

Developing Partnerships: How local development  
organisations can empower themselves through the integration  
and management of international volunteers; a case study with  
Aspire, South Africa

By

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*For Claire,  
Who shared her stories of South Africa,  
and planted the seed of my own African dream.*

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**Abstract:**

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International partnerships between developed and developing country agencies are typically presented as a way of working toward specific development goals that will benefit the local, developing country partner. Sending international development volunteers from developed country agencies to assist, or build the capacity of local partners is an increasingly common practice within these international partnerships. Yet research about international partnerships and international volunteer sending is typically focussed on the perspective of developed country agencies or the returned (developed country national) volunteers. There is a silence in the literature where the perspective of the local 'undeveloped' country partners' voice should be heard. By overlooking the voice and perspective of local partners, who host international volunteers, the success and worth of international partnerships cannot be ascertained.

This research addresses the topic; "Developing Partnerships: How local development organisations can empower themselves through the integration and management of international volunteers, a case study with Aspire, South Africa". In addressing this topic the research aims to build a better understanding of how host organisations experience international partnerships. Field research was carried out over a three month period and centred on an in depth organisational case study with Aspire; Amathole. Aspire is a rural development agency in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa which has a cosmopolitan and diverse staff team of local and national employees, and international volunteers. This research topic was developed in collaboration with Aspire to build a better understanding of the Aspire experience of international volunteer hosting within its international partnerships. By better understanding local partners' perspectives, wider lessons can be drawn relating to the principles of ownership, partnership and local empowerment which may influence future development practice.

The research was underpinned by a participatory ethos, and utilised a mixed methodology with a qualitative emphasis including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analyses. The research found that the 'Aspire approach' of fully integrating and managing international volunteers into a single, unified, staff team, and managing international volunteers within Aspires own employee systems is a strengths-based and assertive approach. This study of the 'Aspire approach' identifies tangible day-to-day measures that local partners in development can take to empower themselves and to promote and assert their ownership of international volunteer hosting partnerships. The 'Aspire approach' ultimately provides a positive model for future development practice and partnership relations.

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**Contents:**

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Chapter:	Page(s):
----------	----------

---

**Chapter One.****An overview of development partnerships, international volunteering, and the research project:**

- |   |             |
|---|-------------|
| .....   | <b>1-6.</b> |
| • Rationale for undertaking this research project, and its importance | ..... 3.    |
| • The research topic and questions                                    | ..... 4.    |
| • The structure of the thesis   | ..... 5.    |

**Chapter Two.****A review and analysis of existing literature pertinent to the research topic:**

- |  |              |
|--|--------------|
| .....  | <b>7-22.</b> |
| • Early discussions of 'development'   | ..... 8.     |
| • Shifting meanings of development in response to emerging critiques           | ..... 8.     |
| • The emergence of development conceptualised as a fundamental human right     | ..... 9.     |
| • A new 'populist' form of development   | ..... 10.    |
| • Critiques of development; has it really changed at all?                      | ..... 12.    |
| • Development based on the concepts of participation and partnership           | ..... 13.    |
| • Partnerships core principles; empowerment and ownership                      | ..... 17.    |
| • Volunteers, and the growth of international development volunteering         | ..... 18.    |
| • Whose voice is heard in the existing literature on development partnerships? | ..... 21.    |

**Chapter Three.****South African legislation and development policy, post-Apartheid:**

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| .....   | <b>23-30.</b> |
| • The long shadow of Apartheid  | ..... 24.     |
| • South African national level development policies                               | ..... 25.     |
| • From the Reconstruction and Development Programme to Local Economic Development | ..... 27.     |
| • The role of provincial and local government in South African development        | ..... 29.     |

#### **Chapter Four.**

##### **An introduction to Aspire; organisational context and background: ..... 31-37.**

- The founding of Aspire ..... 31.
- Aspire's staff structure and situating international recruits within that structure ..... 32.
- Aspire's organisational mandate ..... 33.
- Aspire's small towns agenda ..... 34.
- An Aspire project snapshot, from Hamburg village ..... 34.
- Aspire's 2007-2014 strategic plan ..... 37.

#### **Chapter Five.**

##### **The research aims, methods and process: ..... 38-48.**

- Research approach and epistemology ..... 38.
- Participatory and strengths based research considerations ..... 39.
- Morality and conducting ethical research ..... 41.
- Recognising the implications of researcher positionality and background ..... 42.
- Additional factors influencing the field research period ..... 43.
- The research methods and process ..... 44.
- Review of the field research periods and methods used ..... 45.
- Summary table of research activities ..... 48.

#### **Chapter Six.**

##### **Discussion and analysis of the research findings: ..... 49-74.**

- Findings and discussion of research questions relating to local partner empowerment and ownership within international development partnerships ..... 49.
- The benefits and challenges of hosting international recruits ..... 57.
- Reflections on blended organisational approaches to international recruit management ..... 65.
- Lessons that can be learnt from the 'Aspire approach' and the broader applicability of these ..... 67.
- Lessons drawn from the research at organisational level ..... 68.

• National scale lessons and implications of this research	.....	69.
• Lessons from the research that reflect on development approaches and concepts at an international level	.....	71.
• Reflections on partnership, participation and process	.....	72.
 <b>Chapter Seven.</b>		
<b>A summary of the research and key learning points:</b>	.....	75-79.
 <b>References:</b>	.....	80-86.



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## **Chapter One.**

### **An overview of development partnerships, international volunteering, and the research project:**

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Development has been, and remains a much debated concept, and field of practice which has been subject to ongoing ideological, theoretical and practical evolutions. Throughout the 1980's-2000's concepts of development moved towards more human centred measures of progress and success, rather than just building infrastructure and industrial white elephants. Human centred development is more about meeting the needs of people, and especially marginalised and vulnerable people. Development goals in this period shifted to emphasise the provision of health care, education, bolstering local skills and meeting peoples basic needs. A natural extension of participatory and human centred development is through the founding of development partnerships.

Partnerships can take many and varied forms, but typically constitute a negotiated and collaborative arrangement between a developed country 'donor' agency, and a developing country based local 'beneficiary' community or organisation. Such partnerships are typically predicated on an agreement between agencies to work together towards specified goals or aims that address a local need in line with the donor agencies concerns and ability to provide resources or assistance. There is a general notion that combining external resources or assistance with a degree of local input in decision making and implementation of development can foster a greater sense of local engagement and support of the development initiatives or projects. Making local communities or organisations active agents and stakeholders in development projects builds local ownership and 'buy in' which in turn fuels a local desire to maintain the project, improving the likelihood of positive outcomes and prospects of sustainability.

The international legitimacy of participatory and partnership based development models is conveyed through documents such as the United Nations (UNs) 1989 Declaration on the Right to Development which frames development as a fundamental and non-negotiable human right. Under the UN Declaration on the Right to Development both developing and developed countries have certain rights, and duties to fulfil. The Paris Declaration of 2005 has been ratified by over 100 countries and places partnerships at the very centre of its development directives and targets. This document also sets out specific targets, guidelines, and commitments for both developing and developed country partners. These are ambitious intentions and ideals to work towards, but it is a tremendous leap from global declarations, and discourses, to the mud and grit of local scale real life implications and implementation.

For some agencies and developed country nationals there is a strong desire to connect as people, to bridge the impersonal global scale and engage with development at the local and human scale. One way to achieve this more human centred and connected form of development is by providing skills or capacity building rather than merely materials or resources in the name of development. Some agencies pursue this through sending paid development experts or consultants, who run workshops or training for local people in order to build their capacity. This 'expert' centred approach envisions a one way transfer of knowledge and skills, and can be criticised for disregarding local knowledge and skills. Other agencies adopt a different approach and aim to provide skills and capacity building through the provision of professional, international volunteers. International volunteers typically undertake an assignment of one to three years duration during which they are hosted by the local partner agency and staff. International volunteer sending programmes like this aim to build strong personal and organisational relationships within which the volunteer is expected to learn from their local counterparts, whilst also sharing their own skills and knowledge. In an ever more connected and globalised world, volunteering has become increasingly internationalised. Sending skilled volunteers from developed countries, to undertake a period of work with developing country (host) partner organisations has become a prominent aspect of many countries official aid programmes.

International volunteer sending does not differ from most development activities taken by developed country partner agencies, in that the primary aim is to benefit the local country partner and assist in providing them with the skills, or knowledge crucial for meeting their development needs and goals. Yet as will be shown in this research, the vast majority of literature on volunteering is focussed on the perspective and experience of either the developed country partner, or the returned (developed country national) volunteer. Whilst it is valuable to consider donor experiences in partnerships for development it is not only more valuable, but absolutely essential that consideration is also given to the experience of the local partner organisations that host volunteers.

Volunteers are sent to benefit and advance the development goals of a local partner, yet the question that goes unasked, and consequently unanswered is how do local partner agencies that host volunteers experience the partnership, and does it actually benefit them in the intended manner/s? As development researchers, and practitioners, it is important to begin addressing this question now. To begin the process of genuinely asking and listening there is an urgent need for in-depth case studies and field research to be undertaken with local partner host organisations. The call now is to get in alongside local development partners, to make ourselves as researchers available, to listen, to ask, to show that we are present and willing to work alongside and respect local development partners as equals.

This research project positions itself to begin asking, and addressing, questions around how local partners experience and benefit (or not) from hosting international volunteers. The

research topic is **“Developing Partnerships: How local development organisations can empower themselves through the integration and management of international volunteers, a case study with Aspire, South Africa”**. The aim of this research is to build a better understanding of how Aspire, a rural development agency in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, takes ownership of its partnerships with international volunteer sending agencies through integrating international volunteers into its own organisational employee structures. By achieving this aim it is hoped that developing a deeper understanding of Aspires approach to hosting international volunteers can be used to suggest new or better models of practice for both volunteer hosting and volunteer sending organisations in future, and may prove to have wider implications for the development sector and literature.

### **Rationale for undertaking this research project, and its importance:**

South Africa provides a dynamic and complex setting within which to study development. Despite the development challenges that the country as a whole is grappling with there are many instances where local people are tackling the problems they face. Aspire is one such local agency, that has identified development challenges in rural areas and small towns of the Eastern Cape. Aspire has devised a strategy for addressing those challenges, and is now implementing locally devised, customised projects, to meet local needs and promote rural development in the Eastern Cape. Against the larger backdrop of South African development challenges it is of crucial importance that these local, positive, initiatives and innovative approaches to development are given recognition. Rather than encouraging research that emphasizes the failures and challenges of development, this project aims to understand and highlight the difference being made through Aspires approach to international partnerships and volunteer hosting. This research provides an opportunity to consider if, and how, the ‘Aspire approach’ may provide lessons for better future practice by both volunteer sending organisations and volunteer hosting organisations.

This research was undertaken with Aspire; Amathole. Aspire is based in the South African city of East London and was founded in 2005 by local municipal government body the Amathole District Municipality (ADM). The economic regeneration of rural areas is a cornerstone of the national development strategy for South Africa, as President Jacob Zuma stated on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009 in his annual State of the Nation Address:

*Fellow South Africans,*

*As you would be aware, the fight against poverty remains the cornerstone of our government’s focus.*

*On the 9th of May, during the Presidential inauguration, we made a commitment to our people and the world that:*

*For as long as there are communities without clean water, decent shelter or*

*proper sanitation;*

*For as long as there are rural dwellers unable to make a decent living from the land on which they live;*

*For as long as there are children who do not have the means nor the opportunity to receive a decent education;*

*We shall not rest, and we dare not falter, in our drive to eradicate poverty*  
(Zuma 2009)

In alignment with these national level development concerns, Aspire operates at the local level where it is responsible for conceptualizing development interventions, devising a strategy and work plan to carry these out, and ultimately implementing a range of unique, holistic rural regeneration and development projects in declining rural areas and small towns of the Eastern Cape province.

Aspire has a core team of fourteen local and national staff members led by Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Phila Xuza. Integrated into that core staff team are up to four international volunteers of various nationalities at any given time. These international volunteers are hosted by Aspire through international development partnerships with other international agencies (from 'developed' countries) they are fully integrated into the staff team and employee structures of the agency, and are placed in line function roles as 'employees' of Aspire. Aspire has adopted a model of international volunteer management based on the integration of volunteers as expert workers, this will be termed the 'Aspire approach' in this research. Through carrying out participatory research at Aspire and drawing on the international literature and models of volunteer management a better understanding of the 'Aspire approach' to international volunteers will benefit Aspire itself, will strengthen Aspire's relationship with its international partner organisations, and will also make a valuable contribution to the international development sector. The 'Aspire approach' will be examined to determine whether it has the potential to lead to more positive future practices and relationships between local development organisations and their international development partners.

### **The research topic and questions:**

This research topic was the product of a process of negotiation and collaborative discussion with Aspire to formulate a proposal that incorporated and addressed the organizations practical questions and ideas. In seeking to explore the topic, and achieve the aims of this research, the following research questions were formulated and reviewed in collaboration with Aspire throughout the project:

- 1: How can the role of international volunteers be managed by local development (host) organisations to promote genuine empowerment and ownership? In this case

the integration of international volunteers into the Aspire structure as expert international workers is the strategy to be studied in depth.

2: Does the wholesale integration of international volunteers into the Aspire structure influence how Aspire interacts with its international partner agencies?

3: How does this model of integrating international volunteers as workers deliver benefits to Aspire as an organisation? What challenges are also associated with this?

4: What might be learnt from the Aspire approach that can benefit other organisations and the development sector more generally (in essence, does the Aspire experience provide a guide for better development practice in future?)

### **Structure of the thesis:**

The thesis is structured to lead the reader through the research process as it was carried out;

- The following chapter is an overview of the literature, presenting the literature and theories underlying the formulation of this research project, it explores concepts of empowerment, partnership and ownership that are central to this project. The chapter serves to provide a general grounding of this research topic within wider development discourses and the existing research.
- The South African context chapter follows the literature review, giving a very brief overview of the national context as it is relevant to the research. It identifies the broader level South African development legislation and policies that provide the umbrella framework and directives under which Aspire operates. Different policy scales and governing structures are outlined from national level, through to the localized municipal governing bodies like the Amathole District Municipality of which Aspire is a supplementary implementation agency.
- Having laid out the national level context within which Aspire operates, chapter four focuses on Aspire the agency itself to trace its history, and organizational mandate. A short photo essays presents the Aspire project in Hamburg village, giving an example of the environments and locations in which Aspire is active. This chapter also outlines the staffing structure at aspire, the scale of the organisation, and how it operates.
- Whilst the first chapters of the thesis lay out what is being studied and the context of the research, the methodology chapter (chapter five) moves to present, in depth, the underlying participatory ethos of this research and the methods employed in the

field. In order to address the topic areas and research questions and achieve the aim of better understanding the Aspire approach to managing international volunteer, a field research period of three months was undertaken with Aspire in South Africa. Field research was undertaken with a general ethos of being participatory and empowering to the participants and Aspire. Within this approach a mixed methodology was utilized. Research methods included a series of semi-structured interviews, discussion and presentation slots for the researcher during regular staff meetings, extensive discussion, feedback, and communication with Aspire staff. This was supported by site visits, researcher observations, and an analysis of Aspires' policies and reports.

- Chapter six presents and discusses the findings of the research. The chapter is broken down to present each of the research questions in turn. Each section presents the central findings relating to that research question. It draws on these findings to reflect on the wider implications and relevance of each in turn. Each of the research questions covers a central theme or development concept: research question one relates to empowerment and ownership; research question two highlights aspects of international partnerships; question three aims to draw out both the benefits and challenges of these international development partnership; and with those benefits and challenges in mind question four explores what can be learnt from them, and how this may influence broader development practices in partnerships and volunteer hosting/sending arrangements. These themes and the research focus areas themselves are all interlinked and brought together contribute to a richer and more holistic understanding of the Aspire approach and the wider lessons that can be drawn from it.
- The final chapter presents the conclusion and key learning points drawn from the research project, as well as suggesting future directions in which this research could be built upon and expanded. The key learning points echo the themes of the research questions, and centre on the importance of partnerships being conducted as a relationship within which both partners participate and contribute; the centrality of genuine local ownership in having productive and beneficial partnerships; and finally the notion that in development partnerships not only should power be granted to local development organisations, but that developed country partners have to accept the locally appropriate and contextually determined ways in which power may be exercised. The closing challenge then, is to researchers and development practitioners to seek out and respect local partner voices in development.

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## Chapter Two.

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### A review and analysis of existing literature pertinent to the research topic:

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This review and analysis chapter lays out the major theoretical underpinnings and arguments in existing research and literature that influence this research in addressing the topic *“Developing Partnerships: How local development organisations can empower themselves through the integration and management of international volunteers, a case study with Aspire, South Africa”*. The purpose of the research is to build on what already exists, in order to expand and deepen our understandings of development and partnerships. To introduce and contextualise the research and the body of literature within which it is situated, this review and analysis chapter is structured as follows:

- The opening section recognises that development at the broadest level is a contested term, which delineates variations between the economic, political, physical, and social environment of different countries. It can be used to indicate desired goals and outcomes, desired relationships, desired processes, and different modes of practice. This chapter will briefly review usage of the term ‘development’ and some of the major changes in how development has been understood, and practiced in recent history.
- After considering the changes and trajectory of development as a concept, the chapter draws attention to the challenges that have arisen from certain academic spheres, including the rise of participatory and human centred development approaches that have emerged, evolved, and taken precedence since the 1960’s. Once participation was firmly embedded in development discourses, and international agreements such as the United Nations Declaration of the Right to Development, its precedence as a principle of development theory and practice gave rise to new ways of implementing participatory development. One of these ways was the establishment of development partnerships between developed or donor country agencies and developing country organisations or communities.
- Within partnerships there has emerged an increasingly internationalised practice among donor agencies toward sending international volunteers to assist with building the capacity and skills of developing country partners. The literature will lay out some of the central debates around the ethics and effectiveness of international volunteering which is generally driven by the principles of promoting local empowerment and fostering a sense of local partner ownership. However, there is debate around power dynamics and representation within development partnerships and volunteer sending and hosting arrangements.

This literature review lays out the broader development picture and theoretical trends, in relation to the areas highlighted above. In the existing literature the developed country partners' voice is often more easily found, and heard, and also more easily understood as it speaks to the Western 'Us'. The purpose of sending international volunteers is to benefit a partner host organisation and / or community, this purpose is undermined and lost in literature which persistently prioritises the voice of sending agencies and volunteers. A local partner / host organisation perspective must be sought on whether the international partnership and volunteer sending arrangement is genuinely beneficial and in line with specific local partner needs. It is this silence that the research aims to address.

### **Early discussions of 'development':**

The term 'development' was brought to prominence by United States President Truman who, in his 1949 inaugural address, stated that "We (the developed, Northern countries) must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease..." He went on to denounce the economic practices of developing countries as stagnant and primitive, and branded their poverty "a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas" (Truman 1949).

This statement by Truman confirmed a public perception of a binary between the 'us' or developed, wealthy, capitalist states of the global North on one side, and the 'them' of impoverished, under-developed, misery populating the global South on the other side. In Truman's view this gross inequality constituted a threat to all peoples and nations, a threat which was to be overcome through development as a process of mimicry and Westernisation in developing countries which constitute the majority world. The Truman era and its legacy of 'think big' projects drew on Rostows' five stages of economic growth whereby countries 'evolved' from being a primitive traditional society, through take-off and industrialization, toward a desired end point of being a fully fledged, industrialized Western style 'developed' country (Rostow 1956). This set in place a dominant model of development thinking that elevated Western knowledge, resources, and power, in contrast to an impoverished, passive, and powerless 'under-developed' world which was deemed to be inherently inferior (Brohman 1996).

### **Shifting meanings of development in response to emerging critiques:**

Since 1949 the notion of development has experienced multiple shifts in meaning and interpretation. The aims and outcomes associated with development have changed in response to global trends, norms and the ever changing political landscape. In response to



these shifts ideas relating to appropriate development methods, practice and implementation have travelled a winding road as well. Challenges to the concept of development as purely a linear process of Western mimicry and the adoption of industrialised and capitalist economies began to emerge in the mid-1960's from the vocal group of Latin American dependency theorists which included Gunder Frank and Christobal Kay. Proponents of underdevelopment charged that the development initiatives carried out by developed countries throughout the 1950's had not only failed to achieve their stated objectives but had directly contributed to establishing dependency and *underdevelopment* in Latin America. This claim was central to the New International Economic order (NIEO) claims of the 1970's (Frank 1972, Kay 1991, Kapoor 2002) and reflected growing opposition to the activities of the Bretton Woods Institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in developing countries (Worsley 1984).

In the 1960's Dudley Seers was a vocal advocate for moving away from economically focused notions of development. Seers (1969) argued that an increase in GDP cannot be regarded as development in its own right if the social ills of inequality, unemployment and poverty have worsened in the same period. This sentiment tapped into a deep current of unease among development practitioners and Western liberals, contributing to a gradual shift in development discourses to include dimensions of human, social, cultural and political well being as integral aspects of development. The contributions of development critics like Seers, and later participatory development advocates especially Robert Chambers (1983, 1997) built momentum in steering development discourses toward more human centred and participatory schools of development thought. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's human centred and participatory development ideas became increasingly prominent and mainstream. This shift occurred alongside increased international awareness and a strongly turning tide of public opinion against Structural Adjustment Programmes and other financial reforms, due to the devastating human and social impacts that accompanied them when imposed upon developing countries.

### **The emergence of development conceptualised as a fundamental human right:**

One clear statement of the emerging direction in international development discourse and norms came during the late 1980's, expressed in the United Nations (UNs) 1989 Declaration on the Right to Development. This document clearly stipulated that development be viewed as a human centred and holistic process which also comprised a fundamental, universal human right. The UN Declaration on the Right to Development articulated a right to a process within which:

*All human rights and fundamental freedoms are realized. Development is a process. Development is not an event that happens on a particular day. The right to development goes further in identifying the notion of well-being with the*

*realisation of fundamental freedoms, so development becomes a process of improvement of well being or the improved realisation of fundamental freedoms.*  
(Sengupta et al 2004:93)

Under this interpretation development is regarded in essence, as a process, which enables the fulfilment of human potential (Udombana 2000, Sengupta et al. 2006). The UN's explicit and emphatic recognition of development as having human, social, cultural and political components, as well as economic, captured the shifts that were taking place in development discourses and debates at the time, and contributed to the direction of development through the 1990's and 2000's.

### **A new, 'populist' form of development?**

In the 1980's, 1990's and 2000's development has emerged in a more 'populist' form (Brohmann 1996). The central aspects of the new 'populist' development are notions of sustainability and empowerment founded on participation, and partnership. Through embracing these principles populist development has promoted more holistic development appraisals and projects which integrate and respect indigenous (local) technical knowledge. Much of the push for early populist development came in the 1980s came from agricultural research bodies and lobby groups (Blaikie 2000). It was evident to these campaigners that agricultural methods are based on indigenous knowledge of the local culture, geography, and climate, and that without a whole system approach environmental sustainability cannot be achieved. Subsequent populist development approaches have encouraged the recognition and inclusion of local knowledge which elevates the status of local partners and communities, providing scope for more inclusive and empowering development practices. The use of broader, more holistic appraisals and projects addresses interconnected systems, and heightens the prospects for sustainability (Blaikie 2000).

Populist approaches to development envision a more equal and engaged relationship between donor and recipient nations. Establishing relationships became increasingly essential as the concepts of partnership, empowerment, and participation placed new expectations on the conduct of both donor and recipient countries and organisations. The 2005 Paris Declaration represented an international statement of intent at the highest level regarding the direction of future development practice. The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness was a high level forum of negotiation and consultation eventually ratified by over 100 countries seeking "joint progress toward enhanced aid effectiveness" (HDRN 2005:1) and centred on the importance of the principles of "ownership, harmonisation and alignment, in order to deliver development results and mutual accountability" (HDRN 2005). The Paris Declaration reiterated a commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goal targets for development that were established in 2000, but went further in expressing tangible ways in which progress could be achieved and monitored, providing indicators and

targets for each of the Paris Principles alongside which commitment could be measured by actions.

Each of the first three Paris principles; ownership, alignment, and harmonisation, are presented in the text of the Paris Declaration alongside tangible and measurable commitments of both partner countries and donor countries. Under ownership “Partner countries commit to: Exercise leadership in developing and implementing their national development strategies, take the lead in coordinating aid at all level in conjunction with other development resources, in dialogue with donors, and encouraging participation. [whilst] Donor countries commit to: Respect partner country leadership and help strengthen their capacity to exercise it” (HDRN 2005:3). Fundamentally the Paris Declaration regards partner country ownership as crucial to effective development. Hyden (2008) states that “It [the Paris Declaration] builds on the many negative lessons learnt over the years from programme and project support, and proposes a shift towards modalities of aid that give recipient-country governments more scope to make decisions based on their own priorities. The principle underlying this shift is the importance of ‘national ownership’”.

National and local ownership is the first development principle of the Paris Declaration. It presumes that achieving ownership will make a positive step toward ensuring that developing countries have the opportunity and capacity to take leadership of their own development initiatives, how these are carried out and co-ordinated, and what policies and strategies govern the development of their country. The second Paris Declaration principle advocates alignment by donors. The principle of alignment emphasises the need for donors to ensure that the assistance or support they give is in keeping with partner country (or agencies) existing strategies, institutions and procedures. The intention is to avoid the duplication of similar programmes, and the establishment of parallel agencies and systems which are all aiming to achieve the same goal, this includes a commitment by donors to use the existing partner country systems and agencies. The third Paris principle is harmonisation by donors in order to present partners with more effective and transparent procedures for sourcing funding or support. Ideally donors are meant to apply a comparative advantage based distribution of labour and contribute the support of resources they are most able to provide (HDRN 2005, Rogerson 2005, Hyden 2008).

Underlying the shift toward populist development and subsequent international level agreements such as the Paris Declaration, there is an increased awareness that development needs to be conducted as a relationship based on an understanding of recipient needs. The populist ideals of empowerment, participation, and sustainability are more likely to be realised within a development approach based on partnership. The push from the Paris Declaration toward increased accountability, spelling out tangible, explicit, targets and responsibilities for both the donor and recipient countries and organisations is a strong indication that development needs to be an engaged, and two-way process. The emphasis

on actions and responsibilities placed upon both the donor and the recipient serves to advance recognition of agency and competencies on both sides of the development relationship.

### **Critiques of development, has it really changed at all?**

Critics of development frequently charge that in essence development has not changed, or moved beyond its' modernist and mono-cultural capitalist roots. Instead, despite a so-called evolution of development what has remained constant is the notion of development as a process of change toward achieving 'desirable goals' naturally what is deemed to be 'desirable' is highly subjective and disputed (De Vries 2001:313). In many cases "Notions of development have facilitated economic, cultural and environmental degradation in the name of progress. This 'progress' is perceived as inherently Euro-centric and has required the acceptance of mono-cultural ends in which the desirable fate for all is in terms of achieving the status of wage earners and consumers"(De Vries 2001:180). The mono-cultural bias in development discourses has established a 'one world' ontology which is deeply embedded in international political and developmental discourses and approaches.

The naturalized and generally accepted desirability of mono-cultural capitalism continues to underlie much present day development theory and practice, whereby the discourse of development is steeped in residual notions of hierarchy and presumptions of western superiority (Udombana 2000, Rostow 1956, Worsley 1984). This gives rise to a development discourse in which 'the poor' are regarded as passive, powerless, and generally incapable of initiating change or progress through their own initiative and ability, by casting less developed countries in this light one can present a case for the need and dependency of these countries which legitimises external (Western) intervention and aid in the name of development. The implicit hierarchy between developed, and developing, countries is important to note once more, as the majority of approaches promoting capacity building or partnership envisage a predominantly one way exchange of knowledge and skills, with the actions of the donor agency typically being focused on, and scant regard is given to the actions and agency of the local partner (Eade 1997).

Of particular concern is the fact that the work of more progressive development writers, who intended to challenge the elevated status of developed country partners has had the unintended consequence of consolidating a focus on the actions of donor or developed country partners alone. In this regard Robert Chambers is particularly note worthy, not least of all because of the high profile and impact of his work. Chambers advocates strongly, and eloquently for a process of putting the 'last', 'first' and in so doing to 'hand over the stick' or control, in a manner that will encourage local engagement and ownership within development processes (Chambers 1983). At the time of his writings in the 1980's-90's Chambers quite rightly confronted and challenged the arrogance and self-assured approach

of Western 'experts' in development. Chambers proposed a concept of 'putting the first, last' and in the context of the 1980-90's Chambers was correct in stating that scrutiny and reflection on the actions of donors and development professionals was urgently needed (Chambers 1983, Chambers 1997). However in so effectively shifting the gaze of development research and practice toward scrutiny of the donor partners' actions, there is now a lack of focus and recognition given to the local partner. In effect it could be argued that the developed country 'first' has been so effectively put 'last' that development has now tended to overlook the actions of the developing country partner at all, whether 'first' or 'last' (Chambers 1983). As a consequence, the local partners' perspective, knowledge, competence, and agency is currently being overlooked and undermined in development research.

In neglecting to consider the experience and role of local partners in their own development, local partners are denied agency and appear to be merely inactive by-standers passively waiting to be handed some crumbs of 'control' over their own development and futures (Chambers 1997). Similarly Crocker (2008) places the onus on the donor or developed country agency to ensure that development partnerships lead to empowerment and dignity for the developing country partner, arguing that: "The help they give to others should enhance autonomy rather than produce dependency" (Crocker 2008:90). The use of the word 'help' in this context appears to contradict the sentiment of the statement as once more it denies the agency of the local partner, and furthers the implicit hierarchy of the developed country partner as a donor and benevolent giver, and portrays the local partner as needy and incompetent.

Research urgently needs to address the issues outlined above and recognise a rich multiplicity of truths and development goals. Whilst certain changes may be generally perceived as desirable in a Western context, these may not be appropriate or viable in localised environments, and non-western social and cultural contexts. Similarly development practitioners and researchers need to move beyond a single, familiar, Western voice in development practice and begin to recognize, and respect that local organizations are actively involved in development partnerships, they have their own goals, agency, and actions. Development initiatives are primarily intended to benefit the local partner, and yet without consideration of local partner goals and actions it is not possible to genuinely evaluate, and reflect on the success of those development initiatives.

### **Development based on the concepts of participation and partnership:**

Participatory development strives to elevate the status and involvement of the developing country partner. Whilst "each environment has its stumbling blocks to development [which are inter-connected] each environment also has resources that must be identified and then applied in the struggle against poverty" (Swanepoel & De Beer 2006:10). The experts in this

situation, and the people with the knowledge and expertise to overcome those stumbling blocks are not necessarily outside experts. Most likely, the real experts are the local organisations, local people, and affected communities themselves. Expressing a similar sentiment, and writing in relation to development across the African continent, but particularly in Southern Africa Stock suggests that:

*Future development will depend primarily on the mobilisation of African resources and know-how. **The possibility of supporting and ultimately building upon what ordinary Africans already know and do represents an exciting alternative** to development strategies that rely exclusively on the state and ignore what people themselves can contribute to the development process*

(Stock 2004:5 in Nel 2007:460 emphasis added)

Through participatory development approaches not only can African resources and knowledge be respected and harnessed, but the opportunity can be seized to take up Stocks suggestion that development should be about combining the very best of international skills and knowledge to support and build upon what already exists in Africa. This creates space for a move toward collaboration and development partnerships founded on recognition “of recipients not as passive parties, receiving resources, technology and direction from outside, but as active agents and communities, helping to define their own problems, resources, and solutions” (Overton & Storey 2004:42).

Development that draws on African knowledge, and aims to position local development agencies as active agents and drivers of their own development is influenced by the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen. In 1999 Sen’s book ‘Development as freedom’ drew together a lifetimes multidisciplinary research to present the case for development as a process of building and developing individual capabilities. The notion of asset-based community development draws on a similar understanding of development being achieved through recognizing the positive attributes and capabilities already present in individuals and in the community. Once positive attributes, strengths and capabilities are identified and given recognition then development takes “as its starting point the existing assets and strengths of community” (Mathie & Cunningham 2003:3) and centres on working to bolster these.

Recognizing that individuals and communities have capabilities and assets of their own to contribute moves development approaches further away from traditional neo-liberal and modernistic development projects, which tended to cast local organizations and people as mere passive recipients or subjects of development projects. Local organizations and people are recognized as active and influential agents in devising and carrying out development projects. Participatory and community development prioritises the importance of both

outcomes, and a process that is enabling and contextually appropriate (Burkey 1993). The sustainability and effectiveness of development initiatives will be influenced by stakeholder engagement and a sense of ownership and inclusion in the decision making and implementation process (Blackburn et al. 2002). Crocker (2008) asserts that “Authentic development occurs when groups at whatever level become subjects who deliberate, decide and act in the world rather than being either victims of circumstance, or objects of someone else’s decisions” (Crocker 2008:339). One such vehicle for shared voice and stakeholder input to the development process is the establishment of organisational partnerships for development.

*The term ‘partnership’ implies joint participation. It may not be an equal partnership, but both sides are involved in the development activity. ‘Partnership’ can be seen to have a focus and purpose-partnerships are formed in order to achieve something.*  
(Overton & Storey 2004:42)

As the quote above states, partnerships for development are a strategic relationship between partners working together toward specific desired outcomes or goals. Partnerships ideally establish a collaborative relationship between developed and developing country development agencies<sup>1</sup>. Fostering participatory approaches in day-to-day development practice has seen a move toward more development partnerships. Typically these partnerships are a collaborative arrangement between two or more development agencies, and in the context of this research it is the partnerships forged between developed and developing country agencies that is of interest.

“In aid recipient countries, partnerships between governments, donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now a central feature of many development projects and programmes” (Lewis 1997:323). The trend toward partnership as a core mechanism for ‘good’ development practice has gained in prominence since Lewis’ 1997 quote above. If one views the websites and information pages of major international aid and development agencies such as the United Kingdoms’ Department For International Development (DFID), and New Zealand’s Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) the term ‘Partnership’ or reference to ‘Partners’, will be seen frequently. International partnerships for development, between developed and developing country organizations, can now be regarded as cornerstones of current development practice and theory.

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<sup>1</sup> The sharing of an explicit focus or goal to work towards is what distinguishes an organisational partnership from a relationship. A relationship between organisations similarly involves interaction and engagement, but is not necessarily established around specific goals or aims.

The notion of partnership has come to shape the policies and practices of many if not most international development agencies, including the United Kingdom's Volunteer Service Overseas, New Zealand's Volunteer Service Abroad (Snelson 2010) and Australia's equivalent agency, Australian Volunteer International (Fifer 2010). In its ideal form partnership can be defined as:

*A dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labour based on the respective competitive advantages of each partner [within which the partners can expect to have] mutual influence, with a careful balance between synergy and respective autonomy, which incorporates mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability and transparency.*  
(Brinkerhoff 2002:14)

International partnerships demand that a delicate balancing act be performed between local control and appropriate, 'carefully mediated' external support provided by the developed country partner (Burkey 1993). If this balance is not achieved, practitioners may fall into the trap identified by Nel et al (2001) that power imbalances in partnerships, if not well managed, can create a harmful culture of dependency.

International partnerships may incorporate various combinations of organizational networking, logistical support, advocacy and lobbying, assisting with learning and training opportunities, and the sharing of resources, technological, financial, or human (Hudson & Inkson 2006). The sharing of human resources can take place through the sending of international volunteers, typically from a Western or developed partner country, and hosted by a developing country partner organisation. International volunteers hosted by a developing country partner may play a role as imported temporary project managers or expert advisors. Alternatively, international volunteers may take on a skill exchange and training focused role, providing a short term (usually one to three year) human resource boost, and ideally contributing longer term benefits and skill gains for the permanent staff and associates of the organization, thus providing a more sustainable form of organizational and human development (Hudson & Inkson 2006, Snelson 2010, Fifer 2010)

Development practice centred on the establishment of equitable partnerships between organisations from developed and developing countries is a reflection of the trends, emerging norms, and values that shape current development discourses and practice. The implications of partnership in practice warrant further consideration. Partnership as a process of capacity building and skill exchange is intended to impart knowledge and skills to individuals and organisations in developing countries, such capacity building can boost the sustainability and long term success of development initiatives. Principles of partnerships include promoting and enabling local empowerment. If a community is to be



effectively empowered through the development process, and as an outcome of a development project, there needs to be a conscious shift towards fostering and establishing local ownership of that development process and outcomes. Unless a community is empowered and feeling a sense of ownership towards a project or development initiative then the prospects of longer term viability and sustainability are greatly reduced. These partnership principles of empowerment, ownership, and sustainability are now each discussed in slightly more depth.

### **Partnerships core principles; empowerment and ownership:**

This research will draw on the following definition provided by Gibson & Woolcock that empowerment is *“the process of enhancing individual or group capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”* (Gibson et al 2008:152). Different aspects of empowerment are evident in this definition of empowerment. Empowerment needs to both provide the opportunity, and enhance the ability, of local people to influence change and take action. Gibson and Woolcock go on to observe that empowerment is “an increasingly familiar term within the international development community. Its increasing popularity suggests an emerging, shared understanding that marginalized individuals and groups often possess limited influence in shaping local-level, decision-making processes that affect their well-being” (Gibson & Woolcock 2008:152).

Schuftan (1996) highlights the following suggested areas and features of empowering and inclusive community development: gender and cultural sensitivity, the use of “existing local human resources whenever possible”; and through recognising and using local human resources, development should aim to build on the existing strengths, assets and capabilities of the participants (Schuftan 1996:261). Ideally “most people in the community understand the rationale behind the services being offered [and] community representatives participate in making decisions about the services being delivered” (Schuftan 1996:261). Further it should be an integral part of both the development process, and outcomes that:

*People cease to be passive recipients of services delivered by government and others; they demand a role of responsibility for themselves, especially in determining the type, quality, quantity, place and focus of such services; they take part in both the decision-making process and in the delivery mechanisms.*

(Schuftan 1996:261)

Empowerment should not be limited in duration to a single project, through gaining knowledge, training, and expertise individuals are enabled and empowered. When skills and capacity are imparted to individual persons they become part of the local skills base and knowledge pool, capacity building is a resource that does not cease to operate once a donor or partner organisation is gone. For this reason it is argued that capacity building serves not

only to empower but is also a sustainable form of development that can generate returns far beyond the initial input of time and effort (Gibson & Woolcock 2008, Schuftan 1996).

Through the implementation of development approaches that promote empowerment and the inclusion of local people and communities a sense of ownership over development projects can be fostered. By making local people and communities active participants and stakeholders in their own development the prospects for ongoing sustainability are much increased. Without the active engagement and support of the community and stakeholders a development project is not sustainable. Sustainability is a product of development that actively engages and empowers people, development that meets specific and genuine local needs and not assumed deficiencies that outsiders have prescribed. Unless local people and stakeholders can see the benefit of a development initiative and have an active role in it, as well as a vested interest in its long term survival, it will not be sustainable. However, local support is meaningless without empowerment and education or training. Unless local people have the skills and capacity to sustain the project, then too it is unsustainable (Buckland 1998, Nel et al 2001).

Lucas (2001) asserts that exclusion from one's own development is in and of itself a form of violent dis-empowerment. On these grounds partnership, and participatory development methods can be seen as a form of positive change and potential redress. At the core of empowerment and participatory methods is the notion that if people are involved with and participating in their own development initiatives, which respond to their felt needs, the outcomes will be more positive, and sustainable (Blackburn et al 2002). Strategies to achieve participation include local engagement, the sharing of influence, and control over process, resources, decisions and outcomes and genuinely handing over power so that decision making is in the hands of the people it directly affects (Blackburn et al 2002, Lucas 2001, Binns & Nel 1999). Yet despite the prominence of community ownership rhetoric within the aid and development industry there remains a lag in the implementation and practice of these principles (Lucas 2001).

### **Volunteers; and the growth of international development volunteering:**

Development partnerships and participatory development emphasise the need to increase local capacity and skills in a sustainable and empowering manner. This has led to a shift away from development and aid centred on the provision of financial and material resources. One emerging trend has been to provide a temporary skill and training boost through the provision of international volunteers. This practice in development builds stronger connections between people and the international community, and can be a means to improve understanding and awareness as well as seeking to impart skills. The research organisation NGO Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA) conducts

studies of the trends in volunteering and civil service across the region of Southern Africa. In their South Africa Country Report 2006 VOESAs highlight that:

*The volunteers of international volunteer programmes are skilled and experienced personnel that are hard to come by in many countries. Organisations view them as a much-needed resource to fill a gap at a fraction of the cost it would require to fill the post using local experts. [in the South African context] Most international volunteer programmes are also administered as partnerships either between international organisations and the South African government, or between international organisations and civil society organisations.*

(Perold et al. 2006:36)

There has been an internationalisation of volunteering taking place over the last two decades. The expansion of volunteering activity in the developing world has occurred alongside an increase in development and relief efforts by western organisations (Anheier & Salamon 1999). To illustrate the scale of international volunteering activity, the 'Volunteer Global' webpage identifies six hundred organisations and programmes involved with sending international volunteers to developing countries and regions across the globe. The research finds that the highest number of international volunteer based programmes is carried out in Latin America, with an average of 39.5 programmes in each country across the region. Africa is third placed (after Oceania) with an average 16.094 programmes per country. Of the international programmes operating in Africa, the highest number was 80 programmes in South Africa, followed by 75 in Tanzania. The number of programmes declines to the 20's for other countries in Southern Africa, with 35 programmes in Zambia, and 25 in Namibia (Volunteer Global 2009).

The scale of international volunteering does not make clear how international volunteers are identified or what their role is. In the field of development volunteers are differentiated from development agents or practitioners because the work that they do is unpaid, or possibly rewarded with only a minimal stipend or services such as accommodation provisions (Anheier & Salamon 1999, Hudson & Inkson 2006). The Red Cross definition of volunteering is: "Individuals who reach out beyond the confines of paid employment and normal responsibility to contribute in different ways without expectation of profit or reward, in the belief that their activities are beneficial to the community as well as satisfying to themselves" (Anheier & Salamon 1999:49). Palmer provides a more specific definition of modern day international development volunteers as "Someone who willingly works overseas (most often in 'developing' countries) for a package that amounts to less than what s/he would be earning in the same capacity in his/her country of origin." (Palmer 2002:637). Volunteer's personal motivations centre on helping or 'giving something back' to communities, and

creating opportunities for personal growth and fulfilment (Hudson & Inkson 2006, Palmer 2002, Anheier & Salamon 1999).

Organisations engaged with international volunteering usually have a strong, idealistic focus in the work that they do. The International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) presents the following opening statement on international volunteering on its international webpage:

*As stated in the Universal Declaration on Volunteering, adopted by the IAVE Board of Directors in 2001, 'volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of humankind - the pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety, and justice for all people.' Volunteering is a force that unites people in an increasingly complex world with the common human values of community, care, and service. Volunteering has the power to connect us and shape our collective destinies*  
(IAVE, 2010).

The New Zealand volunteer sending agency Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) features an 'About VSA' page on their website, which provides the following vision of what can be achieved through sending international volunteers as a core strategy for international development partnerships:

*We believe we can make a positive difference in the world when volunteers, partner organisations and communities work together, sharing skills and knowledge. This approach, based on appropriate sustainable development, leads to improved quality of life, and helps build self-determining communities and stable nations*  
(VSA 2010)

As is clear in the VSA statement above, international volunteers are sent with the intention of assisting local partner organisations, yet there “has been a dearth of information about the perspectives of host communities [or host organisations] that are involved with these international volunteers” (Comhlamh 2007). In recognizing this shortfall in existing research, this research focuses on the host organisation practices to integrate and manage international volunteers and maximise the benefits of hosting international volunteers provided through their international partnerships with volunteer sending agencies from developed countries.

Smith and Cordery (2010) draw on a wide range of institutional resources (i.e. agency training manuals, codes of practice) and volunteer management guides to derive a list of general principles that can be considered as generic aspect of effective and ‘good practice’ in

organisational management of volunteers. Some of these 'good practice' aspects of volunteer management are of use in this research project and these include:

- Support and communication, stressing the need to "Treat volunteer staff as valuable team members. Volunteering is a two way process which benefits volunteers and the organisation" (Smith & Cordery 2010:14),
- Having in place appropriate and clear policies and procedures which define and clarify volunteer roles, job descriptions, rights, and responsibilities within the organisational structure.
- As well as ensuring the provision of suitable and effective volunteer orientation and training (Smith & Cordery 2010).

### **Whose voice is heard in the existing literature on development partnerships?**

The voice of volunteering sending agencies, and returned international volunteers can be found and accessed with relative ease, through organisational websites, reports, corporate social responsibility pages and academic publications. On the other side of partnership, are developing country partners both governmental and non-governmental, communities, local businesses, unions and stakeholders that collaborate in research and development projects. There are high status locals and elders, traditional experts, organisations and communities that host international volunteers, individuals who drive change, and a whole host of voices which are often overlooked or regarded as the lesser half of the partnership equation. The avenues simply don't seem to exist through which this voice can be widely recognised, respected, and heard.

There is little in the literature to address or identify the day to day practices undertaken by volunteer hosting organisations. International volunteers are sent to organisations for a purpose, with an explicit skill set or area of competence that warrants their being sent, yet there seems to be a dearth of research considering the processes or strategies for volunteer management and negotiation between partners (Comhlamh 2007). Likewise little consideration is given to the actions taken by volunteer hosting agencies to maximise the benefits of the relationship, and to ensure benefits gained are sustainable and will effectively bolster and strengthen the organisation beyond the departure of international volunteers.

In response to these issues, this research is explicitly focused on trying to access the voice and perspective of a single host organisation (Aspire) with regard to hosting international volunteers sent through partnership arrangements with its' international development partners. The research topic and questions draw on the body of literature, and the issues and themes highlighted in this chapter. Of equal, if not greater importance, is that the research

topic and questions are the product of a process of negotiation and collaborative discussion with Aspire. The research design incorporates and addresses Aspires' on the ground concerns and ideas as an organisation, whilst reflecting on its' international partnerships, and perspective as a host organisation for international volunteers.

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## **Chapter Three.**

### **South African legislation and development policy, post-Apartheid:**

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South Africa has a land area of about 1 221 040 km squared and a population of 49.3 million people according to World Bank 2010 estimates (World Bank 2011). Approximately 59% of that population is officially urban based (ADB 2010). South Africa is a culturally and ethnically diverse country with 11 official languages representing a range of distinct ethnic and 'tribal' population groups. South Africa faces a range of development challenges. Unequal development of, and investment in, rural areas has led to the decline of many small towns and minor service centres. In a country with such a large geographical territory, the decline of small towns (which are often a substantial distance from any larger centre) leaves many rural dwellers cut off and isolated from vital services, especially the provision of health care and education.

Major challenges are ahead for South Africa as it grapples with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The average age expectancy in the country has fallen from 61 years in 1990, to 51 years in 2008. HIV/AIDS prevalence remains at about 18% and this is likely to increase as high risk sexual activity, especially among youth, remains common. Health concerns such as HIV/AIDS are compounded by widespread extreme poverty, and lack of access to adequate sanitation facilities; 66% of urban dwellers have access to improved sanitation facilities, compared to only 49% of rural dwellers. Clean water is a further concern and approximately 18% of rural dwellers remain without access to clean and safe water supplies (UNICEF 2010).

Official unemployment statistics have been consistently rising in South Africa. Statistics produced by the South African Labour and Development Unit (SALDRU) show unemployment in 1993 ranging from 13-31.2% depending on the definition of 'unemployment' used. In 1997 the figure increased to 22.9-37.6% official unemployment across the country, again depending on the definition of 'unemployment used' (Kingdon et al 2000). In 2010 SALDRU report an official figure of 25% unemployment and speculate that broadly defined unemployment is likely to be around 37% (Frederick et al 2010). In 2010 Statistics South Africa report for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter issues an official national unemployment of 24%, and in the Eastern Cape Province this is higher at 27% (Statistics South Africa 2010).

In the face of these challenges, development, which is already a much contested concept and field of practice, is especially disputed and controversial in the South African context. There are cross cutting issues and factors that shape national policy, and debate. National dialogue is especially influenced by the widespread hardship and deprivation experienced by Historically Disadvantaged Individuals (HDIs) including 'blacks', women, and the disabled. Development encompasses issues around economic and financial inequality, racial identity

and tensions, gender issues, and grossly unequal levels of service delivery and provision along racial lines, including unequal education and employment opportunities. Whilst these factors are generally common to most developing countries, the South African context is unique in the extent to which these factors stem quite directly from the country's raw and traumatic history under apartheid and its painful transition into a democracy that is still maturing and evolving. This gives rise to a volatile national history and context within which development takes place.

This research has been undertaken in a country that is highly diverse, and subject to many different (and conflicting) interpretations or perspectives. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this research to do such a complex history justice, this chapter will seek to lay out some basic information and key facts about the South African context which provide a sufficient background within which to situate the research project. This chapter will briefly give an overview of the South African context, presenting the country's emergence from apartheid and the first raft of development policies put out under the government of the New South Africa after 1994. Transitions in national policy and approach to development are then traced from the Redistribution and Development Programme, to Local Economic Development, to the current trend toward more nuanced, localised and tailored initiatives such as those advocated by Aspire.

### **The long shadow of Apartheid:**

'Development' is a term that has been misappropriated and used in the name of many ill-conceived and ultimately harmful schemes and projects (Escobar 1995). These associations and connotations add to the disputed nature of the development sector. In the South African context, the apartheid legacy makes the use of the term development doubly troublesome. The word apartheid literally translates as "separate development" and through the regulating of labour markets, the creation of so-called 'Bantustans' ('Black' tribal homeland areas), and forced removals of 'black' residents from 'white' areas, separate development is exactly what the apartheid era government strove for (Rogers, 1980). As a consequence of broader debates and the unique national history of the country, 'development' in South Africa is a term with exceptionally heavy baggage and negative associations.

South Africa, which is the most industrialized country in Africa, is regarded by some observers as being a first-world country in a third-world continent (Bond 2003). Although it is seen by many as a leader for the rest of Africa, the overwhelming effects of a legacy of colonialism and racism experienced by the population are still visible, even in this advancing society (Carter & May 2001). In a country where former apartheid rule served to 'under-develop' the majority of South Africa's population while the minority portion held on to power and control through social, political and economic inequalities, the task for the



new democratic government in 1994 was primarily to 'reconstruct and develop' the country (Hoogeveen & Ozler 2005,).

The United Nations (UN) 1989 Declaration on Apartheid condemned apartheid as a crime against humanity which perpetrated gross violations of basic human rights and denied equality in human dignity and respect, for all people "regardless of colour, race, sex or creed". The declaration goes on to state that apartheid "sought to dehumanise entire peoples and imposed a brutal war on the region of Southern Africa which has resulted in untold loss of life [apartheid is] a scourge and affront to humanity that must be fought and eradicated in its entirety" (UN 1989) The apartheid regime eventually succumbed to consistent and escalating domestic unrest, international sanctions, a booming global protest movement and international condemnation, culminating in 1994 with the recently released Nelson Mandela leading the African National Congress (ANC) to victory as the first black, majority government of the country. However deep scars remain in this troubled country, and reflect that apartheid was not merely a racist political phenomenon, but an ideology that shaped the country's social, legal, cultural and economic environments, dictated service provision (especially health and education), labour control and policies, employment opportunities, spatial and geographical access, and resource allocation, along the lines of racial categories. The deeply entrenched inequalities and social divisions of the apartheid legacy persist and continue to characterise life in SA for many people (Richards et al. 2005, Carter & May 2001).

### **South African national level development policies:**

Policies, legislation, and plans that emerged in the aftermath of the 1994 transition to democracy expressed the need to strive for national healing and moving forward. Among these, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is paramount. Adopted by government in 1996, the Constitution laid out a vision for the country as it emerged from the dark shadow of apartheid, the preamble reads as follows:

*We, the people of South Africa, recognise the injustices of our past; honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.*

*We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to :*

*Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;*

*Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;*

*Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person;*  
*and*

*Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.*

*May God protect our people. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso. God seën Suid-Afrika. God bless South Africa. Mudzimu fhatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika.*

(SA Government 1996)

The South African Constitution of 1996 guides the role and function of all South African government departments and instruments at the broadest level. It is under the South African constitution that a plethora of development-related initiatives and mandates were formulated and delegated after 1994 across the range of governance spheres, scales and departmental bodies. Unlike many countries South Africa lacks a single over-arching 'development' agency, or umbrella document that guides all related activities in the country. This haphazard and fragmented approach limits the scope for holistic development projects that recognize the cross cutting and interacting nature of social, economic, political, ethnic/racial and cultural concerns and issues. The absence of an over-riding national strategy is compounded by a policy of decentralization to bodies at different scales of governance across the country.

Governance in South Africa is divided into three distinct, but interrelated 'spheres' or scales; national, provincial and local:

- National scale "government is responsible for policy formulation and making, developing national standards and norms, and rules and regulations"
- Provincial government oversees "Exclusive functional areas [which include] abattoirs, ambulance services, provincial planning, provincial cultural matters, provincial roads and traffic.
- Local government bodies which "take care of local government matters which include local amenities, markets, municipal abattoirs, municipal roads, noise pollution and street trading.

(DPSA, 2003:15)

Policy derived at national level is delegated to the country's nine provinces, of which the Eastern Cape is one (see fig 1. page 26, for a map showing the South African provinces). Each province has a core city based 'metro' or local governing body. In the Eastern Cape this is the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro body. The 'metro' then oversees a number of smaller district governing bodies, such as the Amathole District Municipality (ADM). Each of these districts is further broken down into localized municipalities, for example the East London based Buffalo City Municipality (BCM). At the smaller scales within the district or

municipality, policy implementation may be sub-contracted out to a variety of implementation agencies or partner agencies such as Aspire.

Fig 1. Below. Map of South African provinces:



### **From the Reconstruction and Development Programme to Local Economic Development:**

The following discussion outlines some of the key trends and influences within the South African development context post 1994. The overall approach to development in South Africa was set by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) published before the democratic elections of 1994 (KHANYA 2005, Carter & May 2001). The process of reconstruction and development for South Africa's estimated 44.7 million people (SAIRR 1996) was the aim of the African National Congress (ANC) governments Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). According to the RDP (RDP 1994:14), 'poverty is the single greatest burden of South Africa's people and is the direct result of the apartheid system' the RDP aimed to begin addressing the economic and social challenges facing the New South Africa. Central to the RDP approach was to identify focal areas which reflected the desire to meet the basic needs of people and endow basic human rights as outlined in the Constitution. The RDPs focus areas were job creation, land reform, provision of housing, electricity and communications, clean water, and health care (including social welfare services such as nutritional programmes) and environmental programmes (Hoogeveen & Ozler 2005, Ramphela 2008, Knight 2001). The RDP was essentially a paternalistic system

which regarded development as a process of the state delivering goods to passive citizen / recipients, it did not allow for the agency of individuals or communities as competent, active players in their own development (Ramphela 2008).

In 1996 following the recommendations of the governments Poverty and Inequality Report (PIR) the RDP was superseded by the Department of Finance GEAR strategy (Growth, Employment, And Redistribution). Strongly influenced by modernist concepts of development and progress, the GEAR strategy was implemented as the macro-economic framework for the country, aiming to correct the very poor macroeconomic situation inherited in 1994, overcome the large debt, and to open the economy, so creating a platform for growth (Weeks 1999). GEAR remains an active South African government policy to the present day. It consists of macroeconomic five year plans aiming primarily to stabilize the national economy. GEAR has been much criticized in some quarters, especially by trade unions and the NGO sector for pandering too much to the global capitalist economy, and leaving behind the poor in South Africa. Though GEAR never achieved the ambitious growth targets initially set (Weeks 1999), some social commentators on the ground in South Africa, including the high profile South African social activist Mamphele Ramphele, observe that for all its shortcomings, GEAR has overseen a period of sustained national economic growth and increased service provision, although demand has continued to outstrip supply (Ramphela 2008).

In the immediate aftermath of 1994 under the RDP, and later under GEAR, the country experienced a boom in development projects, grand announcements and fanfare that surrounded the launch of various strategies and trail blazing initiatives for which follow up, implementation, and committed investment was frequently lacking. This often led to the abandonment of initiatives and the complete overhaul of strategies in the quest to achieve immediate, visible results (Aspire Interview: CEO). After all, high visibility, and high impact projects attract greater levels of funding and not least of all status. This boom and bust period settled into a system of Local Economic Development projects (LED). LED generally took the form of community-based project driven 'development', whereby a central government funding pool was made available for local and 'community' projects which ranged from women's craft co-operatives, to small scale chicken farms and much else in between (Aspire Interview: CEO, Nel 2001). Local Economic Development (LED) projects in general were haphazard, strategically isolated, and though they were numerous there was an overall lack in coherence about the system.

LED projects were established by a range of local community groups and individuals who applied for funding grants from a central, designated, funding pool. By and large LED projects were not sustainable in the event that government funding was withdrawn, and did not form part of any wider strategy or development plan (Nel 2001). However, LED did serve as a social cohesion and morale boosting tool that harnessed the energy and

enthusiasm of people whilst creating a bridge between ‘the people’ and government. This unprecedented level of dialogue, immediacy, and contact between communities and governmental bodies was a major step forward in bringing the country together and forging a positive sense of motivation and connectivity, or unity where none had existed before. For all its flaws, LED facilitated a process of rebuilding social capital and hope in a country deeply damaged by its recent history (Aspire Interview: CEO).

### **The role of provincial and local government in South African development:**

In 1998 the government White Paper on Local Government re-defined the role of municipalities to extend far further than their traditional responsibilities. Under the white paper, the mandate of municipalities was vastly increased to include development within the area under their jurisdiction. “local government has been given a new constitutional mandate to create and sustain humane, equitable and viable human settlement. It is in the interest of the nation that local government be capacitated and transformed to play a developmental role” (SA White Paper on Local Government 1998:22). Despite this change in the scope of municipal mandates the capability of the municipalities to fulfil it was severely constrained by the fact that there was no corresponding increase in funding or staffing levels, and capacity remained limited (Cashdan 2002). This led to a general situation whereby existing LED projects were simply re-branded with a municipal logo attached and there was little change to the status quo (Aspire Interview: CEO)

The LED boom remained the status quo for some years, until the 2003 Municipal Finance Management Act gave rise to a more structured development approach and ‘programme thinking’. At this point there were 383 municipalities nationwide, with a chasm between rural and urban bodies, although the nature of municipal boundaries meant that some local bodies oversaw an area of both rural and urban communities. Through the rise of development ‘programmes’, a blending of perspectives and approaches took place. By 2005 there was an emerging consensus that one size fits all solutions were no longer viable and that municipal development approaches needed to be customised to the specific needs and challenges of each municipality. It was in this national context that the Amathole District Municipality (ADM) in 2003 committed itself to establishing an economic development agency to service the Amathole district. Aspire was that organisation.

From 2003 to 2010 the economic regeneration of rural areas has remained a cornerstone of the national development strategy for South Africa as outlined in South African president Jacob Zuma’s June 2009 state of the nation address. In this address Zuma outlines the developmental aims of the government as follows:

*We make a commitment that working together we will speed up economic growth and transform the economy to create decent work and sustainable livelihoods.*

*We will introduce a massive programme to build economic and social infrastructure.*

***We will develop and implement a comprehensive rural development strategy** linked to land and agrarian reform and food security.*

*We will strengthen the skills and human resource base.*

*We will improve the health profile of all South Africans.*

*Working together with all South Africans, we will intensify the fight against crime and corruption.*

*We will build cohesive, caring and sustainable communities.*

***Working with Africa and the rest of the world, we will pursue African advancement and enhanced international co-operation.***

*We will ensure sustainable resource management and use. And, working with the people and supported by our public servants, we will build a developmental state, improve public services and strengthen democratic institutions.*

*(Zuma 2009, emphasis added)*

In accordance with the broad national level policy agendas outlined in the state of the nation speech, Aspire is carrying out provincial rural development strategies. Through hosting international volunteers and engaging with international partners, Aspire is making its own, localised, contribution to South Africa's rural development and international co-operation that Zuma speaks of in the emphasised passages of the previous quote. Through Aspires rural economic regeneration initiatives in five different interconnected areas or 'corridors' of rural towns and communities around the impoverished Eastern Cape province, the national governments agenda is implemented on a local scale (Aspire Annual Report 2008/9). The next chapter explains how Aspire was established, what the organisation is mandated to do, and how it puts this mandate into action.

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## **Chapter Four.**

### **An introduction to Aspire; organisational context and background:**

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International development concepts such as partnership are promoted on the assumption that they are of greater benefit to local developing country agencies. In order to assess that 'benefit' the local experience and perspective has to be considered. A single organisational case study is not reflective of all development partnerships, but, at this micro-scale it is possible to glean the in-depth, detailed information, and perspectives that reflect and can influence far wider concepts. At Aspire local realities and international development trends intersect, and subsequently determine the shape of tangible support given to development agencies like Aspire. This research considers the local reality of Aspire's experience and perspectives, and draws from this lessons that can be applied to development concepts and practice at the broadest level.

This chapter is focused on Aspire itself. It traces the history of Aspire from 2005 when it was founded as the semi-autonomous Amathole Economic Development Agency of the Amathole District Municipality (ADM); the organisational staff structure over the years, and the recruitment and position of international recruits (international volunteers)<sup>2</sup> within that structure. This chapter also outlines Aspire's organisational mandate, and how Aspire operates in order to fulfil that mandate through promoting its small towns agenda, including formulating and adopting its Amathole Regional Economic Development Strategy (AREDS) aligned 2007-2014 organisational strategy.

#### **The founding of Aspire:**

Aspire was originally established by the ADM in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Prior to its official 2005 launch an eight month long process of visioning, inter-active dialogue, and negotiations had been taking place between Aspire, municipality, and community representatives to lay a strong foundation for the agency. This process built a comprehensive, shared, understanding of Aspire's role, aims, and operations systems. The central question throughout the visioning

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<sup>2</sup> Aspire prefer to use the term International Recruits (IRs) to identify the volunteers that they host through their international partnerships. These IRs in general literature are termed international volunteers, however Aspire feels that the use of the word 'volunteer' carries with it connotations of dependency and obligation; the organisation uses the term International recruits (IRs) to distance itself from such disempowering connotations. A more detailed discussion of these issues and the associated terminology is given in chapter six on pages 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of its founding in 2005 Aspire was named the Amathole Economic Development Agency (AEDA). AEDA was subsequently re-branded 'Aspire- Amathole, beyond limits' as part of the strategic re-branding and positioning activities which were undertaken in 2007/2008. For the purposes of clarity and consistency the organisational name Aspire has been used throughout this research.

process was to ask 'What is the Amathole we want?' and then from there, what targeted interventions can Aspire make to contribute toward the realization of this vision? This clarity of vision from the outset has been of tremendous benefit to Aspire as the organization has grown and matured (Aspire 2005/2006 & Aspire 2008/2009).

The CEO of Aspire here outlines the benefits she sees arising from such a thorough and open visioning process:

*For me that [visioning process] helped a lot, one it gave us confidence, to say ok, now we have heard from everyone and we've got everybody on board, things will still change, yes. But at least now we are trusted with certain responsibilities of making sure the stakeholder's happy. And two, as a new organisation at that stage when we finished that process we did not have to introduce ourselves because it sort of launched us into the public people knew about Aspire after that exercise.*

(Aspire Interview: CEO)

#### **Aspire's staff structure and situating international recruits within that structure:**

In 2005 Aspire was founded by the Amathole District Municipality (ADM) with a core team of seven local and national employees (NEs), and a single international recruit (IR). This makes Aspire relatively unusual as a very young organisation that had from its beginning a clear intention to use, and a strategy for the use of, international personnel. Currently Aspire has grown to a staff body sixteen<sup>4</sup>, of whom four are IRs. This is a simplified break down of the Aspire staff structure, as amongst the NEs at Aspire there are organisational employees, contractors, and secondments from local municipal bodies who provide specialised support in specific areas of operations. For example, the ADM provides seconded personnel to assist with the financial and administrative functions of Aspire. The CEO of Aspire actively seeks to minimise the emphasis on these varied contractual arrangements, instead promoting an organisational ethos of being a single, varied, but unified staff team which is Aspire. To fully integrate all staff under a single, Aspire based, system of management and employee is perhaps the only viable way to regularize and effectively manage the staff team in a consistent and equitable manner. Whilst individuals are recruited to specific positions or roles, the organisation runs on a flat hierarchical structure and open door policy, on which management lead by example. Collaboration and support of colleagues is not merely encouraged but is expected and required within Aspire.

IRs at Aspire are recruited on the basis of specific complementary skill sets that Aspire feels will contribute to the overall skill package of the staff team. The IRs at Aspire have been

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<sup>4</sup> This number is correct for the field research period, but note that the usual working staff team at Aspire is slightly larger as this research took place during a phase of staff turn-over and recruitment.



sourced through international partnerships with two different international volunteer sending agencies since 2005. Both of these agencies are based in 'developed' countries and operate as part of the national official aid programme, and for both of them sending staff to Aspire to take 'employee' or 'line function' roles has been, and is, an exception from their usual policies. IRs are generally professionals in their early-mid career stages with experience and skills in areas including town planning, project management, financial management, and marketing. As IRs are placed in different staff positions within Aspire, there are different skill stipulations for each position and IR.

### **Aspire's organisational mandate:**

In communities and rural areas faced with a persistent, gradual, decline Aspire seeks to turn this trend around through initiatives that cater to unique environmental, cultural and social environments. In dealing with local communities, and overcoming deep seated mistrust based on the delivery failures and broken promises of many previous agencies Aspire embraces its identity as a local development agency and operates on the level of the people. As Aspire is operating in only a small number of communities (where its projects are intended to function as pilot or demonstration projects) it is able to foster close relationships and engage in intense stakeholder engagement and relationship building. Thus establishing the foundation for trust and an enabling environment, within which projects can take place with the local community genuinely engaged, and on board. Image 1 below, shows a stakeholder and community meeting attended by Aspire staff, council representatives, and traditional leaders. In this photo taken in September 2010, they are doing a 'walking tour' of Hamburg village and exchanging views, visions and hopes for how the village might or should look in future.

Image 1. Below:  
Multi-stakeholder 'walking tour' of Hamburg village.



Aspire is allocated set funding from its parent agency, the ADM, and therefore has a reliable and stable budget within which to work towards its organisational mandate. The mandate of Aspire is “to contribute to the economic growth of the district by stimulating activities in selected sectors in targeted localities” (Aspire 2005/2006:1). Aspire is expected to contribute to reversing the degeneration of rural small towns and villages in the district which act as a market and service centre to hundreds of scattered rural communities. These are areas which have been in a state of decay and decline for many years. Through its work Aspire aims to achieve a vision of Amathole as “a socially and economically sustainable district distinguished by an integrated regional economy with empowered communities” (Aspire 2005/2006:3). With its mission being to stimulate district wide economic growth, this can take place in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, promoting entrepreneurial activity, leveraging business, and facilitating strategic sector investments. From the outset Aspire had a strong and clearly articulated multi-sector and spatial focus in its work toward small town regeneration.

### **Aspires’ small towns agenda:**

Aspire identified small towns in rural areas as being vital service centres and economic centres for small and otherwise isolated communities. Since the fall of apartheid, investment and development in South Africa has generally focussed on urban growth and semi-urban township areas. This has led to the persistent and gradual decline of many rural areas and small towns across South Africa. In the Eastern Cape this impact has been especially profound as the province includes the former ‘Bantustans’ or black homeland areas of the Ciskei and Transkei. Apartheid-era policies of ‘separate development’ mean that these areas have been historically left behind and ‘under-developed’, and remain chronically poor and lacking in services. Aspire recognises the development of these rural areas and small towns as a way to revitalise and build local economies, to bring services and training opportunities to local people, and to stop the drain of outward migration that has seen many rural areas stagnate and decline.

### **An Aspire project snapshot from Hamburg village:**

One of the projects currently being carried out by Aspire is centred on Hamburg, a small coastal settlement on the R72 highway south of East London. Aspire are heavily involved in a holistic local regeneration project there. The construction of a local artistic residence and community centre is the anchor project, which will take place alongside a variety of sub-projects aimed at a holistic revitalisation of interconnected systems and services. These include improving local infrastructure, encouraging small scale agriculture and livestock farming, building a coastal walking path, and resurrecting the local holiday park/camp site. The following images are taken during a community meeting in September 2010, when

Aspire staff, council representatives and local stakeholders held joint discussions and went on a walking tour of the village to voice their hopes and visions for the area.

Image 2. Below:

Overlooking Hamburg village and estuary. Hamburg is located on the famously scenic 'Sunshine Coast' tourist route. Promoting Hamburg as a destination along the Sunshine Coast tourist route is a key part of Aspires economic revitalisation project for this area.



Image 3. Below, left:

Public Information board onsite at the sod-turning and construction launch for the artistic residence in Hamburg village.



Image 4. Below, right:

The local holiday park / campsite is currently out of business in Hamburg and will be done up and re-opened as part of the Aspire project.



Image 5. Below, left:

The Snow Goose Liquor Store, one of two shops still in business on the main street, Hamburg village.



Image 6. Below, right:

Local livestock, Nguni cattle grazing alongside Hamburg estuary.



Image 7. Below:

Schoolboys walk through Hamburg village. Apart from the poor condition of the road the provision of utilities and infrastructure (especially water and electricity) is limited in this area, and addressing these issues is challenging due to financial constraints and land ownership / tenancy concerns. The powerlines that can be seen by the road provide only a sporadic electricity supply and do not service all houses.





### **Aspires 2007-2014 strategic plan:**

Aspire has a spatially based, rural areas, and small town focus and plays a major lobbying role in getting small towns onto the national agenda and incorporated into development policy. Previously rural development was conceptualized almost exclusively within the framework and discourse of multitudinous fragmented micro-scale LED projects. During 2006 Aspire continued to push the small towns agenda, hosting the first small towns conference of academics and development practitioners. In 2006 Aspire also acted as partner to the ADM in carrying out a strategic economic review of the Amathole district. This review was influential in the development of the ADM's Amathole Regional Economic Development Strategy (AREDS), which was adopted in 2007. AREDS outlines a strategic vision and way forward by the ADM, for the whole of Amathole. It draws on multi-stakeholder discussions and extensive negotiations to set out the ADMs holistic, long-term, overall vision for the entire district. The challenge Aspire undertook next was to strategically and realistically align itself with AREDS and to identify the areas and aspects of the overall regional strategy to which it can actively contribute. As a small and very young organisation Aspire sought to find its niche within the AREDS whereby it can make its impact felt and serve as a pioneer of economic development that leads by example and produces results (Aspire 2006/2007).

In 2007/2008 Aspire launched its new AREDS aligned seven year strategic plan for 2007-2014. By 2007 Aspire was beginning to carve out a clear "niche as a public-private sector enterprise that is able to facilitate interaction and coordination between public sector stakeholders and private businesses" (Aspire 2006/2007:15). Since its establishment in 2005 Aspire had not only successfully developed and promoted the concept of small town regeneration as a viable and legitimate development strategy, but has progressed into the implementation phase of small town regeneration and spatial development projects. Aspire is now entering the mid-point of the 2007-2014 strategic plan (subject to annual review) and is poised to continue with the implementation phase of its small town regeneration strategy.

At the 2010 annual review a central question was considering how Aspire moves onwards to either act as a project implementer, or to continue stretching the limits by carrying out demonstration effect pilot projects which other agencies can then replicate and implement along similar lines. Whichever path Aspire chooses the organization is currently well positioned, with a reputation that precedes it for achieving results and delivering on promises and an increasingly high public profile. With a solid track record of clean audits and proven results Aspire appears to be on target for achieving its mission to become a pioneer of spatial development in South Africa, with other provinces and departments already looking at what they might learn or replicate from Aspires work to date (Aspire Interview: CEO).

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**Chapter Five.****The research aims, methods and process:**

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The research aims to build a better understanding of how Aspire experiences, and takes ownership of, its partnerships with international volunteer sending agencies through integrating international volunteers into its own organisational employee structures. By achieving this aim it is hoped that developing a deeper understanding of Aspires approach to hosting international volunteers can be used to suggest new or better models of practice for both volunteer hosting and volunteer sending organisations in future. This may prove to have wider implications for the development sector and literature. The research questions that are explored in the project reflect this aim, and enable an in depth analysis of how Aspire integrates and manages international recruits (IR) placed with the agency. The questions also explore Aspires interactions with international partner agencies, the challenges and benefits associated with the volunteer hosting role, and finally consider the wider lessons that can be drawn from the Aspire experience.

This methodology chapter sets out the methods which have been selected to achieve those aims. The first section of the chapter outlines the epistemological position of this research. The second section explains the participatory, and strengths based focus of the project, and the next section moves on to consider the implications of researcher positionality in this approach. The final sections of the chapter relate to the field research period, the research methods used, and provide a review of these which reflects refinements to the planned methods during the field research process in response to feedback and advice from the host organisation, Aspire.

**Research approach and epistemology:**

Epistemologies shape the production of knowledge, what is regarded as knowledge, from whom and where knowledge is drawn, and what use knowledge can be put to (Zingerli 2010). Rather than accepting the discourse of dominant Western knowledge as superior, this research strives to access, respect, and build upon alternative and localised forms of knowledge from individuals who experience the realities of development work in its day-to-day context (Fergus & Rowney 2005). The research adopts a position of learning by reversing the dominant hierarchies in knowledge production and allowing Aspire to act as guides and experts in the research process. In seeking to understand and recognise alternative forms of knowledge, this research is essentially socially constructivist, and has a qualitative emphasis.

This research aims to build understanding of complex, social knowledge and experiences. Therefore a predominantly qualitative methodology is appropriate. The in depth organisational case study approach is used as a frame-work for a mixed methodology that draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and opportunities for presentation, discussion, and feedback. Some quantitative methods are used to establish background data and facts, including a policy and document analysis and gathering some basic data. However, the primary emphasis in the methods is very much qualitative allowing for the in-depth exploration of ideas and issues as they arise, and facilitating open dialogue and communication of ideas throughout the research process.

### **Participatory and strengths based research considerations:**

The research process adheres to a participatory research framework as opposed to participatory action research. Participatory research focuses more tightly on using research as a vehicle for learning, and deepening understandings. By contrast participatory action research is intended to provide a catalyst for direct social action, policy reform, and social or systemic change (Rahnema 1990). Adopting a participatory research approach gives the freedom and scope to recognize and value a plurality of knowledges and truths that can exist in relation to a single event or practice, this reflects the complexity and diversity of human conditions and experiences (Kindon et al 2007). Under this participatory approach 'success' is a broader and more subjective notion which incorporates both the research process (is it genuinely equitable and democratic?) and the findings or results of the research.

In formulating the research process Wallerstein's (1999) guidelines for carrying out participatory (action) research have been drawn upon, they are as follows:

- Research participants must be engaged with setting the agenda.
  - In this research Aspire have been invited to nominate research topics and areas from the outset.
  - The eventual research topic and questions were reached through discussion and a merging of Aspire nominated research areas (that the organisation felt it could benefit from an independent analysis of) and researcher interests.
- Research must be of real and practical benefit to the research partner and provide tools for future decision making and planning (which may lead to action).
  - Aspire expressed a hope that this research will be of use to them in promoting the organization and the 'Aspire approach' to international partnerships and IR hosting, it may also be beneficial in providing reports back to their international partners to show that the sending agencies flexibility and responsiveness is achieving results.

- The relationship between researcher and participants (Aspire) is one of collaboration and reflexivity in which both parties learn and are open to having their ideas and opinions challenged (especially the researcher).
  - This research relationship involves ongoing communication, and collaboration, with Aspire actively engaged throughout the project.
  - As researcher, during and after field research I delivered ongoing meeting discussions/presentations on the project, my agenda, and the progress being made, a de-brief report was submitted to the Aspire team.
  - This has been followed up with ongoing progress reports outlining tentative findings and directions of the thesis write up, with invitations for Aspire feedback and input (the research findings and discussion have been re-worked in accordance with invaluable points raised by participants throughout the process)
  
- One must strive to achieve a balance between research and community goals.
  - It has been clearly communicated that ultimately this research is intended primarily, for the completion of a Master of Development Studies thesis. However the research is formulated to leave open options whereby it could be used to produce reports or other documents beneficial and useful to Aspire.
  - The guidance of Aspire staff in formulating the research agenda, devising research methods, and in offering their opinions and ideas around the findings and discussion points has been invaluable. In this project there is a mutually beneficial balance struck between the research goals and those of Aspire.

Kanyi and Ngunjiri (2002) highlight the centrality of strengths-based approaches in participatory methodologies, and the importance of recognizing that the partner organisation has existing strengths and resources that can be bolstered and built upon. Truly participatory research should be about enabling organizations to further develop and implement their own programmes and solutions. Aspire is already far along this track as an innovative and proactive local development agency with a proven record of results and positive outcomes. Therefore, the main priority of the research is to seek a deeper understanding of Aspires approach to the management and integration of international recruits. In particular to establish what it is about these practices that is working well, and how these might be drawn on in future, rather than setting an agenda for fundamental change or action.

One cannot “separate how we produce data, from what we produce”(Simpson 2006:158). This statement reflects the fact that the outputs of this research (what is produced) will be



strongly influenced by how this research has been formulated and undertaken. Though this does not render the research less credible, it is a fact that needs to be openly stated and acknowledged. The research adopts an unashamedly participatory approach in order to develop a collaborative and democratic methodology. A common criticism of research is that “people are treated as objects to be studied, rather than as subjects of their own development” (Edwards 2008). Thus this project with its participatory underpinnings combines flexible, context specific research methods to be carry out research *with*, not on, Aspire. The research is characterized by mutual learning and reflection by both researcher and participants, but mostly by the researcher (Kindon et al 2007).

Crocker (2008) draws on the writing of Sabina Alkire, and Robert Chambers to discuss the importance of the researcher adopting what he coins a “participatory manner”. This includes aspects of presentation and demeanour, such as appropriate personal presentation, and taking the time to sit down beside people, speak with them in their language if possible, and to take the time to genuinely respect, engage with, and partake in their activities and day to day realities (Apentiik & Parpart 2006). In aiming to be a participatory researcher, one recognises things will not always go smoothly and that misunderstandings and mistakes are almost inevitable when undertaking research in relatively unfamiliar cultural and social environments. Dealing with mistakes or misunderstandings where they occur swiftly and openly is crucial, through recognition of one’s own limitations and accepting guidance and advice from local counterparts, one can show a willingness to reflect, to change, and gradually to establish a more meaningful, genuine, and trusting relationship (Apentik & Parport 2006).

### **Morality and conducting ethical research:**

*Conducting research takes us into peoples’ lives. We explore their lives, represent those lives, and attempt to make those lives visible to others. This whole process from conception to publication encompasses a mass of ethical issues and tensions.*  
(Simpson 2006:167)

This research seeks to carry out morally informed and holistic human centred development research. The researcher adopts the position of learner, necessary in rising to the “continuous challenge of making the learning experience a shared learning one with the people whose lives are affected...” (Mikkelsen 2005:30). Aspire is a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural agency with staff from a range of (South African and international) cultural and linguistic backgrounds, carrying out rural economic regeneration initiatives in impoverished and marginalised small towns and communities with predominantly amaXhosa <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The use of the prefix ‘ama’ specifies that it is the Xhosa *people* being referred to in this instance. If one were to refer to isiXhosa, this would instead indicate that the Xhosa *language* is being referred to.

populations. Concepts around indigenous and Kaupapa Maori research provide some moral and ethical guidance in approaching this social and cultural setting.

Smith (2005) stresses the need for the researcher to humble themselves and adopt a position of learning and to respect the cultures in which they carry out research, and also to respect the knowledge and ideas people share (Smith 2005). As a researcher, one has to be highly sensitive to the power that is held in being able to represent peoples lives and words, and show the utmost respect throughout the research process. *"In order for doors and windows to be opened researchers must tread gently. Information and knowledge cannot be asked for without respecting those who choose to share and without an understanding of the responsibilities and accountabilities of researchers"* (Barnes 2000:2). In a post apartheid context, as an outsider, and a white outsider at that, the importance of treading gently is even greater.

### **Recognising the implications of researcher positionality and background:**

For the duration of 2008 I held an international volunteer position in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, as part of the University Volunteer (UNIVOL) programme offered by Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) and funded by the former New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). This assignment was undertaken with a grass-roots, community based, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in the township of Mdantsane. The experience raised important questions about how host agencies relate to international volunteers, providing the motivation and idea for this research project. This previous experience was tremendously helpful in making connections and negotiating the research project. It is important to recognise and remain self-aware and critical throughout the research project. This previous experience, although greatly beneficial, also gives rise to pre-conceived ideas about development work in South Africa and how local people relate to 'outsiders'.

South Africa remains a highly charged racial environment, and as a researcher I carried with me the anomaly of being white, young, female, childless and single. In both my volunteer and research roles in South Africa I was constantly challenging social norms around racial interactions, marriage, and motherhood. My language and class background are clearly marked and noticed in a city that was recently found by the United Nations to be the third most unequal in the world (UN Habitat 2010). Through adopting a participatory manner and being self aware the challenges of positionality can be limited, and acknowledged, but not erased. One's world view is shaped by positionality which in turn inevitably tints the interpretations and judgments made throughout the research process. These positionality related 'yard-sticks' and cultural responses are succinctly summarized by Mikkelsen, *"Our concepts cover only the things we know. The world is interpreted with ones own culture, norms and values at the centre and as a yardstick for other cultures. This is not in itself a problem, as long as we accept the limitations of an ethnocentric interpretation"* (Mikkelsen 2005:327).

### **Additional factors influencing the field research period:**

The field research period for this project covered June 19<sup>th</sup> until September 28<sup>th</sup> 2010, and it is worth noting that current events at the time did impact on the project. The research took place in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 FIFA world cup and the 'national hangover' which followed it. This gave rise to an especially tense and volatile atmosphere, on one hand there was a tremendously positive surge in national pride, increased international attention and positive feedback, but this same period also saw escalating social and ethnic/racial tensions and unrest over a range of issues (Domokos 2010). In particular there was widespread concern about the resurgence of xenophobic violence echoing that which shook the country in 2008. During the 2008 outbreak violence was targeted against 'other' African nationals, especially those perceived as illegal immigrants, or 'stealing' jobs from South Africans. Among the horrific acts of violence, for the first time since the apartheid era, 'necklacing'<sup>6</sup> took place, this occurred mostly in the townships around Johannesburg and the Gauteng province but it also spread to the Eastern Cape (Crawford 2010). Ultimately the outbreaks of xenophobic violence post FIFA 2010 were limited to handful of isolated incidents and were much more widely and emphatically condemned by community leaders, public figures and government officials than was the case in 2008 (Guma 2010).

Unfortunately, the rumblings of xenophobia had barely subsided before the education system was in uproar and wider service sector strikes set in across the country. As is often the case, poorer areas and schools, which are typically also 'black' schools and areas were most affected. Coming at the end of a school year already shortened by an extended school holiday / closure for the duration of the world cup, the school strikes essentially cut a whole student year group out of the education system, with few schools able to run practice matriculation exams. Many pupils were ultimately unable to sit their final year matriculation examinations due to venue changes, general chaos, and further strikes by the staff intended to be running exams (Patsanza 2010). The impacts in the Eastern Cape were profound and divisive, pitting communities against teachers, hospital nurses against patients, and taking place within an already grossly over-loaded, under-funded and poorly performing public service system. These background issues set the scene for the field research period, they did not necessarily affect the project directly, but did influence people's perceptions of outsiders, ways of relating, and the general atmosphere in South Africa at the time.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Necklacing' involves placing a petrol filled car tyre around the neck and shoulders of another person and setting it alight, it leads to an especially gruesome, and slow death. In the apartheid era targeted individuals were usually suspected police informers. In 2008, they were 'other' African nationals, those of Zimbabwean and Nigerian nationality were most at risk in many South African provinces.

## **The research methods, and process:**

Methods used in this research were selected to allow scope for clarification and understanding, and most importantly they were based on building trust and respect between myself as a researcher and the Aspire participants. The use of participatory research methods ensured that the participants were able to play an active role in shaping the research process and methods. The methodology was mixed, with a participatory ethos and qualitative emphasis. This recognises the greater potential for qualitative methods to enable a more equal conversation to take place where power can be negotiated in ways that are not generally considered or thought possible in more quantitative approaches (Barnes 2000). Quantitative methods including a document analysis were drawn on to establish background and 'big picture' data.

- Initial contact and correspondence

Contact was made with Aspire from the outset of this project. Initial contact involved the exchange of ideas about possible research areas that could incorporate the researcher's interests in understanding the role of international volunteers, and Aspire's position on how this might be approached in a relevant and useful manner for them. Throughout the project Aspire contributed ideas, suggestions, and feedback, much of which shaped and directed the research project. The blending of researcher interests, and participant engagement and feedback gave rise to a mutually beneficial project.

- Arrival and presentations;

On arrival for the research period with Aspire, a research brief and statement of intent was distributed to all Aspire staff. A few days later a research presentation was made during the fortnightly staff meeting. This led to an open group discussion with the Aspire team about the research and any questions they had relating to the project and the briefing provided on arrival.

- Reporting back at fortnightly Op's meeting;

At each fortnightly operations meeting all staff members present to the rest of the team on their progress and activities over the last two weeks, field research updates became part of this schedule for the duration of the field research and the researcher was thus able to keep staff informed of progress, and raise matters of interest as they arose. It also assisted greatly in developing a field research timetable around staff commitments and avoided clashes with upcoming events that would impact on staff work loads and availability. It also meant that by knowing what was coming up site visits, and event attendance could be worked into the research schedule.

- Being 'part of it';

For the duration of the field research period, the researcher essentially became an unofficial member of the Aspire staff team, based at the Aspire office, sharing an office with Aspire colleagues / participants. During the research field assessments, project steering committee meetings, the annual strategic review retreat, and the fortnightly operations meetings were attended as part of the research participant observation. Being immersed in the day to day running of the organisation gave rise to opportunities to build both working and social relationships with a number of staff. Whilst this may render the research less objective, without this deep immersion into the workings of the organisation it would have been greatly challenging to build any real understanding of Aspire's work and operations in such a short time frame.

By being present and familiar to the Aspire team there were many opportunities to engage in casual discussion with individuals, to explain the research, and its aims. Based in the Aspire office, the researcher became, temporarily, part of the organisation, having both formal and informal interactions with individuals there and gaining valuable insights and suggestions for the research. The series of semi-structured interviews were hugely beneficial, but above and beyond that, building a personal relationship, not with 'Aspire', but with the individuals who make up Aspire was absolutely crucial and central to the success of this project. This high level of personal engagement, in a sense raised the stakes, and made it more critical than ever that participants feel respected and included. The process of presenting at meetings, providing open progress reports, and submitting a debrief document for discussion at the final staff meeting were all ways to achieve this. The fact that feedback has been received from more than half of the participants (ranging from comments about quotes, to suggestions for discussion themes) shows how engaged with this research participants felt, and have continued to engage with even after the field research period has ended.

## **Review of the field research period and methods used:**

### **Organisational Case Studies:**

Despite the profusion of organisational guidelines, and academic debates regarding partnerships for international development, generally accepted theoretical best practice and real life processes and outcomes, are not always closely aligned, nor are they consistently informed by one another. Swanson (2005) proposes a cyclic relationship as the ideal; whereby evolving development theory, shapes research, which in turn produces field based findings that are drawn on to shape practice models and guidelines, which are incorporated into theory, to which practice is responsive, and so on. Once theory is informed by practice and vice versa this raises the need for research which is responsive, in depth and advances the knowledge of not only organisational researchers, but also increases the knowledge of organisations and development practitioners. This requires an in depth understanding and

awareness of organisational practice as it plays out on the ground in the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

In devising research that promotes this cyclic theory : practice relationship, case studies are an ideal approach for seeking detailed and nuanced knowledge which increases depth of understanding. By harnessing mixed methods within a case study approach one can gain richly varied and detailed information on various aspects of the organisation and begin to address “How, What and Why questions” (Ellinger et al 2005). Reporting on the findings of an in depth organisational case study research project with the Hertzog Agricultural Co-Operative (HACOP) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, Nel et al (2001) pinpoint the “urgent need to undertake long term evaluations [ie through case studies] of local development initiatives, to ascertain whether a common set of variables is present. With this knowledge there might be scope for replicating successful initiatives” (Nel et al 2001:12). This observation identifies the potential for organisational case studies to yield valuable and informed information about development practice, from which more widely applicable lessons can potentially be drawn.

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews:**

The use of semi-structured interviews is a widely utilised and accepted research method in qualitative research processes as it allows for the sharing of stories and exploring ideas. Initially focus groups were considered for use as a research method, however once in the field it became clear that as a small organisation, with staff on very tight schedules who were both office based and attending to projects around the province, it would have been logistically challenging if not impossible to hold focus group sessions. As things played out in the field it was both more appropriate and more convenient for the interview participants, to hold a series of short one-on-one semi-structured interviews at the Aspire office, at times negotiated with each participant individually. As the research required in-depth thematic information about people’s experiences and opinions, interviews were an appropriate method to incorporate (Laws et al. 2003). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for exploration of key themes (structured around the research questions) without limiting freedom to share stories and discuss issues or ideas as they arise<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Focus groups:**

With the Aspire participants focus groups were not appropriate, however focus group discussions were held with two other agencies present in South Africa. These discussions were of assistance in gaining a broader awareness of international volunteering activity and development work in the South African context. One focus group was held in Johannesburg with the in country office of an international volunteer agency from a developed country.

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<sup>7</sup> Please note that research activities at Aspire were carried out only with current national employees (NEs) and international recruits (IRs), and not with individuals who have previously been involved with the organisation.

This particular volunteer sending agency is not in a partnership with Aspire but was able to give a detailed description of generalised volunteer recruitment and sending processes from the sending agencies perspective. The other focus group was held with a local research NGO who are studying the impacts of volunteering across Southern Africa. This organisation was able to assist with their insights and knowledge of the local volunteering trends and context. Both agencies were happy to participate in a one off focus group discussion but due to substantial workloads and time pressures, further communication and feedback was not desired beyond a final summary report on completion of the research.

### **Document Analysis:**

An in depth reading and thematic analysis of Aspire's organisational annual reports was carried out to provide quantitative data on background facts and statistics relating to the running of the organisation. Analysis of official documents and relevant policies (including the 2007-2014 strategic plan for Aspire, and the Amathole District Municipality Amathole Region Economic Development Strategy –AREDS- document) provided a baseline understanding of the official approaches and policies that underpin Aspires organisational model and volunteer management approach.

### **Feedback:**

Research should not be a purely extractive process where participants are given nothing back, therefore feedback was a fundamental part of this participatory research process (Crocker 2008). Feedback and progress reports were provided to Aspire via email documents and in staff meeting presentations regularly throughout the field research period. Prior to departure a full team brainstorming session was held to explain and discuss the initial findings, this generated many interesting and valid suggestions and interpretations from Aspire staff. Further discussion has taken place after initial processing of the data and during the writing up process. Further feedback has been provided by the CEO and many of the NE and IR participants as well as to the focus group agencies. A final summary document and report will be provided to Aspire, on completion along with copies of both the thesis and any additional publications.

**Summary table of activities undertaken during the field research period:**

<b>Aspire Participant/s</b>	<b>Research Activity and frequency:</b>
CEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial contact and topic discussions.</li> <li>Research Proposal drafted, negotiated and modified in line with Aspire interests and needs as expressed by CEO.</li> <li>Research Proposal approved and finalised, invitation to undertake field research period with Aspire.</li> <li>Research timetable and plan produced and approved.</li> <li>Preparatory reading and guidance given by CEO on relevant policies, reports and documents to consult for the research, and how these could be accessed or sourced (both before and during the field research period).</li> <li>During Field research:</li> <li>Fortnightly informal discussion and email communications regarding progress of the research and the next steps to take and carry out in completing the project.</li> <li>Two formal semi-structured interview discussions, one at beginning of the research process and one shortly before completion (X2).</li> </ul>
National Employees (NEs)	Semi-Structured Interviews with NEs (X 8)
International Recruits (IRs)	Semi-Structured Interviews with IRs (X 3)
Aspire International Employee* (IE)	Semi-Structured Interviews with IE (X1)
Whole Staff Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attendance and presentations at fortnightly Op's (operations) meetings.</li> <li>Distribution of research briefing and progress reports via email.</li> <li>Ongoing communication and feedback discussion throughout the research analysis and write up process.</li> <li>Accompanying staff on project visits and to community/stake-holder meetings (X 9)</li> <li>Attending public events, project launches and sod-turnings. (X3)</li> <li>2 Day annual strategic review and staff retreat 2010, held at Chintsa.</li> <li>Research brief and summary documents, to be submitted to Aspire along with a copy of the final thesis after completion and marking. (task outstanding)</li> </ul>

\*One individual at Aspire was previously on assignment there as an International Recruit, and has now returned to South Africa to work for Aspire in the same job role, but as a contracted employee. Until Visa formalities are completed this individual remains technically an IR, and although now an employee this individual is still an 'international person'. In order to make the distinction in nationality (as opposed to NEs), and employment status (as opposed to IRs) this individual has been termed an IE (International Employee) in the summary table.



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**Chapter Six.****Discussion and analysis of the research findings:**

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The findings of this research centre on what Aspire does, and how the approach taken by the organisation to integrating and managing International Recruits (IRs) works in a tangible and practical day-to-day manner. The semi-structured interviews carried out at Aspire were the core aspect of this field research process, but cannot be taken in isolation from a three month period of field observations, attendance and presentations at staff meetings, policy and document analysis, project visits and informal interactions with the Aspire staff team, both National Employees (NEs) and International Recruits (IRs). This research was carried out through an organisational case study which utilised a mixed methods approach and had a qualitative emphasis.

It is worth highlighting that despite separating out the Research Questions (RQs) for purposes of clarity and analysis, they are each linked and give rise to the research questions that follow. RQ1 addresses Aspires sense of empowerment and ownership in how the organization approaches the management of IRs, this sense of empowerment shapes Aspires approach to international partner organisations and negotiations around volunteer hosting which are considered in RQ2. From the approach to partnerships and volunteer integration one can draw out RQ3, the benefits and challenges of volunteer hosting for Aspire. With a better understanding of benefits and challenges of IR hosting then lessons (RQ4) can be drawn: lessons for Aspire itself, lessons at a national scale, and lessons of wider international relevance. By considering these wider lessons, the research is brought full circle to how these broad level lessons can influence practice in partnerships and promoting a sense of ownership and empowerment for local development partners.

**Findings and discussion for research questions relating to local partner empowerment, and ownership within international development partnerships:**

This section addresses the first two research questions which combined consider how Aspire is able to promote its own empowerment and ownership over IR assignments and international partnerships. The discussion section will consider how Aspires approach fits into the broader discourses of development practice and how it operates in a way that encourages empowerment and ownership of the development process at different levels. The findings of RQ1 are given first, then the findings of RQ2, followed by a discussion chapter that draws the two questions together and situates them within the wider context and development issues.

*RQ ONE: How can the role of international volunteers be managed by local development (host) organisations to promote genuine empowerment and ownership? In this case the integration of international volunteers into the Aspire structure as expert international workers is the strategy to be studied in depth.*

From attending the Aspire annual strategic review workshop, interview discussions, and personal observations it was clear that the over-riding aim of management practices at Aspire was to fully and totally integrate IRs into the existing staff management frameworks in order to establish a sense of being a single, unified, and collaborative team (Xuza, CEO Presentation 2010 July 26<sup>th</sup>). This strategy of integration was explicitly stated time and again, it was emphasised in the semi-structured interview discussions, in public arenas, including the fortnightly operations meetings with all Aspire staff, and at official events where the CEO spoke. The intention to integrate IRs fully and minimise distinctions between IRs and NEs, comes through interviews where each of the IRs spoke about the fact that they are subject to the same management practices as any other staff member at Aspire. Job descriptions may differ based on an individual's role within the multidisciplinary staff team, but whether that job description is taken on by an IR or NE makes no difference to the responsibilities, accountabilities and evaluation procedures the individual is subject to. "The international people are no different from anyone else, you're doing a full time job, and it's your job. You're actually just an employee" (Aspire Interview Number:3, IR).

One IR makes the following comment whilst reflecting on her experience as an IR at Aspire in contrast to her experience earlier as an IR at a municipal government agency elsewhere in South Africa "I enjoy more to be at Aspire. With Aspire it was very clear from the beginning that Phila [the CEO of Aspire] says ok, this is your responsibility area, and that you can act within that [responsibility area] take decisions even" (Aspire Interview Number:2, IR). The IR in this interview talks about having a sense of freedom and the space to be more active in her work. She reflects very positively on the sense of inclusion and support drawn from being part of a team and having the chance to talk through ideas and approaches with colleagues. Almost without exception the IR interviews each produced similar statements about having a generally very positive experience of undertaking assignments with Aspire during which they felt a strong sense of belonging, inclusion, and professional as well as personal support (Aspire Interviews, IRs).

As an organisation Aspire's staff comprises a range of contracted and permanent employees, IRs, and national staff secondments (from the municipality and other government agencies). This staff team is drawn from varied backgrounds, nationalities and employment arrangements, there is an awareness that it "could result in a split of the unity" (Aspire Interview Number:4, IR) if individuals identified primarily with their sending organization other affiliations first and foremost, with Aspire regarded as a secondary commitment. In

countering this risk of staff fragmentation and torn loyalties “one approach is to make the international advisor [IR] completely a member of the entity [Aspire] itself, without 'sticking out' other people would have to say that's not so good, but it works quite well in the field” (Aspire Interview Number:4, IR). By fostering a sense of shared identity and loyalty as Aspire, staff have a sense of working toward a single organisational goal, but also of being part of something bigger than themselves or their role within the team, that is “working towards one goal, but not working in isolation” (Aspire Interview Number:4, IR).

In taking action to promote a team ethos and working approach, Aspire management actively and consciously seek to fully integrate and manage IRs and NEs within the same employee structure and management system. The CEO, with some pride, stated that to an external observer it is not immediately obvious who is or is not strictly an Aspire 'employee' as opposed to IR: “In our experience there is no telling from the outside, who is local Aspire staff and who is IR” (Aspire CEO). There remain some areas where IRs still fall under a dual accountability to both Aspire and the sending agency, usually this occurs over financial particulars and leave entitlements where responsibilities are divided between Aspire and its international partner organisation. Overall however, Aspire feels that it is very much in control of the IRs being hosted, and through integrating them into its own employee systems a real sense of ownership over the process is felt. Through the process of taking such an active lead on managing IRs and asserting its ownership over the assignment, Aspire feels it is empowered as an organisation, and this gives it a strong foundation on which to approach its international partnerships as an assertive, capable, and equal partner.

*RQ TWO: Does the wholesale integration of International Recruits into the Aspire structure influence how Aspire interacts with its international partner agencies?*

This research question once explored in the field proved to be of limited use. This was mainly because in the Aspire working model only the CEO and to a lesser degree the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Aspire have direct contact with the international partner agencies who send IRs. Even for IRs the negotiations relating to their contract and role take place solely between the sending agency and the senior management staff at Aspire, so they are not privy to this process or the negotiations that take place. Aspire does have well established and ongoing partnerships with the agencies from whom they accept and host IRs.

For many organizations adapting to managing and hosting volunteers within a paid staff body can be problematic (Taylor 2004). Aspire is different to many volunteer hosting agencies in this regard as the use and hosting of IRs is a clear part of its organizational staffing approach and has been in place since the organisation was founded in 2005. Aspire was hosting its first IRs very shortly after it was founded, so IRs played a substantial role in helping the organization define its purpose, role and operational procedures. Its

partnerships with volunteer sending agencies span almost the entire history of the organisation. Whilst the scope of this question was limited in the field, what did emerge was a very strong and passionate sentiment from management in terms of how they feel IRs should be regarded when on assignment with Aspire, which informs and underlies all of their interaction with the international partners who send IRs. In interviews with the management of Aspire they explained that as an agency that is itself providing 'help' by delivering services and rural development programmes, Aspire does not need nor want 'help' from its international partners. By hosting IRs Aspire wants to gain people who are able to work together as part of a multi-disciplinary and unified staff team to contribute skills and experience that can enhance the Aspire staff teams ability to deliver 'help' through their work and aims as an organisation. Within that staff team individuals, IRs or NEs alike, they are expected to perform a specific job role.

As discussed in RQ1 Aspire is an organisation that feels it is strongly empowered and is actively seeking to take ownership and control of managing IRs who are sent through international partnership arrangements with volunteer sending agencies. Aspire approaches its partnership negotiations with a clear agenda of wanting workers who will be team members and who can contribute skills to that team and further, will be managed in accordance with Aspires own systems and needs. Aspire rejects the traditional discourse that international partners send 'volunteers' who act as aid in human form to agencies who are in need, and lack the skills or ability to initiate or drive their own development without a foreign hand out. This step requires Aspire's international partners to be progressive and responsive in following through on the rhetoric of partnership, empowerment and genuinely respecting the host organization perspective. This sentiment is put succinctly in an interview with the CEO who outlines Aspires position and attitude to IR hosting through international partnerships as follows:

*Aspire doesn't need help, Aspire is, it is the help to the people of Amathole, so we need people, we don't even need experts because we all don't know as much of what is required here, because we have not asked the people, but we need people who could hold hands together with the team here and one: find out what is required by the community, two: develop a response to it, and three: harness the resources and get it done. So we are looking for partners basically.*

(Interview: Aspire CEO)

In conversations with participants around this research question and the balance of power within partnerships, a very clear parallel issue emerged relating to terminology, and how the labelling of volunteers can shape the perspectives and attitudes of agencies toward sending and hosting partnerships. There was a sense that the word 'volunteer' although frequently used at Aspire and clearly understood in everyday conversation, had different connotations when applied as a label that differentiates people from the rest of the staff team.

In relation to international partnerships the use of the term 'volunteer' for the IR assignments at Aspire was felt to imply a more passive role would be taken by Aspire as an organisation depending on the provision of international personnel in order to implement its own agenda. To draw again on the words of the CEO:

*There's something not quite, comfortable, with the word 'volunteer' just generally, but in an agreement and arrangement we seek to achieve through this thing [international volunteer sending / hosting partnerships] I think we need to respect also the recipient of such programmes. So yes we all understand what volunteers are and that's word we use everyday but when volunteer [sending] organisations think of volunteers as assistance, then that's where we feel there comes more a form of aid, as I said of 'human aid'.*

(Interview: Aspire CEO)

Aspire spurns deficit approaches whereby the international volunteer is regarded as a crucial repository of knowledge and skill providing the catalyst for changes that local organisations are assumed to be unable to make for themselves. Accompanying this paternalistic attitude is a tendency for international volunteers to be regarded as aid in human form whose principal loyalty, and accountability, is to their home country volunteer sending organisation, rather than with the local partner organisation where the assignment is undertaken. Aspire's unease with the term volunteer links to this paternalistic deficit discourse, and encompasses concern about the sense of obligation that can arise if volunteers are seen as a form of 'aid' or 'handout' in and of themselves: "it's also just the donor funding, the minute the government takes a donor fund they know it comes with certain conditions, and those conditions may not necessarily be what we want or what you want to use the funding for, so the same then applies for 'human donor-ship' if you want to call it that..." (Aspire Interview: CEO). It is in recognition of this concern and sense of unease with the term 'volunteers' that the terminology International Recruit (IR) has been used throughout this research project, at Aspires request.

Aspire has a proven record of results, clean audits and a growing reputation for effective delivery and promises kept, with the endorsement of local authorities Aspire is well placed to feel assertive and proud in promoting itself, and its approach. Here the executive mayor of the Amathole District Municipality, Sakhumzi Somyo makes the following statement expressing his faith in Aspires ability to deliver beneficial development outcomes and to continue doing so:

*In Aspire, the Amathole District has a vehicle that we can trust and that can work with our communities to give real substance to our vision of growing the economy of the region. In other words, institutionally, the existence of Aspire has enabled us to provide a specialty which promises spatial economic development that will truly lift*

*the quality of life of the people of our district. After the first few years of Aspire's existence I can say this with utter conviction.*

(Mayors Foreword Aspire 2008/2009:3)

Aspire has a strong sense of organizational pride derived from its achievements, Simphiwe Kondlo wrote the chairperson's statement in the 2008/2009 report in which he offered the following endorsement of Aspire "This is still a young organisation, but it has grown and matured tremendously over the past three years...It has done very well from a governance point of view, and its track record of unqualified audits is indicative of that" Kondlo goes on to say that "we [the board] are deeply appreciative of the fact that Aspire has a highly specialised executive team on board which is able to act swiftly and appropriately" (Aspire 2008/2009:6) In commanding such respect Aspire is well positioned to assert its credibility and right to ownership. The sense of empowerment gained from these endorsements and achievement influences the manner in which Aspire deals with its international partners. It approaches partnerships secure in its role as a service delivery agency with a strong and positive reputation, clean audits and with invaluable on the ground knowledge and experience. These organizational strengths give Aspire the leverage and confidence to set the terms of IR hosting partnerships. Where the international partners are progressive and flexible enough to enact the rhetoric of local ownership and partner empowerment through providing IRs to Aspire on these terms a highly productive and positive relationship is seen to be emerging.

The findings for RQ 1 and RQ 2 provide testimony of the extent to which Aspire feels it has been able to take conscious and deliberate actions which have secured its ownership of the IR hosting process, subsequently giving rise to a strong sense of organisational empowerment that shapes the way Aspire approaches its international partnerships. The discussion section will now consider how organisational level ownership and empowerment connects to wider development ideals and approaches, including the merging of local and western practices that Aspire does, the links that can be drawn between the Aspire approach and the Paris Declaration principles of ownership, alignment, and harmonisation.

During the research project and field research period with Aspire it became apparent that Aspire was displaying a number of the traits of the 'populist' development model (Brohmann 1996, Overton & Storey (2004). Aspire is mandated to deliver localised, human centered, development initiatives to the Amathole region. In doing so the organisation is actively promoting development approaches that can contribute to the regions sustainability, whilst furthering community empowerment and participation. Aspire not only adheres to 'populist' development ideals in its own project implementation activities, but is also encouraging a similar ethos in its interactions with its international partner agencies. On one hand Aspire is engaged in partnerships with international volunteer sending agencies and within these partnerships Aspire seeks to empower itself and assert its ownership of the

volunteer assignment process. Then in its organisational work, Aspire carries out corridor interventions and development projects with staff teams including IRs in such a way as to encourage the ownership and empowerment of those communities with which it is engaged. Again we are drawn back to the comment of the CEO that Aspire is the provider of help, rather than being in need of help itself, thus Aspire rejects the conventional idea that partnerships are 'help' and uses IRs to bolster the existing strengths and positive attributes of the organisation.

Aspire operates in two main working environments; office and administrative functions at the central office in East London, and field staff roles with the projects stakeholders and communities. IRs are used in line function staff roles at Aspire and so they also perform these parallel roles as part of the staff team. IRs fall under Aspire's dual approach model whereby local, culturally appropriate field practices are balanced with 'Western' office systems resulting in an organisational blend that is highly effective in the South African context, where extremes of inequality and social differentiations create a dual society. Aspire integrates IRs fully into its own systems which are themselves a blend of 'Western' and localised approaches. Through fully integrating IRs, Aspire is able to foster a unified team approach where individual commitment and loyalty to the organisation, and the job at hand is high. Individuals typically reported feeling a weight of responsibility but a correspondingly high sense of challenge, reward, and accomplishment through their work at Aspire. Through taking management of the IRs and their assignments Aspire is able to establish a great deal of ownership over the IR hosting process. This strong sense of ownership gives rise to a corresponding sense of empowerment for Aspire, especially when Aspire is able to identify its management approach and highlight this alongside tangible and positive results that the organisation is achieving through its engagement with IRs.

The CEO and staff of Aspire clearly express a feeling of empowerment and accomplishment that enables them to approach international partnerships and negotiations in an assertive and confident manner. Far from approaching international partnerships with a hand out and stating 'this is what we lack, can you help us get it', the approach taken by Aspire to development is about recognizing existing skills, strengths and opportunities and bolstering those. This has clear echoes of the capabilities approach put forward by Armatya Sen (1996) which aims to recognize the skills and potential of individual and group capabilities where appropriate support is given that enables a process of development as freedom. Similarly, beyond the capabilities approach Aspire is also carrying out its own version of asset based development (Evans 2002). Within the organisation itself Aspire is inviting international partners to provide IRs who can bolster the overhaul skills package of the agency. In its development programmes and projects Aspire is seeking to identify unique local assets, and attributes and to strengthen and build upon these.

In presenting international partners with the opportunity to recognize and build on the organisations existing assets and capabilities, on Aspires terms and provide assistance in accordance with this, the Aspire approach displays international development principles being put into local practice. The 2005 Paris Declaration laid out central principles for international development co-operation and strategies for achieving more effective development (HDRN 2010). The three key principles of effective and good development practice outlined in the Paris Declaration are:

- *Ownership*- Which can be seen playing out in concrete form at Aspire where there is tangible local ownership occurring in practice. This research has laid out some of the working aspects of the process by which Aspire is actively claiming and exercising ownership over the IR hosting process.
- *Alignment*- Aspire itself is aligned with regional (AREDS) development approaches which in turn are aligned to national level policies. Aspires international partners are also expected to align themselves accordingly so that the aims and objectives they pursue with Aspire are all aligned with each other and complementary.
- *Harmonisation*- This term usually refers to donor groups getting their plans in line with each other and then dealing with a recipient agency as one (very powerful) voice, which arguably serves to further empower the donor agency and limit the negotiating leverage of recipient and local partners (Rogerson 2005). In Aspires international partnerships this is not the case, rather international partner agencies, or 'donors' are fully expected, and required, to harmonise with Aspires approach and practices by stepping in behind and supporting the agency in the manner it requests. Otherwise Aspire is in a strong and stable enough position as an agency that it does not need to, and will not, accept engaging in partnerships with international agencies who resist this more equitable form of partnership.

As stated by Blackburn et al (2002) a sense of ownership and empowerment is critical to the long term outcomes and sustainability of development projects. Active engagement with the development process and a sense of individual connection and stake in its success is crucial to fostering a sense of ownership and commitment in order to sustain development initiatives or changes. The research found that staff expressed a very high level of commitment not only to their job within Aspire, but to the aims of the organisation on a broader level. As such the staff at Aspire actively and consciously embrace the ethos of small town and community centred development. Different levels of empowerment and ownership emerged in the research: Aspire is taking ownership and empowering itself within its international partnerships, whilst simultaneously carrying out development projects within which it is promoting the ownership and empowerment of the communities and small towns with which it works. Aspire is empowered, and the work it does is



empowering of others. Aspire takes ownership of IR management and asserts itself in its international partnership relationships, and IRs are part of the collective skill package and staff team that enables Aspire to deliver results in its own work.

To respond simply to the research questions guiding this section of the discussion in relation to empowerment and ownership within international IR sending partnerships; The IR host organisation, Aspire in this instance, can and does manage the role of IRs through the total integration of IRs into its own staff and employee management structures and systems. This system seems to be producing positive results, and some associated challenges detailed in the next discussion section. By taking an active role in the management of IR and integrating them into the Aspire staff team the host organisation feels that it is actively taking ownership of the IR process, and in so doing gains a sense of empowerment. This sense of empowerment coupled with a strong record of results and achievements by the organisation does indeed influence Aspires interactions with its international partners as it approaches negotiations with a very clear agenda that it needs, not help, but rather the provision of individuals with skill who can become part of the Aspire staff team and operate as partners and members within the organisation.

### **Benefits and challenges for the local partner organisation hosting international recruits through international partnerships:**

*RQ THREE: How does this model of integrating international volunteers as workers deliver benefits to Aspire as an organisation? What challenges are also associated with this?*

The findings and discussion for RQ 3 are presented in a single body of text as the discussion of specific benefits and challenges is most appropriately presented alongside the findings to which it directly relates. As well as outlining benefits and challenges of IR hosting this discussion draws in issues of sustainability in the face of the challenges facing Aspire, and suggests that overall, Aspire presents a positive model of international partnership interaction and practice. This research was formulated in line with participatory research principles and an explicit desire to focus on strengths and positive aspects of the organisation and its experience. However it became clear that to willfully ignore the challenges people were raising in relation to IR hosting, was to impose a blind spot on the research. It is ultimately beneficial to consider and recognise both the benefits and challenges of the IR hosting arrangement for Aspire as this enables a more holistic and deeper understanding of the Aspire experience.

Hosting IRs has a number of beneficial impacts on Aspire, mostly the benefits are clustered around the input of skills, and skill sharing within a collaborative team based working environment. IRs and national staff all gain from the skill exchange and learning that takes place through working in such close proximity and collaboration. This contributes to a

dynamic, varied and cosmopolitan work environment at Aspire where workers are able to draw on the best of international and national/local methods to create blend of approaches that works best in this unique context. Other benefits are more individualised and relate to inter-personal skills and mentoring relationships between IRs and junior staff.

### **Benefits to Aspire:**

‘Skill exchange’ is often conceptualised as a process of training provided by external experts, or a relationship whereby skills are exchanged directly between an international volunteer and an individual local counterpart. Aspire perceives skill exchange differently, as a natural side-effect of working as part of a team, in very close proximity and collaboration with colleagues and team-mates. By working closely with NEs the approaches and skills of IRs are demonstrated and learnt from. Most importantly, this is not a passive or one way system, as the IRs are actively learning from the NEs as well. Let us not discredit the Aspire NEs by assuming they are the only ones who need to learn, or change and adapt. In all interviews the theme of mutual learning and back and forth skill sharing came through strongly as the following quotes convey:

*You have a skill and you put the skill in a team of different skills so to say, and you then transfer that skill to the other team members. So having the position of a line function staff [member] is not that problematic because you don't work on your own in any case.*

(Aspire Interview Number;4, IR)

*I am experiencing a difference from my former employer [compared to here at Aspire] working with the international volunteers [IRs], I think it's more of a knowledge exchange, is more of learning new things.*

(Aspire Interview Number: 7, NE)

*From my experience that person (IR) brings a different work ethic this, that actually, in one way or another it actually helps you as well, but at the same time [there is] the exchange of ideas. The way I believe is that you never stop learning, because they come in with different things you didn't know about, you learn from that, but most of the time I need to say it's just that you find common ground to actually tackle the problem which is the project or whatever we're doing with it at that stage, you just deal with it at that stage through co-ordination of different ideas. Aspire is benefitting a lot.*

(Aspire interview Number:6, NE)

Particularly close skill sharing relationships can occur when an IR is actively used to mentor local staff as is the case in one project corridor at Aspire whereby “She has been my mentor, and then I think, yeah, I've learned a lot from her and her support, we established a good

working relationship” (Aspire Interview Number:8, NE). The IR who has acted in a mentoring capacity in this case speaks positively about having someone to mentor and about being aware of the need to make sure she put trust in the mentee and allowed them the space to tackle challenges, take on more responsibility and to grow individually and professionally.

Whilst IRs may have a range of international experience, skills and knowledge already, and some have previously undertaken work and assignments in South Africa, the complex legalities and policies that impact on Aspire’s work can be new to them. In these matters NEs take the lead in educating IRs and guiding them through the often complicated red tape and bureaucracies of South African development work. The hand-over period between staff or IRs can be an especially crucial period in this regard. One newly employed NE taking over a corridor management from an outgoing IR commented on the efficiency of handover to him, and how well this launched his interactions with local stakeholders and project partners (Aspire Interview Number:9, NE). Not only do the IRs and NEs alike consistently, and positively, speak about their own learning and assisting others to learn, but they also reflect on the choices this gives them and having the opportunity and freedom to mix the approaches to which they are exposed. The opportunity to blend international practices with local approaches enables Aspire to customise its approach to programme delivery in a varied, innovative, and pragmatic way.

Major organisational benefits to Aspire centre on primarily the input of skills, experience and a fresh world view that enables Aspire to select the best of international, national and local ideas as it customises its development approach to the unique context and small towns in which it operates. The building of a multi-disciplinary, and culturally diverse staff team brings together a range of perspectives and professional backgrounds. IRs also bring with them potential connections and access to networks and fundraising opportunities where having a staff member of a specific nationality or agency affiliation can be a crucial door opener. Finally, this varied team gives rise to a dynamic, cosmopolitan and highly motivated workforce and work place which the research participants from Aspire generally regarded in an overwhelmingly positive light.

Through adopting more flexible and innovative approaches that select and combine the best of international, national, and local methods and experience Aspire is able to deliver customized and responsive development projects to communities who can see results. The IRs constitute a kind of ‘bargain workforce’ for Aspire. There are different financial arrangements negotiated with each international partner organization, however certainly the financial contribution Aspire makes towards hosting IRs is far below the market value they could command as employees in a competitive job market. One NE outlines the combination of benefits for Aspire in having a highly skilled but affordable workforce and still achieving effective project delivery: “What I observed when I came here, is that Aspire,

the way they are doing it is saving them costs in terms of wages, but they're getting the maximum benefits using the system....maximum benefits in the way that they still deliver on their promises to the public, now they get trusted by the public" (Aspire Interview Number: 6, NE)

In addition to the sharing and merging of approaches and skills, there can be value in having a 'fresh set of eyes', in particular where NEs have grown up in South Africa and especially around the Eastern Cape their frame of reference for the possibilities in an area may be narrower than those of IRs. The following quotes from two different NE interviews express this idea;

*Generally it [IR hosting] is a very good thing for the benefit of the country as a whole. Because you see when you are living in a country, when you are born there, and when you grow up there... but somebody who is looking at a situation from the outside environment, I think that person is helpful. I'm really agreeing that these people should be around and assisting wherever they can assist, having an impact on the development.*

(Aspire Interview Number:7, NE)

*You'll find that with most of the international employees, I think at the same time it's sort of based on their past experience, but they're able to have a broader outlook as opposed to someone whose actually lived here all their lives, and all they've seen is a dirt road, a couple of houses. But for them [IRs] when they see it, they might see a dirt road, but that dirt road or that particular area could be turned into something else.*

(Aspire Interview Number:10, NE)

Some NEs at Aspire raised the matter of race and culture in how differently IRs relate to communities and also in how IRs are received by local stakeholders and communities. As discussed in the context chapter South Africa still grapples with racial turmoil and issues of 'colour coding' people based on their skin and the assumptions or stereotypes applied to this. Thus IRs who are typically 'white' are responded to by local people in a different way to 'white' South Africans, as the IRs are regarded as being separate from the racial history of the country. Likewise one interviewee suggests that IRs come into the role with less racially based presumptions about their local counterparts and that this contributes to building more positive and open relationships. Here the interviewee explains how race and foreigner status can benefit IRs in relationship building:

*When it comes to personal relationships with these people from other countries, you know we are coming from a post-apartheid country which has a lot of diversity, the cultural diversity, and then the history is still existing. To work with these people*

*[IRs] actually I can say is different from working with the original South Africans, because they are not having those perceptions of black people, they are so open [and] they are people I would say, I have seen them going directly to the community and not having challenges and problems, because they don't have information, the perceptions you see, so they go with their clean hearts and clean minds, as the servants of development, so what I'm saying is when it comes to personal relationships they are quite good, they are able to interact with the municipalities, with the communities, so they don't have lots of the challenges like South African-white South Africans.*

(Aspire Interview Number:7, NE)

Aspire's IR hosting partnerships benefit a range of parties, not least of all, the IRs themselves who benefit through the opportunity to take on new challenges, expand their knowledge and skills base, and adapt to a new working environment: "the relationship with the IRs does not only empower [Aspire] itself as an organisation – but it also builds relevancy to the IRs area of expertise and skills" (Aspire CEO Research Feedback November 2010). Sending agency partners are able to point to how much IRs achieve within the Aspire framework and share the credit for it. Whilst Aspire builds a dynamic, cosmopolitan, and multi-skilled staff team which enables it to affordably, and effectively fulfil its organisational mandate. In this quote the CEO of Aspire pays testament to the positive IR contribution that is enabled by the strong and genuine partnerships Aspire has established "It's not 'help' that will promote the IR's effectiveness with host organisation but a partnership with the volunteers organisation and then passion and commitment from the individual volunteers. In fact I think Aspire's IRs have given ME more than I asked for or expected!" (Aspire CEO, Research Feedback November 2010).

In summary, a functional, focused and genuinely productive partnership has been established between Aspire and its international, volunteer sending, partners. Within these partnerships Aspire feels that it is able to assert its ownership of the IR hosting process, and thus empower itself. There are shared aims being achieved by the partners, as well as separate aims, which enables both parties to turn to their constituents or stakeholders and prove results are being achieved and that therefore they are fulfilling their organisational mandates.

### **Challenges for Aspire:**

Naturally no complex arrangement involving multiple organisations and individual people can be solely positive and beneficial, there are challenges associated with IR hosting. Crucially the use of IRs, on fixed time bound contracts, as a vital component of a multidisciplinary, highly skilled team, raises important questions about sustainability and the challenge of succession planning within the organization. The inevitability of a two-three year personnel turnover is especially challenging when using IRs in line function roles

where establishing inter-personal relationships is crucial to effective job performance. At a more personal level, individuals daily navigate and negotiate personal differences and approaches in a complex, multi-cultural and multi-lingual organisational environment. Such a context demands compromise and openness from all individuals.

Any organisation has to negotiate challenges in its day to day operations, and Aspire is no exception. Whilst variety, cosmopolitanism and a range of staff skills, disciplines and backgrounds provides the Aspire team with one of its greatest assets, it does raise the necessity of navigating potential clashes based on individual personalities and differences of interest, these are magnified within such a diverse staff team. Largely this is countered by the open management structure and flat organisational hierarchy, where issues and work related challenges are discussed frequently at staff op's meetings and individuals are encouraged to resolve minor disputes between themselves through discussion.

Unequal access to financial reward and incentives does present a potential challenge to the management of IRs. Whilst IRs are fully integrated into the Aspire staff system and structures, they are not part of the same financial payment and reward systems. The payment of (sometimes quite substantial) annual performance based cash bonuses is a standard practice in South African white-collar employment. However IRs are excluded from the bonus system, so "The international people are no different from anyone else, you're doing a full time job, and it's your job". They are subject to the same conditions, pressures, deadlines and expectations as any other staff member but "you're actually just an employee; *without the benefits employees get*" (Aspire Interview Number:3, IR, emphasis added). Although IRs become part of Aspire's employee system and policies, they are not able to access the same material incentives as NE's. Whilst this could raise a potential source of resentment causing challenges for the effective management of IRs, this is not the case at Aspire. Individual IRs are well aware of the financial trade-offs they make in opting for IR positions rather than seeking to enter the competitive job market. It is clear in their responses that the IRs are following a typical volunteer value pattern of valuing experience and the intrinsic rewards of an IR role over the higher extrinsic rewards of conventional employment (Hudson & Inkson 2006, Palmer 2002, Anheier & Salamon 1999).

The hosting of IRs in and of itself does not create the potential for individual personality clashes, such concerns are the reality for any shared working environment and primarily it demands mature and professional behaviour of all individuals involved. In the Aspire case people are well aware of the staff team's diversity and it is not uncommon for staff to (good naturedly) debate ideas and opinions in a manner that enables them to establish each others opinions and rationale for these. Certainly as a researcher a good deal of time was spent in informal conversation with various staff members just exchanging and debating ideas, opinions, and attitudes.

The favourable impression of positive skill sharing environment and appreciative responses to the range of world views came through strongly in interview responses, however there were sometimes slight undercurrents of unease. There was much talk about IRs being more accustomed to multi-tasking and working in a more flexible fashion, but some individuals seemed to feel a little shown up or embarrassed by the dynamism and work ethic of IRs and it seemed that the 'work ethic' comments may have alluded to some of this. This was not across the board and would have reflected also individual interactions between IRs and NEs and the job roles people held. Nonetheless, references to IRs being very demanding or 'slave drivers' (Aspire Interview, NE) and off the record references to being 'shown up' and feeling professionally outperformed by IRs were made in some instances. It is not remarkable that different approaches to working and carrying out similar professional roles raised some insecurities or low level resentment, especially in a cultural context where many employees have a vested interest in sustaining a job for themselves, contrasting with IRs who are on a limited time frame and intended to be completing a task and essentially doing themselves out of a job. Regardless, it is a sensitive area, and in terms of the expectations placed on NEs the presence of IRs can serve to raise the bar. To this end Aspire's management staff strongly encourage open communication, swift conflict resolution and are acutely aware of the need to find a balance between IRs and NEs, the IR : NE ratio is consciously experimented with at Aspire in order to find the most effective balance (Aspire interview: CEO).

Staff turnover and succession planning are a key area of concern recognised by staff and management at Aspire. There is a challenge around succession planning and the loss of institutional memory. Staff turnover is a concern, but again this applies as much, if not more, to the organisation in general rather than specifically being an issue raised by the hosting of IRs. In fact IRs have been some of the more reliable staff members at Aspire, usually arriving on a two year assignment contract which is either completed or extended to three years. When IRs leave this is anticipated well in advance and occurs on a set time-line. Thus handover is generally relatively smooth as recruitment takes place prior to the IRs departure and there is a hand-over period. Although, in some instances new staff members have resigned shortly after hand-over and then a substantial loss of momentum in the project has occurred. Comments below made by the CEO in research feedback documents outline these concerns:

*Strangely, [most of] our staff turnover are locals or South Africans! The one-year contracts with international partners such as the [IR hosting arrangement with one international partner agency] turned into three years and beyond and the same mutual agreements were reached with [other international partner agency]. What we are missing in our approach with the IRs, but with also everyone else including the CEO and CFO, is a succession plan. When they leave or any of our senior staff walks out, there'll be memory loss [institutionally] and a vacuum [in strategic*

*direction] and unfortunately uncertainty in a number of areas. We have not done enough to respond to this challenge.*

(Aspire CEO Feedback November 2010)

The main and more problematic challenge arising from IR hosting and employing IRs to provide a unique and vital skill set as part of a team is the issue of skill loss and turnover. Whilst a great deal of skill exchange and mutual learning takes place through the team work approach the departure of any staff member or IR leaves a gap in the team. Whilst the issue of staff turnover is not unique to Aspire or to IRs the fixed term nature of IR assignments can make it more of an issue. IRs at Aspire are working on time limited (two to three year) assignment contracts which, although they can be extended, do not constitute an indefinite employment arrangement. This can be problematic in front-line roles where effectiveness is built on inter-personal relationships and earning stakeholder trust because “when they leave those relationships go with them” (Aspire Interview Number: 3).

There is a long term plan at Aspire to gradually reduce and ultimately phase out the number of IRs at the organisation (Aspire Interview: CEO). To achieve this Aspire will have to overcome major difficulties in recruitment and planning for succession, due to a severe skills shortage and the organisation’s inability to offer competitive relocation compared to Johannesburg. Essentially, those individuals in South Africa with the skills and experience necessary for Aspire will be able to find far more lucrative employment in the major centres of Cape Town and Johannesburg. Ironically a situation has emerged whereby it is more viable for Aspire to recruit IRs from Germany or elsewhere overseas than to seek local and national recruits in South Africa. Aspire has previously appointed of a short term human resources (HR) consultant to assist the agency in tackling the question of staff succession and longer term personnel planning. It is felt that the consultant became embroiled in general administrative tasks and ultimately provided little resolution or guidance on staff matters. To date, the CEO feels that this concern has not been satisfactorily addressed.

Does the challenge of managing staff succession negatively impact on Aspire’s prospects for organisational sustainability? Whilst the spectre of staff turnover and loss of institutional memory is not an ideal situation for Aspire, the research findings suggest that it is not a fundamental issue that undermines the organisation as a whole. Aspire has secure government and municipality funding streams, as well as additional support through its international partnerships. The organisation has a strong foundation, clear mandate and robust track record as well as a positive reputation. Aspire has been able to shape the development of small towns and rural areas, these are now firmly on the national development policy agenda. Aspire has proven itself to be an effective change agent far beyond what might be expected of an organisation its size (Aspire 2006/2007 & 2008/2009). These factors make the Aspire case quite unique and bolster its potential sustainability. Whilst many NGO’s and civil society organisations do not enjoy secure and predictable



funding, Aspire has this. Whilst many agencies have to fight for the ear, of local government Aspire already has this, and has earned a great deal of respect at various levels of government in its first five years of operations, as the mayors foreword in each of the Aspire annual reports attests to. So whilst staff turnover is an issue to be addressed at Aspire, and it may raise some short term hiccups and challenges, it does not catastrophically undermine the sustainability of Aspire itself.

Furthermore, even if the sustainability of Aspire as an organisation were to come under threat, the legacy of the small town agenda and Aspires approach to development has been promoted and consolidated through an active push to build academic partnerships whereby a cyclic theory-practice relationship can be established. Small towns are on the national policy agenda, the annual small town conference brings together researchers, academics, and practitioners from across South Africa and the world. Aspire is currently supporting masters students from Fort Hare University. Under this arrangement, the research students are assigned to conduct small town case studies, the students will live in the town and carry out detailed case studies about different aspects of the local social, economic and cultural realities. This not only provides invaluable baseline data and information for Aspire as it plans interventions and projects, but also consolidates the value of small town regeneration and research within academic institutions. In addition to this, Aspire actively hosts researchers from overseas, such as myself, and in doing so is able to spread word of its approach to development. Even if Aspire's organisational sustainability were to come under threat, the Aspire approach is already being researched and presented in academic and practice fields, giving it a credibility all of its own.

### **Reflections on blended organisational approaches and international recruit management:**

*The task for volunteer management is to find the right blend: for the organization, combining choice and control, flexibility and organization, to be experienced by the volunteer as a blend of informality and efficiency, personal and professional support. This must take full account of the blend of characteristics, motivations and needs within the volunteer workforce, and the type of volunteering and the context within which it is carried out. For the volunteering infrastructure as a whole this suggests a blend of different management approaches and structural arrangements, rather than over-dependence on a single model.*

(Gaskin, 2003:28)

The opening quote above is drawn from Kate Gaskins 'A choice blend: what volunteers want from an organization', a report issued in 2003. Although Gaskin wrote it in relation to

the UK volunteer sector a number of things mentioned in her description of how that 'choice blend' might look, clearly connect to the Aspire approach and experience. In the South Africa context the need for balance and blending of international and national / local approaches also reflects the realities of operating in a country with a thriving corporate sector on one hand, but working with traditional, rural communities accustomed to broken promises and failed service delivery by various agencies, and often quite resistant to change or outsiders. Aspire shows a responsiveness and willingness to shift the balance when needed and is consciously experimenting with staff make up and using different elements of approaches drawn from a range of disciplines, in a bid to find its own 'choice blend'. Aspire management reflects some of the aspects of generic good practice in management models formulated to explain a western working context. Of course Aspire is not operating in an exclusively western context. The head office of Aspire operates largely in accordance with Western managerial methods. When carrying out rural development projects and engaging with stakeholders, communities, and individuals, in the field Aspire is operating in a wholly different context. The rural communities and small towns of the Eastern Cape are often lacking in infrastructure, resources, education and health facilities. Aspire's approach to managing IRs shows a blend of international and local management practices.

Research on the management of volunteers typically focuses on volunteers within Western institutions and familiar cultural contexts. This research serves to bridge the research on volunteer management, and link it with how it may be relevant in non-western contexts and in the case of international and cross cultural volunteering such as the Aspire IRs. Rochester (2006) presents three perspectives of volunteering, the IRs at Aspire fit the model of volunteering as "Unpaid work or service which contributes to the work of a formal organisation and is managed by the 'workplace' model" (Rochester 2006 in Smith & Cordery 2010:5). Smith and Cordery (2010) produced a Ministry of Social Development report on 'what works' in managing and encouraging volunteers in New Zealand. The research they drew on was from the United States of America, United kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, some of the traits of 'good volunteer management' that they identify are pertinent to the Aspire case, especially:

- Role Clarity- For volunteers to be effective there must be a clearly defined role for them within the organization as well as an understanding of how that role is to be fulfilled. At Aspire IRs are taking on line function 'staff' roles and operate within detailed job descriptions and areas of responsibility.
- Support for volunteers is also identified as important, at Aspire support and encouragement is provided through a flat organisational hierarchy, with open and approachable management should any issues arise. The fortnightly staff op's meetings provide all staff with a chance to table progress reports, but also to raise issues and challenge they are encountering in their work and seek advice /

suggestions from other staff members (who in many cases may have experienced similar challenges themselves).

- Clear policies and volunteer orientation procedures guide the volunteer on entering an organisation and clear policies provide further clarity around roles, responsibilities and entitlements. At Aspire again IRs are accommodated and covered within the same policies and structures as other employees. However they are also subject to other external policies under the volunteer sending agency should unforeseen or emergency situations arise. The day-to-day management of IRs falls entirely within Aspires jurisdiction in accordance with the role, and job area of the IR as negotiated with the international partner sending agency.

IRs at Aspire exhibit classic examples of modern, non-linear career paths through seeking intrinsic rewards from their careers above and beyond the extrinsic values of financial reward, status and 'climbing the ladder'. Hudson and Inkson (1999) suggest that individuals who undertake international volunteer assignments are typically driven by a desire for challenge, intrinsic reward and the fulfilment of ideals; a sense of challenges met, and personal achievement, or 'giving something back' rather than extrinsic rewards i.e. high pay, bonuses, material luxuries. Remuneration for IRs at Aspire is low compared to what they could earn on the international job market, but instead the IR experience yields far higher intrinsic rewards and a sense of personal gain and accomplishment. In interviews and informal discussions the IRs at Aspire all spoke about enjoying the sense of challenge and accomplishment in their work.

**Lessons that can be learnt from the 'Aspire approach and the broader applicability of these at organisational, national, and international scales:**

*RQ FOUR: What might be learnt from the Aspire approach that can benefit other organisations and the development sector more generally (does the Aspire experience provide a guide for better future practice)?*

RQ4 is presented purely as a discussion point and draws on the research and suggestions made by individuals during the interviews. As such there are no concrete 'findings' that can be applied here, this is by nature a discussion question designed to fuel reflection and speculation regarding how the Aspire approach can be learnt from and made applicable more broadly. In reflecting on what can be learnt from the Aspire approach and IR hosting experience, the research recognises that IRs are individuals and each organisation has its own unique set of features and circumstances that makes it uncertain terrain for to be drawing out generalised 'lessons' from this research. However, given the scope and aims of this research it is possible to draw out a better understanding of more general themes and practice approaches through an organisational case study of the Aspire approach.

In general these lessons seem applicable at three approximate scales, there are findings and lessons that apply at an organisational scale and validate or inform Aspire's practices and organisational approach. There are national level lessons about rejecting a highly restricted checklist or 'tick box' based work culture that may reflect how Aspire has proved to be highly effective by moving away from methods of practice that potentially restrict South African organisations, and their capacity to innovate and implement. Finally, Aspire is genuinely trusted and empowered in its interactions with its international partners. This combined with the organisations record of achievement and sense of ownership provides positive lessons and a model that can be learnt from, replicated and implemented much more broadly in international level development thinking and practice.

### **Lessons drawn from the research at an organisational scale:**

At an organisational level, Aspire's decision and strategies to fully integrate IRs and manage them within their own organisational structures seems to have a range of very strong positive spin offs outlined in research question three. These positive spin offs benefit individual IRs who feel more included and gain a sense of accomplishment and intrinsic reward, which gives rise to a sense of commitment and loyalty to the organisation that benefits Aspire. The team working environment fosters the exchange of skills, experience and world view in all directions benefiting all staff, and contributing to the dynamic, innovative and cosmopolitan organisational culture that Aspire promotes. These benefits provide a strong endorsement for the approach Aspire has taken and although other organisations may not be able to implement a similar system so fully, it is worth considering that in the case of Aspire there is very much a sense that through being a pro-active and assertive partner in managing the IRs they are hosting, the organisation has reaped the benefits.

Beyond the integration and team approach discussed earlier, Aspire's main practical shift is to move away from a 'tick- box' or checklist based workplace culture common in South Africa. Whereby the work of individuals is narrowly confined to pre-determined tasks with little scope for flexibility, innovation and creative thinking. IRs typically come from western working environments where multi-tasking and responsiveness to 'what needs doing' as it arises is a generally accepted part of professional culture. One NE explains the South African tendency to operate on a job description based check list of tasks:

*I think there is a gap between us and the international people [IRs]. This is how I see it, but I stand to be corrected, it's multi-tasking from their side. It's like it's a norm for them, of which most of us this side (in South Africa) if I'm actually told this is your job description, I just want to be within my boundary lines, I can't want to do anything other than that unless I'm told to do that.*

(Aspire Interview Number:6, NE)

This prescriptive approach to working limits the freedom or inclination of employees to approach a job creatively or think about new ways in which things might be done. In a bonus based employment culture, ticking the most boxes generates the greatest benefits, so there is no incentive to think more broadly.

IRs at Aspire who have undertaken other IR assignments within South Africa feel they have been able to achieve a great deal more for themselves and for Aspire through being integrated into line function staff roles, rather than remaining external 'expert advisors'. In this regard Aspire has forged a new approach to IR management that enables the organisation and the individual to get the greatest possible professional and personal gain out of the IR hosting arrangement. The CEO reflects on this as follows "I know of some 'qualified' volunteers in some department agencies who spend the whole day doing nothing because (among other things, I guess) there's no way of knowing how to fit their 'assistance' in the host organisation and in the broader programme/project that the hosting organisation is working in" (Aspire CEO Research Feedback November 2010). In essence the skills of an individual are no use to an organisation that lacks the systems to manage that individual and effectively incorporate their skills into the workings of the organisation. In narrow advisory roles individuals are recruited on the basis of a single skill set and may end up in the situation of 'doing nothing' as they are not really included in the organisation they are meant to be helping and may have a very limited understanding of the work on the ground such that their skills are redundant without greater insight and familiarity.

At Aspire through proximity and a varied job role, the full range of skill sets and experience that an individual has is likely to be harnessed in an integrated, line function IR role. At an organisational and national level Aspire represents a shift away from a predominant 'Check list' work place culture. Whilst Aspire does use progress indicators, these are subject to review and remain flexible in the face of the potential delays and challenges that may arise when dealing with complex social and economic issues. By using a combination of individual and team assessment methods, Aspire both encourages individuals to contribute with their full range of skills, whilst also providing recognition and reward for collaboration and effective team work.

### **National level lessons and implications of this research:**

The national level lessons to be drawn from the Aspire approach and experience are already being promoted by Aspire itself. Through actively engaging with and promoting academic partnerships Aspire is able to promote its approach to development- based on small towns and holistic inter-connected project plans- to shape the discourse within which it operates, working toward a cyclic relationship of theory and practice mutually informing one another. In 2010 during the field research period Aspire launched a partnership with Fort Hare University facilitating and supporting masters student to conduct baseline research in small

towns where future projects may take place. Aspire also hosts annual Small Town Conferences which further give a voice to researchers and practitioners to promote the approach Aspire is taking and engage with both academic and professionals in the field of development and rural regeneration.

Alongside these professional and academic initiatives, one of the best ways to promote an approach such as Aspire's is through demonstration effect, when Aspire is seen to be successful in implementing a project, the natural discussion turns to 'how?' and 'what did they do?' Below one of the Aspire team discusses how Aspire aims to 'build people' through its projects seeks in order to achieve sustainable development that is enabling local people to become financially independent:

*We have all these various departments, and most departments (in South Africa) what they focus on is meeting targets for their bonuses, and it shouldn't be that way. **In the sense that when you've been given, you know, a particular project that you have to do, you should look at it [and think] "hey, I want to meet my target, but at the same time, I need to know that I am making a difference in other peoples lives"** and that difference shouldn't just be short term, and that's what happens with most of the big government organisations. That they'll provide something, and employment based on the very short term, as opposed to what Aspire's doing. Aspire's trying to create employment, but at the same time while creating that employment we try to provide skills for these people so that even if that project is a project only for 12 months or 18 months, should that project come to an end, that skill that you actually have, you could use it elsewhere. So in a way here at Aspire we try to build those characteristics of those people, to shape and mould them so that they are able to stand on their own two feet and not have to be always be dependent on government and government grants*

(Aspire Interview Number:10, NE. Emphasis added)

In order to implement its strategy and approach there are crucial skills that Aspire needs within its team of personnel. The VOSESA 2006 country report on volunteering and civil service in South Africa stressed that IRs are a crucial resource to organisations which may not have the funding to source essential skilled personnel locally. The responses of the Aspire research participants to research question three validate this finding that the central benefit of IR hosting for Aspire is that it gains highly skilled and committed members of its staff team, without having to provide a full salary and employee package. Furthermore in South Africa highly skilled local and national individuals are relatively few, and are very much in demand, Aspire does not have the location or financial resources to entice skilled local or national individuals onto its staff team, requiring them to relocate to a less

cosmopolitan town, for a salary that cannot compete with the job market rates a major cities like Johannesburg.

It is important to acknowledge that not all organisations seeking international support through IR hosting have the same level of focus, clarity and professionalism of Aspire. This was suggested in focus group conversations with a Johannesburg NGO carrying out research into volunteering activity in South Africa, it may not be that the Aspire approach itself is unique'; but that Aspire itself is in a unique position to have the capacity and opportunity to manage IRs in the way it chooses. Unique circumstances or not, this should not detract from the fact that in Aspire there is positive and adaptive model of practice emerging that is innovative and effective. The Aspire approach shows practical day to day measures taken by an IR hosting agency, which has been able to benefit from demanding to be given the freedom and respect that allows it to manage IRs on its own terms (Focus Group Discussion: Volunteer Research NGO, Johannesburg October 2010).

### **Lessons from the research that reflect on development approaches and concepts at an international level:**

At the level of the development sector and international practice arena, although direct lessons as such cannot be drawn from what takes place within a single agency. When external support provides what is requested on the host organisations terms, rather than when support is conditional on the donor or sending agency taking a lead, this research finds that the Aspire approach and experience provides a powerful example of the power and competence of local knowledge and skills. Aspire is a highly efficient, capable and professionally staffed organisation with the capacity to deliver. Where it lacks the financial capacity to recruit national staff at job market rates, IRs are an invaluable and viable addition to the workforce that contribute to making these achievements possible.

The Aspire approach is centred on "what people themselves can contribute to the development process" (Stock 2004:5 in Nel 2007:460) and this is its core strength that enables it to achieve its organisational aims and carry out the work that it is doing. The Aspire approach presents practical on the ground steps for integrating IRs and it presents a positive and proactive model that empowers the host agency and challenges traditional partnership hierarchies. The approach taken at Aspire does not demand huge resources, or inputs, rather it requires a psychological shift from deficiency to capability based partnerships and IRs hosting, this approach can be replicated and learnt from by other agencies.

This research has shown how a local development partner can identify and state its own attributes and capabilities, then negotiate with international partners on the basis of bolstering and building on those positive traits and attributes. In rejecting deficit based partnership negotiations the local partner is empowered to recognize its strengths, and can

take ownership of the partnership negotiations by setting the terms of what support it seeks, and the form this will take. This moves beyond the idea of 'handing over the stick' in development practice, to then accepting and respecting the way that stick might be put to use after it has been handed over. Aspire has not only embraced and harnessed the knowledge and skills of South African workers, but has forged a partnership between South African skills and international skills and combines the power and potential of both (Stock 2004 in Nel 2007:460).

In the literature review chapter authors including Brinkerhoff (2002), Crocker (2008) and Burkey (1993) identified key components of how international partnerships can work, which corresponded closely with the ideals declared on the websites of international volunteer sending agencies. The common sentiment was in general; that development partnerships should involve a process of engagement and collaboration in pursuit of positive, and humanistic development goals. These goals should be primarily determined by the people whom they will directly affect, and ideally derive from a process of genuine empowerment, participation and negotiation which gives rise to local ownership and engagement with development projects. This research has presented the tangible day to day measures that a single local development partner has taken to empower itself and advance its ownership of international partnerships establishing itself as an 'active and assertive participant' in its own development (Overton & Storey 2004).

At an international level from the lessons drawn we can link right back to RQ1 and consider how what we learn from the Aspire approach and experience that can influence future practice that enables the genuine empowerment and sense of ownership of developing country partners. In this area the particular emphasis is on Aspire's demonstration effect of just how much an agency can achieve when support given by international partners is in line with its own needs and systems rather than imposing conditions upon the host agency. The progressive and trusting relationship that Aspire has with its international partners gives rise to a successful and positive model of partnership and shows what can be achieved when the rhetoric of ownership, empowerment and partnership crosses from rhetoric into practice and approach.

### **Reflections on partnership, participation, and process:**

Volunteering is an increasing, and increasingly international activity, within which individuals from a range of professions and backgrounds are participating. In aiming to assess and understand this area, of primary importance should be the experience and opinion of the local (host) agency which the entire volunteer sending partnership is intended to benefit and strengthen. This research has explored how Aspire approaches the management of IRs and makes the full integration of IRs into its own employee structures and staff team a central strategy in its management approach.



One NE at Aspire offered the following perspective on how the Aspire approach to IR hosting impacts on the organisation, and much more widely:

*I think it's the way it's being implemented [at Aspire] has actually changed the way it was done previously, the convention. Because generally you have an expert coming in for two weeks, and coming in to just quickly do whatever he's doing, then goes away to report back to the donor that he has built capacity in maybe that two-three weeks time. So I think what you have here at Aspire having the international people being part of the work being done serves to empower not just the donors themselves, donor countries themselves, but also the country itself- South Africa, because you get to have a different perspective on how to approach certain things because we might be used to a certain approach, but if you have a good mix of different approaches it might assist.*

(Aspire Interview Number:4, NE)

This comment also reflects that the Aspire experience is being actively reflected upon by staff members, and that the way it works is encouraging both staff and external observers to think, reflect, and re-evaluate development processes and approaches in context. The NE quoted above clearly perceives that the Aspire demonstration effect is working, through leading by example and showing what can be done when IRs undertake assignments under the Aspire approach the interviewee feels that observing outsiders can't argue with the positive results and outcomes the agency is able to achieve, and that the Aspire approach to IR management is a vital component of that success.

Sometimes the rhetoric of partnership can serve to provide a smokescreen for sending in Western 'experts', justifying the continuation of development that is pre-determined by outside experts and imposed upon people and communities. The Aspire approach actively confronts such a paternalistic approach to development partnerships and acts to equalise the power balance between partners. As part of a move toward development based on partnerships, empowerment, and local ownership Aspire asserts its own attributes and strengths as a local partner. Further to this, the immersion and integration of IRs into the host organisations structures and the local development sector and context is a positive and productive step toward genuine local ownership. Aspire directly challenges the preference of some development agencies to provide 'assistance' through the provision of short term external or 'expert' advisors and consultants who remain under the control of the donor agency.

In 2004 John Overton and Donovan Storey made a presentation at the Australian Nalanda University. In this seminar they likened short term 'expert advisor' based development aid to an episode of Star Trek. The Star Trek crew flood into an alien community speaking their

own language. They swiftly help that community to fight some dastardly evil, there are lots of dramatic happenings, and a few explosions then, abruptly, the dust settles. Captain Kirk and team dust off their hands, and declare “Our work here is done”. They are promptly beamed up, and vanish, leaving the resident community scratching their heads, surrounded by a familiar, but irrevocably changed environment asking “what was that? What the heck just happened?” The experience of local communities targeted by external ‘specialist teams’ may not be dissimilar to this, with a flood of outsiders speaking a strange language appearing, and vanquishing the evils of ‘un-development’ as they perceive it, before disappearing once more.

The Aspire approach to IRs is to keep those strange and shiny outsiders on the ground a little longer, to become familiar with them, and to allow them time to become familiar with Aspire and its locality and context. The IRs are not ‘beamed up’ after a few quick and visible band aid projects, they are there for the long haul, alongside their colleagues in the Aspire team, and on the same level as the local stakeholders and communities. IR assignments at Aspire are longer term and structured around a position of working with and for Aspire. Even the phrasing of the role indicates a clear power dynamic, these are not international experts sent to ‘advise Aspire’ over a short burst of time, these are individual international volunteers, termed international recruits, who will be working for Aspire as an equal and vital component of a unified staff team, within which they are fully integrated into a staff and employee structure that is all Aspire’s. The duration of assignments is one to three years and allows IRs time to become fully part of the Aspire team and systems. They also have the time to develop a full and intimate understanding of the organisation, how it works and the context within which it operates. A short term ‘expert advisor’ would have none of these insights.

This research was built around the organisational case study of Aspire, a single organisation engaged in international partnerships through which it is hosting IRs, many other organisations are engaged in similar relationships. Although limited in size and scope this research can contribute to how we understand far wider concepts and issues that are faced by many organisations in developing countries that have partnerships of their own and may also be hosting international volunteers. Any development partnership constitutes a relationship between organisations. The relationship between agencies is central to partnership and has to be actively participated in by both parties, which necessitates reflection, responsiveness, and a willingness to make change and act on those reflections and learning in order to remain on track and build effective and positive direction in that partnership. At Aspire the positive outcomes of international partnerships founded on trust and responsiveness have been demonstrated through the specific case of IR sending and hosting. Without organisational case studies such as this which build on understanding of the host organisation experience of IR sending through international partnerships, the worth and success of volunteer sending programmes and partnerships cannot be ascertained.

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## Chapter Seven.

### A summary of the research and the key learning points drawn from it:

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The aim of this research, as stated in the opening chapter, was as follows: This research aims to build a better understanding of how Aspire takes ownership of its partnerships with international volunteer sending agencies through integrating international recruits (IRs) into its own organisational employee structures. It is hoped that by achieving this aim the research can draw on Aspire's approach to suggest new or better models of practice for both volunteer hosting and volunteer sending organisations in future, which may have wider implications for the development sector and literature.

Gaining a better understanding of the Aspire approach to managing and hosting IRs was the aim of this research, and through exploring the research questions this has been achieved. It has been found that at Aspire, the organisation has made a conscious decision to manage IRs by fully integrating them into the employee structures and systems that Aspire already has in place. Through integrating IRs fully Aspire has built a dynamic, unified and cosmopolitan staff team whose diverse backgrounds, range of skills, and worldviews constitute one of the organisations strongest assets. Mutual learning and flexibility in this environment of close team support and collaboration enables both IRs and national employees (NEs) to learn from each other and strengthen their own skill sets through exposure to alternative worldviews and ways of doing things.

The Aspire approach has at its centre the total integration of IRs into the staff team, operating under Aspire's own employee systems and structures. In being able to take ownership of the IR assignment and management Aspire feels it is empowered within its international partnerships and approaches these relationships as an assertive equal partner. Aspire's core ethos in its negotiations with international partners is that it is an agency that delivers help to the small towns of Amathole, and is quite capable of doing so. Aspire is not itself in need of 'help' from partners, but rather presents them with an opportunity to harmonise with the aims of the organisation and provide support through the provision of IRs with skill sets that will bolster the combined skill package of the Aspire staff team.

The CEO of Aspire explained what Aspire wants from its international partnerships as follows, and presents a perspective that any developed country partner agency would be well advised to take heed of:

*So the first thing (for negotiating international partnerships and hosting IRs) for me was to talk to the organisations and to say; you know what, Aspire doesn't need help, Aspire is, it is the help to the people of Amathole, so we need*

*people, we don't even need experts because we all don't know as much of what is required here, because we have not asked the people, but we need people who could hold hands together with the team here and one: find out what is required by the community, two: develop a response to it, and three: harness the resources and get it done. So we are looking for partners basically.*

Interview: Aspire CEO (emphasis added)

In line with this statement, where Aspire has found partners willing to support it in the ways it requests, the results have been overwhelmingly positive.

There are challenges faced by Aspire in IR hosting, but these challenges are not unique to Aspire or IR hosting agencies. Matters of staff turnover and interpersonal relationships amongst a diverse group of people are concerns that have been brought to the fore in this research, and do need to be addressed in time, although that is beyond the scope of this project. Future research might seek to address concerns raised by the CEO, IRs, and NEs at Aspire relating to the transition from being an IR hosting to fully independent, locally and nationally staffed organisation. The CEO recognises the need for such analysis and research in the following comment: "Just to add to 'other avenues' [for the research], I will say we need to know when to stop going the IR route. Aspire has, for its own organizational building and support and imparting of knowledge to local partners, to find an exit strategy and move away from relying on IRs ...but that too is the challenge" (Aspire CEO Interview).

Aspire recognises the challenges faced by staff turnover, even where attempts have been made by the organisation to address this (through contracting a human resources advisor) a suitable succession plan has not been developed. This has implications for the sustainability of Aspire as an organisation, but is a challenge common to many agencies and contexts. Yet the challenges Aspire faces should not detract from the fact that the IR hosting arrangement is generally regarded very positively by Aspire management, the IRs themselves, and their NE colleagues. All of whom recognised IR hosting as a strategic and valid organisational strategy, from which a combination of organisational and personal benefits were derived.

In drawing lessons from this research, at an organisational level the Aspire approach has been validated. It has been shown to be a robust, innovative and beneficial model of IR integration and management that is yielding benefits to individuals and the organisation in a number of different areas. At Aspire IR integration and local ownership are more than rhetorical mantras. There are concrete practices and measures being put in place at Aspire that could be learnt from or drawn on by other host agencies in similar positions. Through avoiding the narrowly defined, check list based work place culture predominant in South Africa, Aspire is able to really harness the full range of skills staff members have and maximise the benefits of hosting IRs. At an international level the Aspire experience captures, and displays, the potential of what can be achieved when partner agencies move

beyond rhetoric to genuinely embrace local ownership of the process and implementation of development. Aspire does not merely 'participate' in setting the goals of the partnership, but is able to determine how those goals will be met (through the provision of skilled IRs) and once those IRs are on the ground, Aspire is able to manage them in accordance with its own organisational systems and goals.

This research has achieved its aim by establishing a better understanding of the Aspire approach, but it is important to see how this becomes part of a picture much bigger than Aspire. The organisational practices and aims of Aspire uses at the local and organisational scale, echo discourses, methods, and theories of development that are operating on national, and international scales. Within this far broader picture the core learning points of this project are related to partnership as a relationship within which both partners are able to participate; the value of local ownership within partnership and the potential of genuine ownership where it becomes a model of practice rather than a rhetorical refrain; and the final and most critical point furthers the argument Robert Chambers made as he took on the development establishment in 1997 and wrote about the necessity of putting the 'last', 'first' and 'handing over the stick'. Development practitioners and theoreticians have grappled with the implications of handing over control, or 'the stick' to local partners ever since. This research argues that merely handing over the stick is one thing, but once the stick has been placed in local hands, international partners must then accept and respect the locally determined approach to how that stick will be wielded and used.

Partnerships in development are a step toward recognition of the need to allow the developing country partner a voice, a chance for their understanding and local, contextualised knowledge to be attributed value in the development process. Whilst a partnership may not necessarily be equal (Overton & Storey 2004) it does require that a relationship be built between partners and that each actively participate in that partnership. Where a local partner articulates its achievements and positive attributes that can be built upon, and receives partner support that is aligned with its own needs and geared toward building its strengths and attributes, partnership can become more meaningful and genuine. When the developed country partner delivers not help, but support, which is in harmony with the local agencies methods of practice and approach to development the prospects for a mutually beneficial partnership are greatly enhanced.

Partnerships that don't merely accommodate some local knowledge, but rather are founded on and governed by local knowledge stand a far better chance of meeting needs that are based in that specific local context. Partnerships need to embrace and promote local engagement with the process of development. Through incorporating and respecting local knowledge, a sense of local ownership can be fostered. The agenda for local development must not be set by external agents or 'experts' who are simply drawing on the snippets of local knowledge that they deem relevant. Rather development must be owned and driven

by the local partner itself, who can draw on their intricate and nuanced understanding of unique cultural and social contexts to devise holistic, and creative development solutions. Once local ownership of the development agenda and process is achieved, then real needs are met, and positive change can, and does, occur.

The final key learning point drawn from this research reflects the difficulty that developed country partners have first; in implementing principles such as partnership, ownership, and empowerment as more than appealing rhetoric, and actually stepping beyond words to foster tangible concrete dimensions of ownership and empowerment through how they engage in partnerships. The second difficulty is that where an organisation does manage to promote ownership and empowerment of local partners as more than mere rhetoric, some devolution of control has to take place. For a developed country partner to hand over control is dangerous territory, to then go a step further and place a resource (for example IRs) in a domain outside the developed partner agencies realm of control (ie. entirely under the management with the host partner agency) is a bold step too far for many agencies.

The final hurdle of effective and genuine partnership is therefore, not simply handing over the stick as Chambers wrote, but being willing to accept that once that control has been handed over, the developing country partner may now use that stick as they see fit, and may on occasion point it back at the partner agency and hold them to account. This could be by asserting the terms on which IRs can be sent, and taking ownership of the subsequent assignment, or through refusing partnership founded on the notion of 'help' and rejecting relationships with international partners who will not express a willingness to engage as equals and to harmonise their support with the local agencies existing strategies and practices.

Holding these core learning points in mind, the Aspire organisational case study allows for wider reflection on the international development context and concepts. The aim of development partnerships with an international volunteer sending / hosting component is primarily to benefit and strengthen the local partner (host organisation). As charged in the introductory chapter and literature review, existing research neglects the voice and perspective of local partners in these partnership arrangements. The success and impact of international volunteer sending within partnerships cannot be ascertained or validated without the local partner perspective being attributed much greater value than is currently the norm. There is still much more to be done with regards to evaluating volunteer sending : hosting partnerships and if the aim of benefiting and strengthening local (host) partners is being achieved.

Research that seeks positives in development practice, and is geared towards recognising and understanding innovative and successful approaches where they are being devised should be encouraged. Research that identifies successes and the aspects of these that could

be applicable elsewhere is greatly more constructive than simply a negative deluge of literature that aims only to criticise without offering a glimmer of hope. Hopefully through this research and projects like it, innovative, locally devised, micro level success stories can be researched and understood so that the positive aspects of approaches such as Aspires can lead to macro scale reflection and learning, ultimately paving the way toward more positive, empowering and genuine partnerships in development. Many criticisms have been levelled at development concepts and practices, especially where the role of local partners is considered. This research identifies, in the Aspire approach, a model that addresses many of those criticisms, and presents a proactive, innovative, and empowering way forward for agencies that host international volunteers.

This research addresses deficiencies in the development literature, where the focus and emphasis seems to be exclusively on the actions of international volunteers and the agencies that send them. Even more enlightened and progressive authors such as Blackburn et al (2002), Chambers (1984, 1997), and Buckland (1998), have inadvertently consolidated this bias by critiquing development and advocating for a shift in focus toward actions of the donor country partner. In the 1980's and 1990's it was a legitimate and timely call to demand greater scrutiny be applied to the paternalistic and domineering behaviour of some donor agencies. Now unfortunately, the gaze of development research seems to have drifted too far, losing sight of the local partners actions and agency within partnerships.

In order to revolutionise development research and practice, the focus now must move toward the local partner, to their rights, their agency, and their actions. Ownership is a fallacy where it is understood only as something given to local partners at the whim of a gracious donor. Rather ownership is something local partners should be able to define themselves, to stand proud and to declare what they are, what they have, and what they can and have achieved. Development researchers and practitioners need to be aware that the future of development must be based on respect for local perspectives and voices. Now collectively, the development sector must rise to the challenge put forth by Stock (2004): To move forward respectfully by building on existing local knowledge and development initiatives, and in doing so to support what already exists and recognise the capacity of local people to direct and achieve their own development (Stock 2004 in Nel 2007:460).

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