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An Innovative Approach to Effective, Impact-Driven Partnering: An Educational Aid Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Cross-sector collaborations are prevalent mechanisms for delivering international development aid. Effective collaboration efforts among partner organizations can drive aid and programme impacts. Nonetheless, many development aid scholars and practitioners highlight weak interpartner and contextual dynamics as predominant reasons for unsuccessful or unsustainable aid partnerships. There are currently few frameworks or tools specifically designed to foster effective partnerships in the development context. We use a novel partnership framework to identify key elements that enabled or impeded success of an educational aid case study. Assessing the partnership context, partner motivations and the quality of interpartner relations, this case study illustrates the usefulness of the framework as both a partnership management and an evaluation and learning tool. We demonstrate how this framework can help develop, manage and evaluate partnerships towards transferable learnings for more cross-beneficial, multistakeholder engagements and outcomes. Practitioners can use this framework to better understand the relationship between partnership processes and societal dynamics and develop intentional practices to build and maintain strong partnerships in international development.

1 | Introduction

Development or multistakeholder partnerships between international development agencies, national governments, private entities and public actors are increasingly common. These partnerships often aim to fund and provide access to quality education, healthcare, agriculture and economic development or other needs in socioeconomically fragile developing countries (Dentoni et al. 2018; Menashy and Dryden-Peterson 2015). Development partnerships align with Goal 17 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which demands a commitment to global and effective partnering to achieve all of the SDGs (Dulume 2019). Many challenges remain despite increasing interest in and commitment to development partnerships. Development aid scholars and practitioners

identify a number of challenges that negatively impact partnership effectiveness, including diverging partner interests, power imbalances and the absence of intergovernmental standards or frameworks (Abnett 2024; Adams and Martens 2016; McEwan et al. 2017; Menashy 2018; Rose and Greely 2006). The structural and functional quality, as well as the effectiveness of development partnerships, can determine the impact and sustainability of aid (Brunt and McCourt 2012; Kadirova 2014; Menashy 2016; Stadler 2018; van Tulder et al. 2016).

Impact-driven development partnerships—partnerships formed with the explicit goal of achieving mutual, measurable and positive outcomes that address social, environmental or economic challenges—efficiently integrate all stakeholder and beneficiary interests and roles, considering the

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multidimensional rationales, environments and relationship attributes at all stages of engagement (Bampoh et al. 2024; Sdunzik et al. 2022; Stadtler 2018). Such engagements often involve interorganizational combination, development and deployment of resources and expertise in commitment to collective partnership objectives, as well as individual partner interests in alignment with good, sustainable outcomes for beneficiaries. For example, a corporation might partner with a nonprofit organization to reduce plastic waste globally, combining resources, expertise and influence to achieve brand legitimacy and greater impact than either could alone. However to date, many scholarly reviews of development aid partnerships characterize many such engagements as failed, low-impact or unsustainable due in part to hierarchical donor-implementer dynamics (Lister 2000; McEwan et al. 2017; Menashy 2018; Menashy and Zakharia 2022)—often stemming from the overprioritization of dominant partner-imposed contractual milestones at the expense of structurally sound, impact-oriented partnership development. For example, over-reliance on donor-driven metrics can diminish partnership effectiveness as implementing partners focus on meeting donor-driven objectives that may not align with community needs (Abnett 2024; Birchler and Michaelowa 2016).

Identifying the key drivers and impediments to effective development partnerships can inform intentional partnership development and management strategies towards enhanced programme success and impact. However, recent studies focus more on the project-specific goals of aid partnerships at the expense of the dynamics of interpartner relations and contexts (Fransman and Newman 2019; Kadirova 2014). This limited evaluative scope makes it difficult to extract and transfer cross-applicable learnings across projects towards improved efficiency in partnership management and broader impacts at scale. Without a systematic and cohesive partnership framework, it is difficult to synthesize important information across a broad range of partnership impacts and project success metrics into useful sense-making constructs. This knowledge gap in partnership scholarship and practice limits interorganizational learning, institutional knowledge-sharing and best-practice transfer. Although learning opportunities from specific case studies may not be relevant across a broad range of partnerships and projects, using effective interorganizational partnership models can support generalizable development partnership research and foster more sustainable and impact-driven aid collaborations (Gisselquist et al. 2024; Kadirova 2014; Sdunzik et al. 2022).

Time-sensitive research and policy development and resource-constrained instrumentation in aid partnerships can benefit from generalizable frameworks. Evidence-based, general-purpose frameworks can be used to characterize and analyse important partnership elements across a broad range of partnership types and configurations. The resulting comprehensive tools can facilitate interorganizational learning by streamlining partner and partnership objectives with partnership structure, management and development processes. This research-and-practice-based approach enables efficient collaborative action towards cross-beneficial, multistakeholder outcomes and achievement of SDGs (Dulume 2019). To this end, a few generalized models of development aid partnerships recently emerged in state-of-the-art partnership scholarship and practice, including the

Four Effectiveness Principles (Gisselquist et al. 2024), Guiding Principles for Partnerships in Emergencies (Menashy et al. 2021) and Partnership Capacity Theory (PCT; Sdunzik et al. 2022). To analyse an educational intervention in Somalia, this study utilizes the more comprehensive PCT—which combines elements of Gisselquist and Menashy's principles with other critical partnership elements.

PCT is an evidence-based sense-making construct that holds promise as a generalized framework of effective and impact-driven development partnerships (Bampoh et al. 2024; Sdunzik et al. 2022). Sdunzik et al. (2022) harmonized structural and relational dynamics of partnerships to comprehensively address a broad set of constraints on partnership development and management across sectors. Bampoh et al. (2024) validated PCT with practitioners actively engaged in development initiatives and across business, management and social science disciplines. Synthesized from over 2000 scholarly and grey literature articles on development and cross-sector partnerships, PCT systematically characterizes and integrates motivational, contextual and relational dimensions of interorganizational collaborations. The dimensions, namely, purpose, context and relationship enablers, promote partnership functioning and potential to realize effective and sustainable partnerships. The purpose domain focuses on identifying motivations ascribed to each partner, the context domain describes the environmental setting in which partnerships take place and relationship enablers centre the dynamics between the partners. In total, the framework encapsulates 14 different purposes, 7 contextual factors and 13 relationship qualities (Sdunzik et al. 2022).

PCT posits a holistic understanding of partnership structure, function and dynamics—towards best-practices for effective collaboration and sustainable outcomes (Bampoh et al. 2024). The framework accommodates case-specific uniqueness of partnership and project development and management processes while enabling systematic documentation and translation of learnings across partnerships and projects. This situation-aware and application-agnostic lens on partnerships makes PCT an evidence-based planning, interaction and learning framework suitable for grand and development challenges.

In this paper, we illustrate the application of PCT as a partnership development tool by examining partnership dynamics in an educational development aid intervention in a postconflict zone in Somalia. Applying the PCT dimensions, we systematically map project observations and experiences onto the framework to comprehensively capture, characterize and analyse motivational, contextual and relational dimensions. This yields invaluable insights on critical success and failure factors of effective international development partnerships.

1.1 | The Case for a Generalized Partnership Framework in Educational Aid Partnerships

Low-income and developing countries often lack the capacity and resources necessary to adequately service the educational needs of vulnerable populations, particularly in postconflict societies (Berry 2010). Educational development aid therefore focuses concurrently on building and strengthening governmental

capacity with complementary resource and programmatic interventions (Rose and Consortium for Research on Educational Access 2007). Since the Paris Declaration in 2005, nonstate actors increasingly supplement governmental capacities and efforts in basic education delivery through inter-sectoral education aid partnerships (Menashy 2016; Rose and Greely 2006). However, partnership effectiveness and project success in development aid are frequently limited by lack of interpartner agreement on the terms capacity building and resource-pooling, compounded by the replication of interorganizational hierarchies reminiscent of the colonial past between global and local actors (Abnett 2024; Axelby et al. 2022; Lie 2024; Menashy and Shields 2017; Mulder 2023).

Development aid partnerships play a crucial role in providing education in conflict-affected areas, addressing the needs of millions of children deprived of learning opportunities due to crises. Organizations such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) collaborate with countries to strengthen and rebuild education systems during and after crises, ensuring that children continue their education despite disruptions (GPE 2024). The World Bank, as the largest external financier of education in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings, has an education portfolio totalling \$7 billion, reflecting the increasing importance of supporting education in these challenging environments (World Bank 2024). Additionally, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Education in Crisis and Conflict Network (ECCN) is a global learning network that works to increase equitable access to safe, inclusive, quality education for children and youth in crisis and conflict-affected environments (USAID 2024).

Despite the importance in conflict-afflicted areas, many development aid partnerships face significant structural challenges that limit long-term sustainability and impact, including fragmented coordination among stakeholders, short-term funding cycles and a lack of culturally relevant educational content tailored to displaced populations (Winthrop and Matsui 2013). Failures in adequately addressing the needs of marginalized communities, particularly girls and children with disabilities, highlight the need for a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach (UNESCO 2024b). Opportunities for improvement include increasing community engagement, fostering long-term financial commitments and leveraging technology to provide remote learning solutions in conflict zones (Dryden-Peterson 2022). These efforts are essential to bridging the gap between humanitarian assistance and long-term development, ensuring that education systems are resilient and inclusive, even in the face of adversity.

In educational aid, particularly in conflict-affected areas, a holistic partnership response is needed to address the multi-tiered educational voids of the communities, from qualified teachers and safe learning environments to educational policies, curricula development and gender equality (Bilagher and Kaushik 2020; Diwakar 2023). However, as is the case in other service delivery aid, educational aid exists in a resource-scarce environment often characterized by competition between primary delivery actors such as international and local NGOs. This competition can contribute to disjointed responses and a lack of transparency among development actors that reduces long-term

partnership impact (Bampoh et al. 2024; Fiori et al. 2016; Menashy and Zakharia 2022; Stadler 2018).

Furthermore, development aid scholarship and practitioner discourse highlight the negative impact of interpartner attrition and defunct local contexts on educational aid partnership goals and outcomes, calling for intergovernmental standards and frameworks to evaluate such endeavours (Abnett 2024; Adams and Martens 2016; Menashy 2018; Rose and Greely 2006). Adams and Martens (2016) highlight the need for an intergovernmental framework on partnerships for aid delivery—one that does not only encapsulate ‘the profound differences in [partner] orientation, interests and accountability’ but also provide an opportunity to establish a unified basis for partnership accountability, reporting, monitoring, research and policy (Adams and Martens 2016, 1). Such a framework is particularly important for partnerships in educational aid, which faces the dilemma and deep divide between humanitarian and market-driven responses (Menashy and Zakharia 2022).

Utilizing a partnership framework like PCT answers the call by organizing and streamlining a broad range of aid partnership and project development experiences and perspectives, as well as management experiences and knowledge—into a unified sense-making construct. This can ameliorate if not overcome the challenge of data scarcity for adequate decision-making in development aid delivery contexts that depend on effective multistakeholder relations in postconflict societies (Wafula and Mulongo 2020). For example, the right partnership framing has been shown to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of development aid initiatives and delivery in postconflict Afghanistan and Iraq, including curbing conflict relapse (Bilagher and Kaushik 2020; Kadirova 2014).

1.2 | The Somali Educational Context

As a postconflict and food insecure nation, Somalia has one of the lowest rates of school enrollment in the world (Burgess et al. 2023; Machova et al. 2022; UNICEF Education Cluster 2017). The continued existence of violent extremist groups like Al-Shabaab, as well as climate change impacts such as increasingly recurring floods and droughts, impede public reconstruction of institutional and sectoral capacities that enable the structural stability required for adequate education provisioning. The federal nature of the reconstructed government system makes educational provisioning a responsibility for the individual member states, limiting streamlined national efforts (Farah 2024). Nomadism and internal displacement of the population further complicate the provision and management of basic education (Wafula and Mulongo 2020). Eighty-five percent of Somali children and youths are vulnerable to these and other structural deficiencies and therefore do not have access to quality education (UNESCO 2024a).

The Somali National Development Plan for 2020–2024 targets improvements in the Somali education system to support the development of a well-educated workforce that can help cultivate resilience and move the country forward both economically and socially (Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development 2020). Improvement efforts include

developing a national curriculum, streamlining religious education and technical and vocational training (TVET) opportunities and adopting alternative educational models (Farah 2024). To support this goal, USAID/Somalia commissioned an international nonprofit organization (INGO) to implement a 5-year alternative educational programme that provided access to quality education for out-of-school children and youth in Somalia. The INGO implemented an accelerated basic education programme in four regions in the country to supplement the nascent formal education system. Over the course of the project, the INGO aspired to reach about 100 000 learners. The INGO partnered with the federal Somali government to develop an accelerated curriculum that compresses 2 years of the national curriculum into a single year. The INGO implemented this accelerated curriculum across Somalia through partnerships and subcontracts with local organizations.

2 | Methods

This case study derives from a third-party external evaluation of the INGO accelerated education implementation in Somalia. It employed a mixed-method longitudinal cohort approach to investigate learning outcomes, perceptions and experiences of students and communities over the course of 2 years in the educational programme (Mohamud et al. 2025). The geographic scope of the project covered the Benaadir region and three states, namely, Hirshabelle, Jubbaland and South-West, requiring multisite data collection. In this paper, we focus on the qualitative evaluation data, that is, semistructured interviews and focus group discussions involving community members and stakeholders. We conducted 13 focus groups with teachers and head teachers ($n=71$) as well as 130 key informant interviews with parents, teachers, head teachers, implementing partners, government officials and community members. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min, focus groups approximately 3 h. Although focus groups allowed us to capture collective experiences of beneficiaries across implementation sites, interviews enabled us to explore individual perspectives in more depth.

Given the security challenges in Somalia, non-Somali team members were unable to directly participate in on-site data collection activities. Fortunately, our in-country research partners had a robust set of experienced field staff located in target communities. Using established networks in the communities, in which the educational intervention took place, ensured that data collection efforts were culturally and linguistically aligned and facilitated rapport-building rapport among researchers and community members (Sdunzik et al. 2025). We selected interviewees to capture a range of experiences, attitudes and beliefs across all project sites with an emphasis on educational and community voices given the focus of the project. Interview subjects included community members ($n=63$), teachers ($n=11$), head teachers ($n=11$), implementing partners ($n=22$) and government officials ($n=23$).

We conducted a manual, thematic analysis of recorded and transcribed interview and focus group content in NVIVO 14. The initial data analysis involved a team of Somali, German and US researchers working together to develop a codebook that

reflected shared perspectives and Somali context-appropriate interpretations. To reduce interpretation bias and promote consistency in the coding group, multinational researchers used the codebook to independently code three randomly selected interviews. Research group members compared, discussed and aligned coding differences after coding each of the three interviews. This cyclic cocoding process facilitated group learning and resolution of interpretation differences, while supporting consistency and appropriate consideration of the Somali cultural interpretation. The research team used the resulting codebook and calibration learning to analyse all interview and focus group transcripts in line with the evaluation framework. To examine the usefulness of the PCT framework as a tool for better understanding partnership dynamics, we performed a second round of data analysis that superimposed the PCT framework on our dataset. We aimed to systematically identify, characterize and analyse key partnership management and development processes, as well as emerging issues in programme design and implementation. We deployed PCT as a sense-making framework to structure participants' perspectives about the educational programme and partnership—to bring attention to design and implementation elements that affect partnership development and management. We draw PCT-informed inferences and learnings about programme evaluation that extends to educational aid partnerships and development work and delineate emergent best practices with implications for aid implementation (Bampoh et al. 2024).

3 | Results

A Somali government official remarked that 'Every project has limitations and successes' and continued noting that the project's 'achievements outweigh its challenges. The community whose education level was low and today are improving in literacy'. Indeed, the accelerated educational aid project increased literacy in Somalia by providing education to many children and youth who would not have had the opportunity otherwise. However, interviews with key stakeholders revealed opportunities for strengthening INGO-community partnership development and management to enhance outcomes. We examine these opportunities through the PCT framework to illustrate the impacts of purpose divergence, contextual factors and relationship enablers on partnership dynamics and project effectiveness in this Somali case study.

3.1 | Purpose Differences Were Not Identified and Addressed

The Somalia accelerated education implementation project involved a variety of partners, including the donor; INGO implementer; Somali federal, state and local government officials; local subcontractors; and community members (including students, parents and teachers). Consistent with PCT, our data revealed variations in purposes across stakeholder groups in this cross-sector partnership. In all, interviewees described nine of the 14 purposes defined by the PCT framework. Table 1 lists and defines each of the PCT purposes and summarizes enactment of that purpose in our study partnership. Not surprisingly, predominant purposes varied by partner group, with, for example,

TABLE 1 | Overview of PCT purposes (derived from Sdunzik et al. 2022) and how they unfolded in the educational aid case study. Grey rows do not apply to this case study.

PCT purpose	Adjusted definition	Educational programme in Somalia
Altruism	Giving back to society without compensatory expectations	Some local subcontracted implementers were dedicated to the provision of education and donated some of their salary to advance project goals
Asymmetry	Exploiting international development ecosystem to gain position or control over resources or competitors	Large international NGO bid for contract, became main implementer of multimillion grant
Capability	Investing in skills and competencies to improve and strengthen organization	Somali government joined project to gain skills and competencies to reestablish national educational infrastructure
Capacity	Investing in people and processes to improve and strengthen the organization	Somali government received project-specific staff, and training on educational policies and processes to reestablish national educational infrastructure
Corporate Social Responsibility	Creating benefits for business and society	
Efficiency	Establishing and maintaining operational efficacy, service delivery and distribution	INGO focused on delivering on terms of the contractual agreement
Innovation	Recombining resources or developing new products, services, knowledge and processes	
Legitimacy	Enhancing public-facing organizational profile and relational or operational standing	INGO intended to establish and enhance reputation within Somalia and educational programming through prestigious large grant
Necessity	Meeting, changing, or driving policy, legal, or regulatory requirements	INGO planned to shape educational policies through co-developing ABE curriculum with Somali government
Profit	Exploiting business ecosystem for monetary and commercially driven reasons	
Reciprocity	Giving tangible assets or intangible value with requital or compensatory expectations	Somali government provided staff, meeting spaces and time expecting staff and knowledge expansion in return
Stability	Pursuing predictable and dependable opportunities with low risks	
Sustainability	Creating benefits for organization and society long-term	<i>Missed opportunity: INGO could have pursued sustainability by creating exit strategy early on</i>
Value	Pursuing opportunities for economic and social returns on investment	INGO staff used position and grant-associated prestige for career advancement

the primary purposes articulated by the Somali government officials related to systems strengthening by building capacities and capabilities, whereas INGO purposes aligned with business development interests such as asymmetry and efficiency.

Our results identified filling structural and institutional capacity and capability voids in public education provisioning as major motivations for Somalia's federal government to partner with the INGO for educational aid intervention. Interviewees described contentions when government expectations and INGO delivery were not aligned. Further, government officials noted that the INGO missed opportunities to build government capacity for a range of activities from monitoring to student registration abilities—thus weakening prospects for long-term sustainability and educational success in the country. An official mentioned that

‘the sustainability of the project if [the INGO] leaves is at risk because the ministry wasn't prepared and [didn't] built its capacity to take over this job afterwards. Education cannot be like an emergency project which will just dry up for one minute’.

Asymmetry, efficiency and legitimacy, on the other hand, appeared to be more important for the INGO, as they intended to establish themselves as a major player for educational project implementation in the region. This intent was consistent with the INGO's reputation in the educational development aid industry, as a local implementation partner reflected, ‘I can assume that the reason is the reputation of this organization in the education sector, and it is well known for its effectiveness’. This intent is also consistent with global aid hierarchies, where legitimacy work is primarily facing upwards—in an

attempt to please and persuade international donors and government agencies of being the right fit for the next funding cycle (Mulder 2023).

This case study highlights variations in purposes among two components of a particular education partnership—government officials and the programme implementer (INGO). Other partner groups described still other motivations, including a strong desire to support or give back to the local community (altruism) as described by community partners. Such differences in purposes are common in multistakeholder partnerships (Bampoh et al. 2024; Harrison 2002; MacDonald and Chrisp 2005). Identifying partner motivations or purposes will allow the intentional development of partnership strategies that support all partner needs and expectations, thus enhancing success and satisfaction.

3.2 | Limited Contextual Understanding Impacted Partnership Implementation

Development partnerships routinely work in fragile and complex environments. Deep understanding of contextual factors is critical to successful project implementation and outcome optimization. The PCT framework describes seven context themes that encompass both external factors (e.g., community and culture, economy and market, environment and infrastructure, and government and regulations), as well as internal factors related to organizational culture and identity. Table 2 lists and describes seven categories of context factors and summarizes the impacts and limitations of those factors on partnerships relative to this case study.

‘This is a very fragile, rapidly changing operation context’, noted an implementing partner who went on to catalogue a series of contextual factors affecting successful programme implementation, including, ‘the recent government moves of military operations, drought significantly changed the context of implementation in the country, families’ movements, IDP [internally displaced people] camps and so families’ contributions, communities’ engagement’. All implementers we interviewed expressed that, in Somalia, ‘things are changing on a daily basis’ and that Somalia presents a challenging environment to implement educational programming. This is especially true when implementation sites span multiple locations, each with distinct risks to programme sustainability and success associated with regional and local uncertainties coupled with differences in community and cultural characteristics. Our case study spans urban and rural environments as well as IDP camps, with each location facing different hurdles: Although violent attacks and explosions were more common in the urban areas, droughts and floodings impacted successful project implementation in rural areas.

Given the complexity of multisite implementation, the INGO in our case study struggled to contend with the contextual diversity that Somalia presented. It became clear that a standard or one size fits all approach is ineffective. Although multiple communities had similar challenges (e.g., school closures, teacher and student absences), the contributing factors varied across locations. For example, an implementing partner commented that

school closures and delays resulted from environment and infrastructure contexts (e.g., floods and road closure) in one community but community and culture contexts (e.g., clan conflicts) in a different community.

As a postconflict society still in the process of rebuilding the nation, community beneficiaries, stakeholders and development implementers face political instability, clan clashes, and rudimentary infrastructure and school sites. In this project, government partners sought safe transportation to education programme sites for monitors given inadequate infrastructure and the threat of terror posed by militant groups like Al-Shabaab, which they were ill-equipped to defend against. Teachers and students alike sought transportation to educational programme sites given the distance to school and road blockages in some communities. The contextual particularities remained unaddressed in partnership design and throughout project implementation, contributing to dissatisfaction among stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Another implementing partner contrasted two districts struggling with retention. Although one district experienced a high degree of teacher absenteeism due to inadequate teacher remuneration, schools in the other district were plagued by school evictions. This informant expressed confidence in the project’s ability to resolve underlying causes of teacher absenteeism but was less sanguine about managing evictions that often resulted when land occupied by an IDP camp and project school was reclaimed by its owner, ‘if the owner of that land comes in and tells them to vacate that place, the school must be vacated basically’. Including local partners at the design stage, when project sites are determined, could reveal these nuanced cultural and communal factors and inform decision-making and contingency planning that aligns with complex Somali landownership dynamics.

The INGO with overall responsibility for educational aid programme implementation described in this case study worked with subcontractors possessing varying levels of prior community engagement and little input into project design or decision-making. The INGO’s lack of first-hand contextual knowledge was described by a local partner who noted, ‘one of the primary issues was a lack of understanding the contextual knowledge of Somalia among the non-Somali individuals involved in [their] team’. This resulted in the INGO setting decontextualized objectives and rigid implementation agendas, as the local partner extrapolated, ‘They were solely focusing on contractual obligations, which led to some sensitive contexts being overlooked. This misunderstanding caused delays in project implementation, lasting almost a year’. Unrealistic expectations by not acknowledging the complex contextual dynamics are a common point of contention in development aid, in which project implementation is led by external partners (Menashy et al. 2021).

Moreover, rigid top-down approaches fail to capitalize on local partners’ rich contextual knowledge to aid project success. For example, key informants described the impacts of context-specific challenges on student and teacher retention, ranging from drought- and violence-induced migrations to poverty-driven support of the family. In the highly mobile Somali population,

TABLE 2 | Overview of PCT context factors (derived from Sdunzik et al. 2022) and how they mattered in the educational aid case study.

PCT context	Definition	Educational programme in Somalia
Business climate	Resourcefulness and reliability of enterprise, industrial and sectoral ecosystems	Dire state of the country overall results in presence of many development actors
Community and culture	Demographic, socioeconomic and customary attributes of the local population	Nomadic and pastoralist society with a high level of ethnic and clan diversity; clan clashes at times; <i>missed opportunity: to work closely with local communities for buy-in and sustainability</i>
Economy and market	Organizational aspects of the production and consumption of products and services	Rudimentary—because of three decades of civil wars; poverty results in child labour to support family, which results in higher rates of absenteeism and dropouts; <i>missed opportunity: to compensate for lost income due to child attending school</i>
Environment and infrastructure	State of the natural and built geophysical conditions	Rudimentary—recurrent droughts, floods caused famine and reduced accessibility to intervention sites; long distance between schools and communities and intervention sites and stakeholders required transportation provision; most school infrastructure dilapidated and in need of renovation
Government and regulation	Municipal and national laws, governance and political practices in the partnership environment	State-federal government tensions; federal government used project to strengthen educational infrastructure and policies; INGO exclusively focused on close collaboration with federal government; <i>missed opportunity: to work with local/regional governments</i>
Organizational culture and identity	Practices, values, rules by which individuals reflect the institutional logic of an organization	Hierarchical structure requiring strong and dedicated leadership hindered effective and efficient project implementation
Risks and resources	Situational exposure to sensitivities that adversely impact activities and means to compensate	Violent extremists and clan clashes caused temporary road and school closure interrupting material deliveries and student learning; <i>missed opportunity: thorough risk assessment prior to project implementation</i>

relocations range from a few days or weeks to months or years, depending on the impetus. Lack of understanding of these local and regional nuances and/or lack of flexibility in implementation policy can lead to devastating programme implementation decisions. Key informants interviewed for this Somali case study noted that the INGO closed project schools when the number of students in a classroom dropped below a predetermined threshold, without regard for local contextual factors, such as a short-term flooding event or regional violence that limited attendance. The resulting school closures and threats of closures eroded community trust, as expressed by a subcontracted local partner, ‘we told them the negative backfire this act could introduce. Communities and parents were suffering to educate their children’.

Another local partner’s comment when reflecting on the INGO’s unfamiliarity with the local context further illustrates the importance of contextual understanding and programme flexibility, ‘we also wonder if [they] would have known about the challenges and situations we have down here, they might not be as demanding’. These observations underscore the critical need for both deep local contextual knowledge and programme flexibility to develop and administer situation-specific effective aid programmes. Establishing an on-site INGO team dedicated to proactively engaging with and comprehensively assessing Somali communities and establishing more balanced relationships with local contacts who can supply situation-specific contextual knowledge will enable aid delivery that better meets the needs of service communities.

3.3 | Relationship Enablers Can Enhance Partnership

The educational intervention examined in this case study involved cross-sector partnerships with a variety of stakeholders. Maximizing project outcomes requires intentional attention to building and maintaining relationships among all partner groups. The PCT framework identifies and describes 13 relationship enablers that support positive partnerships. Key informants in this study described 12 of the 13 as either contributing to or inhibiting this educational partnership—as described in Table 3.

Key informants representing a variety of stakeholders identified several opportunities for improving partner relationships. For example, one partner lamented the lack of accountability, ‘You know, there is no accountability system. That’s why, you know, whatever you tell the partners, they don’t do that. They would just listen to you and that’s it. And next time, the same thing happens again. So, there were a lot of issues in terms of transparency and accountability, but accountability mechanisms were never brought in’. Another partner noted a lack of clarity in assignment of roles and responsibilities, ‘So, at the beginning it was very confusing what they have to do, what is our role, you know’. Although some other stakeholders noted opportunities to improve managerial efforts, ‘the current project appears to be lacking in clarity and organization and could be described as being in a state of disarray’.

Partners and stakeholders also perceived a lack of trust as one of the primary obstacles to effective programme implementation, as articulated by one local implementation partner, ‘We do our job very well, but we don’t know what caused this double staffing. Although our collaboration isn’t bad now, sometimes we ask ourselves if we are trusted by our partner or not’. One teacher noted, ‘they [the INGO] don’t trust the school and the teachers. They only implement their method’. Yet trust is frequently linked to equitable partner relationships and identified as essential for successful project implementation (Menashy et al. 2021).

The perception of lack of trust and other partnership enhancing strategies negatively impacted communications and resulted in duplicate efforts, community misgivings, school withdrawals from the programme and low morale. Another teacher mentioned that ‘[The INGO] is weak in terms of communication. They don’t answer our needs and priorities, but they [are] good at sending inspection. They come and register every absent teacher by taking photos without considering that the teacher can be sick or taking care of sick parent. They don’t respect that we have a principal, an administration, and we take leave’. The choice of the word ‘inspection’ by the teacher illustrates the perception of being audited by a bureaucratic agency rather than being part of a mutually beneficial partnership. The perceived lack of respect, as expressed by the teacher, further manifests the impression of an unequal relationship. The reflections suggest an upward accountability from project beneficiaries to the INGO, common for development aid partnerships (Abnett 2024).

Stakeholders further exemplified their impressions of power inequalities in their partnership. They frequently used terms like ‘inspection’ and ‘supervision’ in describing their perception of

their relationship to the INGO, as the above quotes illustrate. Frequently, local partners bundled these hierarchical impressions with the feeling of not being heard, as this teacher comment illustrates, ‘Lately, they only send us inspectors and supervision. We tell them all our needs and we don’t see any changes’. The remark also demonstrates a perceived lack of flexibility and value, as the INGO failed to incorporate any of their partner feedback regarding ways to improve programme experiences for community members. Yet allowing for flexibility in project implementation, especially in conflict-affected areas like Somalia, is proven to increase partnership success (Menashy et al. 2021).

The impacts of inadequate attention to relationship enablers—like trust building, communication, and flexibility and compromise—are further illustrated by partner comments related to disconnects between programme policies and implementation realities. For example, although the INGO promised communities implementation flexibility to meet local needs, inspection and compliance policies did not take this flexibility into account when making management decisions. A government official described the challenge in this way, ‘[The INGO] suspended 12 schools and the schools mainly complain about the payment delay. [The INGO] doesn’t inform us when assessing and also the result of the assessment. It is impractical to shut down a school for non-operational as they visited the school in [non-program] shift; It is only four hours that [program] students are in school. That miscommunication where [the INGO] isn’t even informing the district education officer is weakening the relationship’.

Discussions with stakeholders representing different partner groups revealed differences in perceptions of the partnership success relative to some relationship enablers. For example, INGO staff frequently emphasized close collaboration with the Somali government partners, noting that they shared authority and decision-making powers in developing educational policies and implementing the programme (such as monitoring or distributing materials). However, some government officials disagreed, with one official stating that ‘The implementor hasn’t engaged us in the initial phases. And we didn’t add much input’. Similarly, although the INGO underscored mutuality and partnership enhancing strategies by building capacity within the ministry of education, government officials noted not having received any training. Further, a local official complained that ‘there was no monitoring support or joint monitoring given to the ministry. [...] Also, the CEC [Community Education Committees] and teachers were trained, and the ministry staff haven’t got adequate capacity building training’.

Contractual agreements often foster a donor-implementer structure, which establishes a hierarchical rather than a mutually beneficial partnership. The INGO appeared to have replicated this structure in their relationships with local implementing partners. Observations like this one from a local implementation partner, ‘There is too much paperwork and constant supervision’, echo more of an auditing culture than a culture that produces sustainable, cross-beneficial multistakeholder outcomes that truly serve the needs of target beneficiaries in alignment with educational aid partnership and project intervention objectives. Using PCT, we illustrate the effect of hierarchical project structures in producing a disequilibrium among the partners in our case study, in which community stakeholders expressed an

TABLE 3 | Overview of PCT relationship enablers (derived from Sdunzik et al. 2022) and how they mattered in the educational aid case study. Grey rows do not apply to this case study.

PCT theme	Definition	Educational programme in Somalia
Accountability	Assurance of common partnership goal(s) pursuit despite potentially diverging individual interests	No mechanisms in place that required accountability from any of the parties involved, including on expenditures; enforced through constant reporting demands and supervision of local stakeholders
Commitment	Investment of time and resources as well as willingness of partners to engage	Rudimentary—INGO implemented from the distance instead of seeking local partnership and leadership was not committed to project
Communication	Conveyance of knowledge and information in an open, regular, effective and accurate manner	Despite regular check-in meetings, many communication issues between different parties
Flexibility & Compromise	Willingness and degree to stray from original plans to accommodate emerging needs and trends	Unwillingness by INGO to adjust times to meet community needs resulted in misunderstandings and school closures
Managerial Efforts	Alignment and coordination of partnering activities, processes, and systems to achieve desired outcomes	Misaligned by INGO despite being largest budgetary item—e.g., expecting completion of processes and procedures before releasing teacher stipends disregards contextual and partner circumstances
Mutual Benefit	Gains for all partners, e.g., knowledge, resources, and skills for shared benefits	Uneven—some local partners benefited from capacity building efforts by INGO
Performance Enhancing Strategies	Procedural and processual mechanisms to support partner engagement and activities	INGO organized pause and reflect meetings approximately twice a year that did not include all stakeholders; inaction on gathered feedback worsened relationship
Positionality	Structural and systemic imbalance between partners due to power, status and/or influence	Hierarchical big-brother relationship common in international development (aid chain): donor > main implementing INGO > local partners
Risk allocation	Assigning of risks to the party most capable of shouldering it	
Roles and Responsibilities	Identification and allocation of tasks and duties within a partnership to ensure functioning	Not clearly identified—resulting in absence or duplication of efforts
Shared authority and decision-making	Willingness and degree to enable or exhibit shared and integrative leadership and representation	Uneven—shared with federal government for curriculum development but efforts not extended to other implementing partners on the ground or beneficiaries
Transparency	Willingness and degree of open and honest disclosure of intentions, process, and progress	Not provided—even after partners requested information on procedures, progress and intermediate outcomes; budgetary allocation and spendings remained nebulous as did hiring decisions

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

PCT theme	Definition	Educational programme in Somalia
Trust	Assurance of obligation to expectations and insurance against corresponding shortcomings	Not established—stakeholders perceived lack of trust from INGO <i>Missed opportunity: INGO could have avoided duplication efforts and micromanagement</i>

uneasy feeling of ‘inspection’ and ‘constant supervision’ instead of trust. Though more the norm than the exception for development partnerships, this power imbalance not only prevented open, regular and honest communication among partners and stakeholders but also precluded transparent and trustworthy behaviour—all crucial attributes of a functional partnership. Despite claims of collaboration, the INGO displayed anticohesive partnership behaviour, disconnecting and distancing from local communities and partners on the ground.

4 | Discussion

This case study used PCT as a sense-making lens into critical success and failure factors of the partnership dynamics in a multisakeholder educational aid intervention in postconflict Somalia. In view of the challenging contextual circumstances of a postconflict society, the partnership—anchored by the INGO—needed to build strong, productive relationships with Somali government institutions, communities and donors, as well as pursue partnerships with local nonstate actors to maximize and sustain good outcomes and impacts of the educational intervention. Well-designed and intentional partnerships create an environment that fosters trust, shared responsibility and decision-making power, as well as open and transparent communication channels (Sdunzik et al. 2022). Participation of all stakeholders, including beneficiaries, is integral to impact-driven partnerships, particularly in postconflict environments (Menashy et al. 2021). Pursuing contract obligations without adequately considering the partner motivations, the local context and the quality of the interpartner relations compromises long-term sustainability of good project outcomes and added-value creation. This case study illustrates the utility of the PCT framework to identify opportunities to optimize partnership development and management for enhancing project outcomes.

In particular, this PCT-based characterization of the educational intervention partnership revealed unexplored and unreconciled differences in partner motivations, as well as significant gaps in the partnership approach to characterizing, understanding and integrating community and cultural contexts in partnership development and management processes. Partnership setup in our case study reflected the hierarchical nature of development aid, with the INGO, an external actor, in charge of the project design and on-the-ground partner, local actors responsible for implementation—but with little opportunity for inputs into design (Lie 2024; Menashy and Shields 2017; Mulder 2023).

Project design and implementation indicated that the INGO did not fully understand the contextual environment or effectively utilize local partners. Although engagement with local

subcontractors and stakeholders with greater contextual knowledge could be an effective strategy for ameliorating this gap, hierarchical barriers, communication challenges and lack of trust undermined partner relationships and rapport. This resulted in tangible confusion about partnership and project operations and inhibited efficient partnership function and operation.

Moreover, ineffective partnership dynamics led to operational inefficiencies such as duplicate monitoring efforts, ineffective incentive structures (e.g., harsher truancy policies due to context ignorance) and programmatic delays (e.g., late salary payments). Indeed, some segments of beneficiary communities withdrew from collaboration in frustration at the misalignment in partner goals concerning context management. For example, when an existing school realized that the accelerated basic education provider hoping to use their facilities declined to contribute towards increased operational costs (e.g., school maintenance and upkeep), the established school management discontinued the collaboration with project partners. Understanding all parallel and divergent stakeholder purposes to partner in view of contextual variability could have enabled the INGO to reconcile divergent partner motivations. Our analysis, however, showed that the INGO prioritized efficiency over true, localized collaboration given the competitive marketized environment of educational aid. A more careful assessment of multistakeholder interests would have empowered the INGO to deploy and employ more informed partnership practices that enable effective collaboration and more adequately address local and regional contextual differences to support effective interpartner relations (Menashy and Zakharia 2022; Sdunzik et al. 2022). Utilizing a generalized partnership framework like PCT will not necessarily prevent occurrences of operational inefficiencies or divergent purposes. However, the systematic structure of the construct provides a tool for identifying and anticipating them and therefore mitigating their influence as sources of confusion and dissatisfaction among stakeholders.

Systematic community-driven approaches to education, even in suboptimal contexts like postconflict environments, prominently feature partnership accountability and project sustainability as central tenets (Berry 2010; Cancedda et al. 2014; Menashy et al. 2021; Mulder 2023). Mapping the PCT framework onto this case study revealed that identifying and giving collective attention to disparate partner purposes, community context and relationship needs is essential. In this project, government partners sought safe transportation to education programme sites given inadequate infrastructure and safety concerns. Similarly, community partners sought family livelihood support that alleviated the demand on youth to participate in providing for their families given suboptimal socioeconomic conditions. The INGO in this case study could have addressed these needs

by designing a collaborative workplan that accommodates the governmental desire for extending their capacity to ensure the security of monitoring personnel, as well as adapting to and integrating emerging community needs in terms of family support and sponsorship (Petrunev et al. 2014). This opportunity was likely missed due to limited community-level representation in partnership development processes such as the formation and planning.

Effective educational aid partnership programmes should therefore intentionally and authentically engage and involve local communities at all stages of partnership development and management processes—including planning and formation, and monitoring and evaluation—to foster community ownership and build programme visibility. Community engagement should include as broad a range of community groups and segments as possible—religious leaders, parents, teachers, students, employers and where possible members of the international diaspora—to facilitate programme adoption and sustainability. Although this recommendation aligns with recent scholarly and practitioner calls for localizing aid (Barakat and Milton 2020; Fiori et al. 2016; Menashy and Zakharia 2022), this case study highlights the continued struggle to meaningfully develop development partnerships that effectively engage with communities in ways that minimize power asymmetries among local and external partners. Community involvement can take various forms but should offer regular and substantive opportunities for two-way sharing, discourse and feedback for successful integration of programme imperatives (Clarke and Fuller 2010). Although greater community participation does not automatically counter the power disequilibrium between partners (Mulder 2023), prioritizing equitable multistakeholder ownership would significantly augment partnership capacity and performance in delivering sustainable, impactful educational aid.

Project and programme complexities demanded significant administrative planning, design, oversight and budgetary allocations from project leadership. These imperatives were forefront in partnership contractual agreements and INGO programme requirements—often at the expense of beneficiary-oriented capacity building with little to no allocations for supporting long-term community ownership. This top-down, unidirectional approach resulted in rigid adherence to programme requirements with limited regard for community interest and feedback given conflict-sensitive dynamics on the ground (Abnett 2024; Dhanani and Kennedy 2023). Although strong aid project leadership can counterbalance the processional rigidity of audit culture typical of donor–implementer relationships in international development (Axelby et al. 2022; Crewe and Mowles 2021), establishing strong partnership enhancing strategies like reciprocal accountability and management has been shown to be more effective (Bampoh et al. 2024; Dulume 2019).

PCT provides a framework for documenting crucial partnership elements and project progress in a consistent and neutral manner. In this project, the federal government of Somalia was a key stakeholder, laying the foundation for successful partnership implementation and project sustainability. The INGO's close working relationship with the federal government of Somalia to develop the accelerated education curriculum was a critical success factor (Kadirova 2014). A philosophical shift towards

enhanced community-based and state-level government capacity building can enable sustained progress beyond project duration (Rose and Consortium for Research on Educational Access 2007). This more egalitarian approach to partnership design will also counteract power disequilibrium among partners and overcome the hierarchical aid chain that is typical of international aid partnerships (Abnett 2024; Axelby et al. 2022).

Although it is generally not possible to change the geopolitical environment in which the partnership takes place, trust and organizational commitment can still foster successful partnerships in difficult environments (Dulume 2019). For example, our participants highlighted communication and trust as major obstacles to effective partnership and project implementation. Trust is the foundation on which a successful partnership is built (Abramov 2009; Ezezika et al. 2012). Trust allows partners to rely on each other, communicate openly and work together towards a common goal. It engenders flexibility and allows for constructive criticism among partners (Menashy et al. 2021). PCT provides fundamental relationship enablers that, when prioritized and systematically integrated into the partnership development and management processes, make the behavioural, interpersonal and interorganizational dimensions of collaboration more universal and actionable. The inability of project leadership to foster strong interpartner relations was a limiting factor for partnership success (Kadirova 2014).

In our case study, the structure of contractual agreements hampered flexibility and agility in responding to community and stakeholder needs. Nonetheless, programme implementers missed opportunities to listen and communicate openly and honestly with their host communities as a way to build trust and foster the reciprocity and mutual respect necessary for partnership and programme effectiveness in unique local contexts. Intentionally nurturing such communication and trust will help balance partnership and programme objectives with community interests. PCT can help make sense of and therefore ameliorate negative impacts of such structural elements of donor–implementer relationships by shifting partnership focus towards positive community stakeholder benefits and beneficiary outcomes (Bampoh et al. 2024; Sdunzik et al. 2021). Finally, the PCT lens into aid partnerships provides a constant and systematic reminder of critical success and failure factors—which in a fast-paced and competitive environment like international development is key to successful outcomes and sustained impact. Moreover, applying the PCT framework across project partners and community contexts within a large and complex project can provide nuanced guidance to inform targeted relationship-enabling practices necessary for local and regional success.

Our findings can be contextualized within the broader Somali landscape, where prolonged conflict, political instability and severe food insecurity have profoundly influenced partnership dynamics and outcomes. As a postconflict society, Somalia presents unique challenges such as weak governance structures, fragile social cohesion and a high dependency on humanitarian aid, all of which complicate the effective implementation of educational interventions (Diwakar 2023; Menkhaus 2018). The intersection of food insecurity and conflict has created an environment where short-term survival imperatives often take precedence over long-term educational goals, resulting

in fluctuating stakeholder engagement and difficulties in sustaining programme impact (Maxwell and Nisar 2016). The hierarchical nature of aid delivery, with INGOs often assuming dominant roles in project planning and resource allocation, has further exacerbated these challenges by marginalizing local actors and overlooking critical contextual nuances such as clan dynamics and informal governance structures (Nyadera and Ahmed 2020). These contextual realities underscore the importance of fostering adaptive, trust-based partnerships that prioritize local engagement and flexibility to respond to evolving community needs. Transferable lessons from this case study include the necessity of embedding resilience-building measures within partnerships, ensuring participatory governance models and integrating livelihood support initiatives alongside educational programmes to enhance community buy-in and programme sustainability (Barakat and Milton 2020; Dryden-Peterson 2022; Menashy and Zakharia 2022; Mulder 2023). Similar postconflict and food-insecure settings can benefit from a more nuanced approach that values local knowledge systems and community agency while balancing donor-driven accountability requirements with grassroots realities.

5 | Conclusion

This study examines an educational aid intervention partnership in Somalia using the PCT framework for effective partnering, revealing significant differences in interpartner and partnership objectives against contextual gaps and underdeveloped relationship dynamics. Combined, these factors limited project outcomes and compromised prospects for programme sustainability by stifling shared programme ownership among implementing and community partners. The PCT framework facilitated a comprehensive but nuanced understanding of the requirements of a holistic partnership approach in international development—one that honours the needs and values of multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries in project creation and implementation.

We showed that understanding and accommodating the interaction between the three major domains of the PCT framework in partnership and project development, management and assessment—purpose, context and relationship enablers—not only enables identification and evaluation of key levers and barriers as critical success and failure factors in educational development partnerships but also facilitates documenting learning opportunities in a way that is transferable and translatable across partnerships—which is also crucial for achieving the SDGs by 2030. Taken as a whole, the PCT framework is a useful tool for planning, implementing, managing and evaluating effective international development partnerships—especially in complex and changing environments where infrastructure and resources are limited. By intentionally examining diverse partner motivations, development aid programmes can design and nurture partnership structures that effectively utilize the full range of partner knowledge, abilities and resources, while meeting diverse partner needs. Likewise, PCT is an effective lens for ongoing analysis of contextual factors that may vary temporally and geographically—an especially important consideration in the often-volatile contexts common to international development programming. Finally, the PCT framework highlights important

relationship enablers that undergird effective relationships of all types. Embedding PCT constructs as a framework for international development partnership development and management can increase success, sustainability and satisfaction across all partners.

Ethics Statement

The Purdue University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study as Exempt, Category 1 (IRB-2021-1516). It was also reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Somali Research and Development Institute's (SORDI) Review Board and by the Somali Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education. Long-term disruption in Somalia's educational systems has resulted in low literacy levels among much of the population. To mitigate these challenges, this research included research partners from Somalia who are intimately familiar with the country, the culture and the contextual factors that can impact the study. All data were collected using trained local enumerators who administered questionnaires verbally and recorded responses electronically. SORDI researchers translated all data collection instruments into the appropriate dialect for each population and also translated informed consent documents for use in data collection. Informed consent documents were read to subjects prior to data collection to ensure comprehension and allow for questions and discussion; consent for all participants was requested and granted verbally. SORDI researchers conducted all data collection and replaced all participant names with a numerical identifier prior to sharing data files with US colleagues under a data sharing agreement to anonymize subject identities and preserve confidentiality.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings will be available in Somalia Education Evaluation at <https://purr.purdue.edu/projects/somaliaed> following an embargo from the date of publication to allow for commercialization of research findings.

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