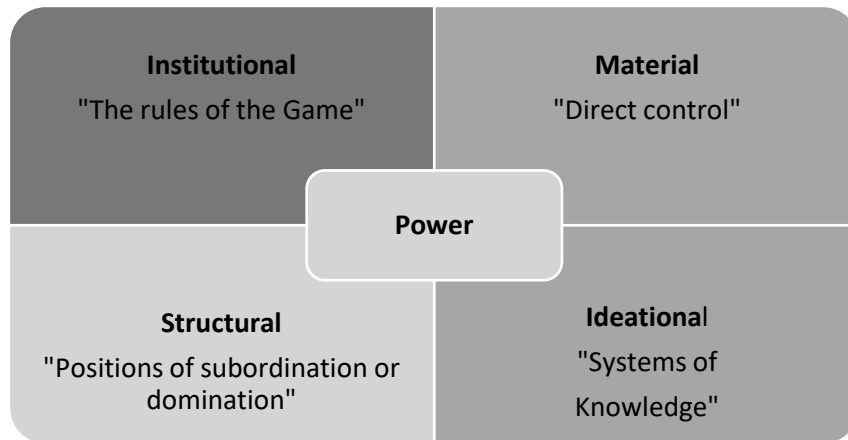
<sup>14</sup> Individual brokers have many diverse dispositions but, in my observation, and reflection often display greater intellectual humility, stronger desire to support local agency, and desire to challenge power imbalance and a certain level of comfort with paradox and complexity. They often enter the field with a decent amount of social and cultural capital and competency in the contexts they work and are often part of the development elite; well educated, well-resourced and healthy.

<sup>15</sup> See [PBA Handbook](#)

<sup>16</sup> The [PBA defined attributes](#) are 1. A clear understanding between the partners of the word ‘partnership’ 2. Agreement to a shared vision and common purpose 3. Account and allowance being made for individual partners’ interests 4. The co-creation of design, decisions, and solutions 5. Commitment to sharing risks as well as benefits 6. Every partner contributes resources (whether tangible or intangible) 7. Partners share decision-making and leadership responsibilities 8. Partners commit to mutual / horizontal accountability 9. Partners work together to develop a principled approach to their partnering endeavours 10. Attention is paid to the partnering process as well as the partnership’s projects.

<sup>17</sup> See for example [PBA 2022 Working with Donors: Key learnings 2017-2019](#), [Sloman \(2022\)](#), [Teskey \(2022\)](#) and [Tennyson \(2016\)](#)

and conversations using a simple framework that allowed me to explore power imbalances as they exist in four interrelated types: institutional, material, structural and ideational (or discursive).



These types of power are not hierarchical, there is no master theory or sequencing, and they don't map exactly to different theories of power. What they do is allow me to think broadly about how power imbalances work, how they are antithetical to effective partnerships, and explore how they are disrupted and reproduced.

### **How Power Imbalance Operates in *Development***

**Institutional power** imbalances are those which are present in the formal and informal rules, procedures and norms that govern *development*, sometimes referred to as the 'rules of the game.'<sup>18</sup>

The formal rules - accountability, decision making, design of systems and processes - clearly sit with the donor. This results in a towards both the perspectives and interests of the donors as well as a preference for western institutional procedures and norms, over non-western ones, for example, the written word over oral communication, outcome over process, task over relationship, English over local languages, and the individual over the collective.

The informal rule of the game is to keep the donor satisfied, onside, and supportive through extensive 'interpretive labour'<sup>19</sup>. *Development* actors, including partnership brokers, work extremely hard to manage the donor towards achieving their own interests. Depending on the actor, these interests can range from challenging power imbalances and supporting local agency to preserving their own profit and privilege depending on the actor. This is often framed as 'stakeholder' or

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<sup>18</sup>[Douglass North's \(1990\)](#) often referenced definition of institutions defined them as follows: 'Institutions are the rules of the game in a society, or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction'. This conception of power is most aligned to theories of liberals, and neo-liberals where power is reliant on consent, on a system of negotiated rules and institutions and alliances – see works of [Keohane 1984](#), [Ikenberry 2011](#) and [Risse-Kappen 1996](#).

<sup>19</sup> [Blunt \(2023\)](#) refers to this as 'interpretive labour.'

‘relationship’ management and is best performed by those with western skills and dispositions as well as a sound understanding of the donor processes, practices, and incentive.

**Material power** imbalances are those which are clear in the ‘direct control of one actor over the conditions of existence and/or the actions of another.’<sup>20</sup> Within *development* the donor possesses vastly greater financial, economic and technical resources of which they assumes almost complete control.<sup>21</sup> From setting the quantity, sectoral and geographic priorities, timeframes for deliverables, project cycle, compulsory attention to cross-cutting priorities and approach to partnering, donor governments remain the ultimate decision makers over their funds.

**Structural Power** imbalances are reflected in positions of subordination or domination, ‘structural position A exists only by virtue of its relations to structural position B’ and in the struggle between them.<sup>22</sup> In *development*, these positions include the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, the ‘donor’ and the ‘recipient’, the ‘expert’ and the ‘beneficiary,’ the ‘white’ and ‘brown’. These structural positions are experienced as the modern manifestation of the colonizer and colonised positions and continue to be underpinned by attitudes, values and norms that are fundamentally colonised and racialized.<sup>23</sup>

**Ideational power** imbalance is ‘more generalised and diffuse,’ it relates to imbalance in our ‘systems of knowledge,’ those which makes possible or limits our very action and imagination.<sup>24</sup> *Development* has long been and remains an important part of the neo-liberal grand design, both a product of neo-liberalism and a crucial means for its maintenance and spread. It operates on the idea of a deficit which is framed as both an economic one, in terms of gross national income, human capital and industrialisation, but also a moral one, in terms of positioning the values of the west as a kind of all-embracing civilisational pre-eminence.<sup>25</sup> This produces a system of beliefs and values that, reinforces and entrenches existing power dynamics and hierarchies, by setting the limits of our imagination.

This often-unconscious process was revealed clearly by Professor Epeli Hau’ofa in his essay ‘Our Sea of Islands’ where he reflects on his own complicity in reproducing the notions of smallness and dependency<sup>26</sup> which have been so pervasive and hegemonic to the Pacific region. In this essay, he

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<sup>20</sup> [Barnett and Duvall \(2005:50-63\)](#). This best aligns with realists, rationalists, and neo-realists’ conceptualisation of power (see [Layne 2006](#), [Wohlforth 1999](#), [Waltz 1979](#)) that emphasize material, economic and physical power.

<sup>21</sup> There is no question that actors have the agency to refuse development finance, but I have only witnessed a couple of examples of a partner government, organisation, or intermediary rejecting donor funds rather than meeting donor preferences.

<sup>22</sup> This conceptualisation of power aligns with those post-colonial and other critical scholars who have explored the ways power could be understood in the context of the identities and relationships between colonizer and colonized, white people and people of colour ([Said 2003](#), [Fanon 1963](#), [Baldwin 1963](#))

<sup>23</sup> See for example experiences in [Blaha et al \(2021\)](#) and [Guttenbeil-Likiliki et al \(2020\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> Again, this conceptualisation is aligned with structuralist, post-structuralist, constructivist conceptions, who conceive power in every decision, every representation.

<sup>25</sup> Said (1993) & Elkins (2022)

<sup>26</sup> See [Hau’ofa \(1994: 28\)](#) “According to this view, the small island states and territories of the Pacific, that is, all of Polynesia and Micronesia are too small, too poorly endowed with resources and too isolated from the centre of economic growth for their inhabitants to ever be able to rise about their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations”

asks himself 'what kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neo-colonialism is all about? To make people believe they have no choice but to depend?'<sup>27</sup>

Ideational power imbalance is also present in the *development* lexicon that reinforces the problematic binaries of the 'developed' and the 'developing' on which our structural positions exist. We embody identities such as donor and recipient rather than 'partners.' This lexicon, for example, continues to refer to endogenous, non-colonial institutions as 'informal' and western colonial institutions as 'formal' and continues use of concepts like 'fragile state' even though they have been expertly dismissed.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately this language and the ideas that underpin it also underpin our practices.

### **How Power Imbalance Undermines Effective Partnering**

In my experience these inter-related power imbalances undermine effective partnering and local agency.

Institutional power imbalance such as one way accountability deeply challenges the principle of mutuality by undermining any opportunity for genuine risk and benefit sharing. The implicit preference for western ways of knowing and being challenge the principle of diversity by continuing to decentre the skills, experiences, and dispositions of non-western people. This creates a regular tension, for example, between the process driven, relational, long term, reflective and adaptive practices of effective partnering and donor preference for results and reports. Often covert attempts to 'keeping the donor happy' while lamenting their behaviour challenges the partnership principle of openness as it results in a reality of multiple hidden agendas that are not discussed openly and transparently for fear of displeasing the funder.

Material power imbalances create clear financial incentives that reinforce adherence to the formal and informal rules of the game that preference the interests and perspectives of the donor. They also immediately create a hierarchy of power in which the donor has a sense of control rarely felt by the partnership itself. This creates relationships based on patronage rather than partnership directly challenging the partnerships principle of equity. The competition for resources combined with the

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<sup>27</sup> [Hau'ofa \(1994:29-30\)](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Pailey \(2019\)](#)



incentives to please the donor creates a setting in which competition is more highly valued than cooperation<sup>29</sup> directly challenging the partnership principle of mutuality.

Structural power imbalance results in the ongoing elevation and domination of one position over another which is a direct challenge to the principles of equity, openness, and mutuality. Structural power imbalances often result in certain individuals or organisations wielding power inappropriately and others feeling marginalised. When one group is able to dominate another, even in the most subtle ways, it reduces the potential value of the partnership. If a partner feels disempowered or dominated by another, their level of commitment to, and willingness to invest in the partnership is reduced.

Ideational power imbalances are clear in the way in which the word ‘partnership’ has been embraced within *development* speak. Experienced brokers have reflected on the ways that ‘partnership has become a blanket phrase to describe many *business as usual* organizational relationships’ and that ‘the word partnership has become a catch all for every collaboration or organisational relationships and in the process then becomes disillusioning for brokers and partnerships as they see business as usual is reinforced’.<sup>30</sup>

### **Partnership Brokering Strategies to Address Power Imbalance**

So how do partnership brokers seek to mediate these various imbalances inherent in partnerships forged in *development*?

Effective strategies I have used and observed other brokers use to mediate **institutional power imbalance** include supporting partners to co-create mechanisms within the partnership which focus on, for example, process, relationality, and shared inclusive decision making. These mechanisms are then embedded with co-created and fit for purpose governance arrangements, monitoring frameworks and health checks that both reinforce and monitor them and other principles and features of effective partnering. Holding explicit discussions around the principles of diversity, mutuality and openness can allow for partners and donors to acknowledge western biases, competitiveness and hidden agendas and co-create ways to mitigate their impacts. These discussions also allow brokers to hold space for concerns to be expressed as a way of developing greater empathy and understanding as well as centre the preferences, interests, and norms of non-western members of the partnership. I have observed these strategies prove effective at shifting the

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<sup>29</sup> I have observed this across several partnership that involve different ‘aid intermediaries’ who are essentially competitors, be they competing intermediaries for global funds, or competing managing contractors in the same country and sector.

<sup>30</sup> See [Smith and Daw, Smith \(2017\)](#), [Cornish \(2017\)](#),



rules of the game within specific partnership and especially so, where the relevant donor program manager and leadership is supportive.

I have found stakeholders operating within partnerships forged around *development* are often well experienced with donor behaviour and keen to develop strategies to achieve more power sharing over decisions around resources as ways to mediate clear **material power imbalances**. The most common strategies I have used and have observed other brokers use are to take the programmable donor funds off the table to begin with and at the same time ensure that all resources, not just financial, are considered and valued when assessing what each partner brings to the partnership. Again, using the partnership principles, such as equity and mutual benefit, the approach is to create space for holding different and difficult conversation that can often lead to a deeper understanding of how this material imbalance is experienced. And again, they can prove effective at shifting power at the level of a specific partnership, particularly where the relevant donor program manager and leadership are willing to yield some power and control.

Partnership brokers often find themselves seeking to mediate the complex and painful **structural power imbalances** of ‘us’ and ‘them’, including acting as ‘intermediaries between the partners and the donor agencies.’<sup>31</sup> Some of the strategies I have used and observed other brokers use include building shared understanding of the diverse views, attributes, and contributions of all involved, ensuring governance and decision-making structures have appropriate representation and, where possible, that the roles and responsibilities of each partner are clearly defined. While storytelling around structural power imbalances can make those on both sides uncomfortable, making the lived experience of structural power real can build empathy and understanding in order to build equity and trust. I have observed brokers are willing to sit and hold this discomfort as well as know when they may need to bring in extra skills to unpack these complex and often painful issues. I have found these strategies can sometimes be transformational for individuals within partnerships by cultivating different mind-sets underpinned by greater humility and a willingness to give up some control on the one side, and greater empowerment and willingness to take control on the other.

Brokers also practice reflexivity on their own structural position, conscious that we enter *development* in possession of those western skills that elevate our status ‘just the way they elevated status in colonial times.’<sup>32</sup> We write and speak the language of the donors, we are able to position ourselves more closely to the donor, giving us more power to exercise in the pursuit of effective partnering. We all reflect on our own positionality, on our attitudes of intellectual superiority, of

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<sup>31</sup> See [Tennyson & Serafin \(2018\)](#), [Tennyson \(2016\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Guttenbeil-Likiliki \(2022\)](#)

times when we, like other 'experts' can take the space of local agency or deny it the status and access accorded to the donor which allow us to learn and change.

One important way partnership brokers seek to disrupt the pervasive and hegemonic **ideational power imbalance** is to challenge and interrogate the meaning of *development* words. The word 'partnership' is a case in point. Starting with a full exploration of what the term means to different people and their own experiences with various partnerships, allows a partnership to build a shared understanding of the term and, in that understanding, a shared sense of its potential. Asking stakeholders to reflect on their own context, on successful collaboration and failures, helps to draw out the common but also unique principles of effective partnering. This strategy is used broadly by brokers based on the key learning that many partnership challenges are the result of a lack of shared understanding not only of what a partnership is, but also what a partnering process might entail. This is especially true for the time and effort required to build strong and productive collaboration, but it does also allow for a discussion about the use of the word itself. Other words, and what they embody, are also challenged. Words like 'locals', 'specialist', 'expatriate', 'adviser,' all maintain imbalances and words that have transformative power, such as 'equity', 'privilege', 'power', 'complexity', 'inclusivity' can be used to disrupt or bring new meaning.

### **Are we getting anywhere?**

When I explore my own observations and reflections as well as those of shared with me and documented by other brokers and *development* actors, I conclude we are not getting very far in shifting any of these imbalances.

**Institutional power imbalance** remains clear. Lessons from the PBA community itself indicate most partnerships forged around *development* still 'end up feeling very much like conventional donor-led projects rather than co-created and co-owned collaborations.'<sup>33</sup> Many reflect on the amount of western bureaucracy, expectations for conventional English reports, lack of flexibility, and one-way reporting and accountability arrangements which all restrict rather than enhance effective partnering. Many brokers report and reflect on situations where partners are actually reluctant to encourage donors to become more involved fearing too much interference and control rather than understanding.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.fundersaspartners.org/>

<sup>34</sup> [https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Shifting-the-Power\\_Paper.pdf](https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Shifting-the-Power_Paper.pdf)

My experience and reflections concur.<sup>35</sup> I have not observed any significant shifts to the ‘rules of the game.’ Written work and outputs continue to be prioritised over relationships and discussion and when timeframes or business processes are not met donors often point to the person or the partnership as being inadequate rather than reflecting on other reasons why. The rules of the game persist in decentring non-western preferences and centring those of the western donors.

The significant **material power imbalance** remains largely unaffected, and donors continue, or perhaps increasingly, exert direct control over their *development* resources. A study in 2016 found that 70-80% of partnerships were described by those involved in them as ‘donor-driven’<sup>36</sup> and partnerships forged in *development* have been found to be characterised by a ‘lack of trust and fear of censure.’<sup>37</sup> Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the control of money makes a ‘true partnership impossible.’<sup>38</sup>

My observations are that while material power can, in fact be wielded in ways that support effective partnerships, it is rarely, if ever, yielded or shared and that this has worsened significantly in our region over the last decade. There is no evidence that donors have not consistently allocated more resources to highly effective partnership work, including both the resourcing of brokers and providing the space and time for partnerships needed. Material power imbalance is often experienced brutally in the shifting of funding, people and priorities, completely outside of the recipient or partnership’s control due to change in donor government policy, priorities and budgets as well as the whims of an individual program manager.

I have observed situations in which those who hold the dominant positions within the **structural power imbalances** are willing to yield a little in *development*, but I have observed far more instances of it being wielded poorly to the detriment of effective partnering. This has been most obvious in those inexperienced program managers who operate from a position of intellectual superiority by virtue of position over knowledge, experience and relationships.<sup>39</sup> I have also observed and had conversations with many highly capable non-western *development* practitioners who doubt their own skills and abilities in the face of these western *development* experts. In my experience, every

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<sup>35</sup> Whether this is being asked to shorten a traditional kava ceremony central to the initiation of a region wide partnership or curtailing good activities with clear local commitment, ownership, and momentum that a donor did not feel was ‘good enough’ in favour of a donor’s preference for highly visible results my reflections are littered with examples.

<sup>36</sup> Emerging Partnering Lessons from Diverse Contexts, 2016, published by PBA and PEP (Promoting Effective Partnering) available from [www.effectivepartnering.org](http://www.effectivepartnering.org)

<sup>37</sup> [Wallace et al \(2006:17\)](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Lister 2000: 229](#)

<sup>39</sup> While not a major theme of this paper, a more substantive critique of the way power is wielded by individual donor program manager is needed. [Blunt, Escobar & Missos \(2023:21\)](#) characterises their role ‘as having a kind of immaculate omniscience and omnipotence, and infallibility, a reflection of power stemming from over whelming economic and military might and presumptions of civilisational superiority’ noting ‘if everyone treats you as if you were all-knowing, all powerful and incapable of error, it is hardly surprising that before long you start to believe it to be true.’”

single day, somewhere within *development*, these dominant and subordinate positions continue to compete for power and control.

I have borne witness to a growing critique of poor partnering behaviour of donors and have observed a corresponding growth in their defensiveness, especially where that challenge comes directly from non-western partners. The more explicitly the dominant position is challenged the more intensely it seeks to maintain and reproduce itself. In these cases, rather than reflecting on the critique, and trying to understand the experience of structural power imbalance, those in power are more likely to accuse those raising the issue of everything from being ungrateful and inappropriate to undermining the national interests of the donor. I have witnessed many occasions in which inappropriate wielding of structural power has been challenged by brokers and partners, only to have the conversation shift to providing emotional and psychological comfort to those wielding that structural power accompanied by reprimanding and gaslighting those who caused the discomfort.

Finally, my observation is that the **ideational power imbalances** in *development* appear to remain as strong as ever. My conversations with others as to why this may be the case often reflects on the way transformative concepts and the words, such as 'decolonisation,' 'localisation,' and 'partnership' are quickly re-framed within *development*. While these words that could embody real transformation and disruption, they lose their own power through their excessive and often superficial use by *development* actors. Localisation has come to be a term that describes the shifting of contracts from international to local organisations and/, or shifting the management of *development* programs from foreign to local elites, rather than a concept that embodies a real shift towards supporting local agency.<sup>40</sup>

Decolonisation is increasingly adopted by *development* practitioners as a metaphor for things they want to do to improve projects rather than a concept that fundamentally challenges *development* itself by calling for financial reparations for the harm inflicted on Indigenous land and life.<sup>41</sup> When it comes to partnerships, you would be hard pressed to find a single donor that doesn't have a range of them, but how many of these can operate on the type of principles outlined by PBA beyond a couple of project cycles?

There is also an observable appropriation of local cultural norms, languages and practices by *development* actors which is increasingly becoming a part of *development* practice. Using the words

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<sup>40</sup> See [Start Network \(2016\)](#), [Fine \(2022\)](#)

<sup>41</sup> See for discussion [Opara \(2021\)](#) and Tuck (2012) [Decolonisation is not a Metaphor](#)

‘talanoa’ or ‘mana’ or ‘pacific way’ without authority or truncating cultural protocols, such as a traditional kava ceremony seems to grow more apparent every day.

### **What role do we play?**

So, the question I then put back to myself and other *development* actors is to ask what our role in this? I conclude that partnership brokers, and other *development* actors, face with a clear paradox as we in fact play a very clear role in maintaining these power imbalances ourselves.

While we seek to disrupt institutional power imbalances we simultaneously reinforce it by operating according to its rules. The rules of the game wont shift if we all keep playing by them. As one broker reflected recently on her own efforts to mentor colleagues to better engage in these *development* spaces, ‘by guiding them through what they needed to do to meet (donor) cultural norms’ she was ‘actually reinforcing inequality, western cultural norms and the status quo’.<sup>42</sup>

We keep playing by these rules because we benefit from them.

We benefit from the material power imbalance. In theory, a broker works for the partnership, but in practice we, as with most *development* experts, we are funded by the donor. This material power imbalance suits us as it is unlikely the recipients of aid would either agree or be able to afford the salaries of the *development* elite, let alone the other financial incentives that come with them.<sup>43</sup>

Brokers are just as susceptible to the deep financial incentives to play by the rules of the game and the financial disincentive to challenge imbalances.<sup>44</sup> We expend huge energy on ‘interpretive labour,’ writing additional reports and communication pieces, creating new monitoring and evaluation systems, and putting in place mentoring systems or other often highly expensive technical ‘experts’ to meet donor preferences rather than challenge them. Even the most experienced and strategic brokers I have known have found themselves compromised when a donor has fully asserted their material power and control over the direction of a partnership. Most push the status quo only as far as they can without undermining their own positionality with the donor and the many financial privileges that come with being a *development* professional, even if this is at the expense of their positionality with the partnership and local actors.

We benefit from the structural power imbalance. In the role of expert, we hold power, wealth and status and therefore consciously, or unconsciously, maintain structural positions. We easily advocate for ‘localisation’ of brokers and *development* experts, instead of advocating for local agency over

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<sup>42</sup> [Sloman \(2022\)](#)

<sup>43</sup> These include high, often tax-free salaries, business class airfares, top hotels etc.

<sup>44</sup> There is a culture of silencing that is often discussed amongst development practitioners of all types, whose salaries are generally funded by donors, to not ‘bite the hand that feeds you’.

*development* itself which would challenge rather than legitimise the structural positions of the *development* expert.<sup>45</sup> By playing the role of expert we earn 4-7 times more than our 'local' non expert counterparts<sup>46</sup> and our practice legitimises, and is in turn legitimised by this imbalance. Even with deep reflexivity, we continue to assume our role within the racialized political economy of *development* underpinned by our colonial past.

Becoming aware of the persistent ideational and discursive power imbalances present brokers and *development* practitioners with a final paradox you could call 'Epeli moments'. These are the moments when you realise your complicity in limiting the collective imagination on what is possible, when you find yourself reproducing negative tropes and stereotypes, when you use problematic binary language that continues to divide us and when you use transformation words in a way that undermines their transformational meaning.

### **How do we hold this paradox?**

Working on partnership forged around *development* presents partnership brokers, and indeed all *development* practitioners who wish to disrupt power imbalance, with this clear paradox: our very efforts to mediate power imbalances also reproduce them to our benefit. Holding complexity and paradox is a central practice of partnership brokering and how each individual do this will vary according to their own values, beliefs, perspectives, experiences, and the everyday realities of their own life's needs and context.

In concluding this paper, I share three ways I hold, and have held, this paradox:

The first has been to have faith that even small, gentle efforts to disrupt power imbalance are always of value. These efforts, whether they come in an individual partnership, a project, even a conversation, are part of a much bigger effort around power and each time we apply a little more pressure over time these small-scale patterns will lead to large scale changes. As we work towards transforming power imbalance at a small scale, we build community, we build authentic relationships, we build connections, we build alternative realities. We remind ourselves of the words of Sir Mekere Morauta 'you don't build something because it can't be broken, you build it to show it can be built'<sup>47</sup> and emergent strategist Adrienne Maree Brown who reflects, 'small is good, small is all, the large is a reflection of the small.'<sup>48</sup> When we are weighed down by the enormity of these imbalances around us, the pain they inflict, their endurance and our own complicity in them, holding

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<sup>45</sup> I do not argue against real localisation but there is something to reflect on the well documented roles played by some indigenous elites in supporting colonial regimes (e.g. [Fanon, 2007](#), [Garrett, 2005](#), [Thiong'o, 1989](#)). Colonialists have always actively co-opted elites, and also embarked on creating a new form of indigenous elite, educated and trained in the mother countries ([Fanon, 2007](#)).

<sup>46</sup> <https://theconversation.com/mind-the-gap-in-local-and-international-aid-workers-salaries-47273>

<sup>47</sup> As quoted by Ross Garnaut in his obituary at Sir Mekere's funeral.

<sup>48</sup> [Brown \(2017\)](#)

paradox in this way can help hold it in productive ways. We can tell ourselves, if we fail, we can learn and try again together.

The second has been to pay more attention to my doubts and be more open to 'Epeli moments'. Systems of hierarchy and domination often persist without conscious recognition, intergenerationally without much resistance. To resist this, we can make our doubts more conscious. At some fundamental level, when we engage in *development*, we reinforce, reproduce, and legitimise the power imbalances outlined in this paper. Even those seeking to disrupt end up key agents of reproduction. My most powerful 'Epeli moment' came when I was told 'Pacific led development is all very well Soli, but this is an Australian funded project'.<sup>49</sup> The stakes are high for those of us with structural and financial power to listen carefully to our own doubts and what moments like this tell us. We have a lot to lose, our livelihoods, status and identity. Posing serious questions about how much our practice is linked to the last century, and the centuries before that, and is still being employed in denying real local agency will meet with much resistance from ourselves and others.

Finally, I hold this paradox by seeking out generative work outside of *development*. There is an abundant reality of growth that is happening, outside of projects and programs and partnerships forged in *development* and from this perspective, outside of *development*, a whole world opens up to us. We have a different viewpoint through which to reimagine *development* together. From this perspective we can reframing it away from the deficit lens it operates on and restructuring the rules of the game to create a different set of incentives toward mutuality and interdependence. This is where the opportunities for genuine partnerships thrive.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to share reflections on power imbalance within the western development industry, what it is, how it works, and why it seems to persist, using the practice of partnership brokering as a unit of analysis. My conclusion is that the practice of partnership brokering operates in a constant paradox maintaining identities, interests, and institutions, but also having the potential to disrupting them. In holding this paradox, I have moved from a certain belief that efforts to disrupt and challenge the imbalances are always of value, to one more conscious of the persistent multilayered ways in which I have both directly and indirectly, maintained an imbalance towards the perspectives, interests, values, and norms of the West to one that seeks out generative work outside of the western development industry. I believe partnership brokers are well placed to 'voyage the

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<sup>49</sup> Authors notes 2020, see also [Islands Business \(2021\) Training Coalition Faces a Reckoning](#)



audacious ocean together'<sup>50</sup> and reimagine *development* by 'supporting and strengthening partnerships through innovative and skilled management of collaborative processes' to 'create a more inclusive and sustainable world.'<sup>51</sup> There is a generative story unfolding, in which more power is shared and our efforts, big and small, need to be consciously part of that story.

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<sup>50</sup> [Guttenbeil-Likiliki \(2022\)](#)

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.partnershipbrokers.org/>