



**Reciprocal Partnership Models:  
Equality and Effectiveness in Global  
Solidarity**



**A Wales-Africa partnership research report  
for Dolen Cymru Lesotho  
by Elaine Christian**



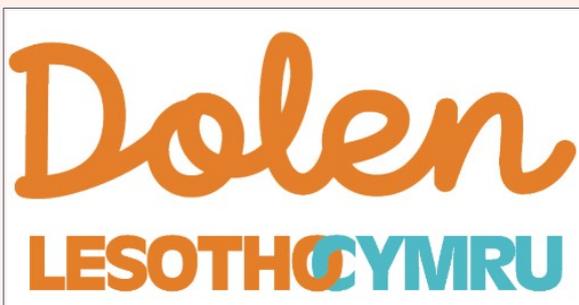
## Acknowledgements

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The executive summary was translated into Sesotho by Sebopelo Mofoko, and into Welsh by Ceri Hughes.

## About Dolen Cymru Lesotho



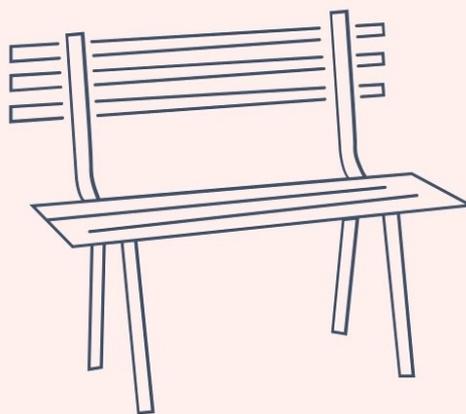
Dolen connects two small countries at opposite ends of our world – Wales and Lesotho. They bring people together from both countries who want to make lasting positive change in their communities. Whether it is with health workers, teachers, communities: They bring knowledge, learning and ideas together which is shared and spread across communities in Lesotho and in Wales.

[dolencymru.org](http://dolencymru.org)

## About the author

Dr Elaine Christian is a social anthropologist, qualitative researcher, and partnership facilitator. Her work promotes hopeful acts of friendship and build bridges of understanding. She is an expert in international partnerships between humanitarian organisations, providing end-to-end social research and evaluation programmes to support strong, equitable, and sustainable relationships.

[elainechristian.com](http://elainechristian.com) | [LinkedIn](#)



## Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	4
1.1. Context.....	4
1.2. Research and Findings.....	4
1.3. Implications & Recommendations.....	5
2. Introduction.....	5
2.1. Notes on report style.....	6
3. Methodology.....	7
3.1. Purpose of project.....	7
3.2. Overview of research design & methodology.....	7
3.3. Data collection.....	8
3.4. Analysis.....	8
4. Commonalities.....	9
4.1. Reciprocity & Bilaterality.....	9
4.2. Organisational embeddedness.....	11
4.3. Friendship & Commitment.....	11
4.4. Regular evaluation.....	12
5. Education.....	12
5.1. Developing friendships and relationships.....	12
5.2. Embedding the relationship within the school's organisational identity.....	13
5.3. Effectiveness in working together.....	13
5.4. Promoting cultural learning & heritage.....	14
5.5. Personal and professional development.....	15
5.6. Summary.....	16
6. Health.....	17
6.1. Legal & practical barriers.....	17
6.2. Lack of organisational embeddedness.....	18
6.3. Funding requirements.....	19
6.4. Healthcare culture and expectation management.....	21
6.5. Difficulty coordinating in Lesotho.....	23
7. Other partnerships.....	24
7.1. Faith partnerships.....	24
7.2. Partnerships in sport.....	25
8. Partnership ambiguities.....	26
8.1. "Dolen model" ambiguities.....	26
8.2. Nature of Dolen partnerships.....	28
9. Implications for Wider Wales-Africa Community.....	28
9.1. Presentation at Global Solidarity Summit.....	28
9.2. Summary and implications.....	29
10. Limitations.....	30
11. Summary.....	30

# I. Executive Summary

[Kakaretso ena e fumaneha ka Sesotho.](#)

[Mae'r crynodeb hwn ar gael yn Gymraeg.](#)

## 1.1. Context

Dolen Cymru Lesotho is a network of links between Wales and Lesotho, with partner organisations including schools, health boards, sports clubs, community advocacy organisations, and faith groups. Partnerships between Wales and Lesotho are encouraged and supported to build long-term relationships based on friendships, using a balanced and reciprocal model of partnership. In addition, Dolen has signed up to Hub Cymru Africa's Anti-Racism Charter and is working towards those goals.

In 2024, Dolen commissioned a research project to investigate the role of their partnership model in building more equal and effective partnership working. This research addressed the following questions:

1. Does the "Dolen model" contribute to effective and equal partnership working, compared to other models? If so, how? and can these contributing factors be built on further?
2. What implications from (1) are there for Dolen, volunteers, and partners (e.g. in terms of organisational structure, approaches to partnership working, or link activities)?
3. What potential implications from (1) are there for the wider Wales Africa community?
4. For both Dolen and the wider Wales Africa community: through the lens of Solidarity and the intentions of the Wales Africa Anti-Racism Charter, what lessons can be learned from investigating the effectiveness of partnership working, both Dolen's model and other similar models identified in literature? What can be avoided, replicated, or adapted in order to contribute to increased Global Solidarity and the role of Wales as an outward looking nation?

## 1.2. Research and Findings

Research was conducted by Dr Elaine Christian, with link participants from the education, health, sport, and faith sectors; including volunteers, partner organisation staff, funders, and Dolen board members and staff.

Four characteristics emerged which were shared between partnerships with higher degrees of balance and equal involvement, or with a greater self-reported sense of equality and effectiveness. These are:

1. Reciprocity and bilaterality: A sense of balance in travel, programming and roles. Roughly equal numbers of visitors travel in each direction, similar activities are occurring in each place, and there is a shared sense between partners that they have a similar contribution to the relationship.
2. Organisational embeddedness: The relationship becomes part of the organisation's identity, with executive levels supporting the partnership and policies in place to support participation.

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3. Friendship and commitment: Recognition that the relationship itself is of value, worthy of investment of both time and finances.
  4. Regular evaluation: Partners make a priority of examining and evaluating the health of the relationship—including efforts towards equality—at regular intervals.

Research shows clearly that these characteristics are tightly interlinked and support each other; I refer to them as the “Four Strands” throughout the report as a way to understand and interpret research findings. Strengthening one strand positively affects the others, and conversely, if one is lacking, then adverse affects are seen in the others.

Overall, research indicates that:

- The “Dolen model” does contribute to equal and effective partnership working. Partnerships with greater reciprocity are more likely to characterise their relationships as equal and effective.
- Greater reciprocity and bilaterality were also associated with personal and professional development, cultural learning, overcoming challenges, and increasing awareness.
- The “Dolen model” can be applied inconsistently: some organisations may have greater equality in travel but less so in programming or partner roles, or vice versa.
- A few partnerships resemble more strongly the “donor-recipient” model, although these organisations tend to take a more collaborative and partner-led approach. Partners in Lesotho consistently report that they appreciate working with Dolen-affiliated organisations for this reason.
- Welsh partners have, in a few cases, been able to contribute to greater equality and effectiveness by challenging assumptions or practices of funders, e.g. around reporting requirements.

### 1.3. Implications & Recommendations

- Partner organisations require continued support in strengthening each of the “four strands” identified. This could include developing guides for best practice, hands-on resources, training, etc.
- Relationships between thematically-linked partners (i.e. organisations with a similar social remit) can be highly effective, and a way to increase participation in global solidarity. New partners can be identified, and existing partners encouraged to develop their work in this area.
- Partner organisations can be encouraged and supported with practical ways to influence the funding landscape to re-orient itself towards longer-term and friendship-based approaches.

## 2. Introduction

For the past 40 years, Dolen Cymru Lesotho has been bringing together people from Wales and Lesotho in order to make positive changes in their communities. From the beginning, Dolen has approached international partnerships from a viewpoint that friendship and understanding would build involvement,



and involvement would build collaboration between individuals, communities, and organisations, leading to common action in a particular sphere.

Dolen has been moving towards a balanced and reciprocal model of partnership based on equal involvement: all link partners join together in friendship based on common work in promoting civic action and solidarity. Each partner is as involved in promoting equality and advancing progress in health, education, etc. in their own locality as in their partner's. Dolen understands this model to be in contrast to the partnership models frequently found in other international NGOs, particularly the "funding-implementing" partnership model, where one partner funds and directs projects that are implemented exclusively by the other partner, without any parallel action taking place in the funder's location. and in 2024, Dolen commissioned a research project to investigate whether this model contributes to more effective and equal partnership working.

In addition, Dolen Cymru Lesotho has signed up to [Hub Cymru Africa's Anti-Racism Charter](#). In particular, they have committed to working on Charter Points 3, 4, 8, 9, and 11. This research specifically addresses Charter Points 3 and 4, and—although it is not yet an area of focus—Charter Point 5 significantly informed how the research was conducted.

3. We will work in a manner which recognises and prioritises in-country expertise and knowledge to lead our work and support this with an equitable pay structure.
4. We will commit to taking ownership of developing our own deeper understanding of the issues of racism and how they impact our thinking.
5. We are an organisation that welcomes critical feedback, with a view to learning and improving our work. We will act without defensiveness or negative repercussions for those highlighting racist or colonial practices and create accountability mechanisms within our work.

This report will summarise the findings of that research, and develop some lessons going forward. In Section 3 I outline the methodological approach to research; in section 4 I identify common themes between partnerships; and in sections 5 through 7 I discuss partnerships in different thematic areas. Section 8 will the ambiguities of Dolen's partnership model, and Section 9 will identify some implications for the wider Wales Africa community before concluding in section 11, with a basis for further partnership work going forward.

## 2.1. Notes on report style

In this report, I have departed from a tendency in many research settings of writing in a detached third-person style. My purpose in doing so is to acknowledge that my research, like any other research, is a product of a specific person's history, education, and view of how knowledge and understanding are built; and not an objectively neutral (and therefore supposedly authoritative) account of bare facts.

### 3. Methodology

This research project draws on the history of Dolen's links in health and education, and aims to improve their understanding of the efficacy of their partnership work, and specifically the friendship-based model of partnership in use.

#### 3.1. Purpose of project

The purpose of the Wales-Africa Partnership Research project is to improve Dolen Cymru Lesotho's understanding of the efficacy of their partnership work, and specifically of the "balanced involvement" model of partnership in use.

Objectives:

1. Understand the ways in which Dolen's partnership model affects the work being done by link members
2. Identify strengths and build on these further
3. Identify weaknesses or areas for improvement, and make necessary changes
4. Contribute to a broader understanding within the larger Wales-Africa community of the role of partnership work in promoting global solidarity

#### 3.2. Overview of research design & methodology

The principal questions guiding this investigation, developed in collaboration with the Dolen co-directors, were:

5. Does the "Dolen model" contribute to effective and equal partnership working, compared to other models? If so, how? and can these contributing factors be built on further?
6. What implications from (1) are there for Dolen, volunteers, and partners (e.g. in terms of organisational structure, approaches to partnership working, or link activities)?
7. What potential implications from (1) are there for the wider Wales Africa community?
8. For both Dolen and the wider Wales Africa community: through the lens of Solidarity and the intentions of the Wales Africa Anti-Racism Charter, what lessons can be learned from investigating the effectiveness of partnership working, both Dolen's model and other similar models identified in literature? What can be avoided, replicated, or adapted in order to contribute to increased Global Solidarity and the role of Wales as an outward looking nation?

At the outset of the project, I met with several stakeholders and members of the Wales-Africa community to develop a shared understanding of the research project and the key concepts to be investigated, and to identify what a successful project would look like.

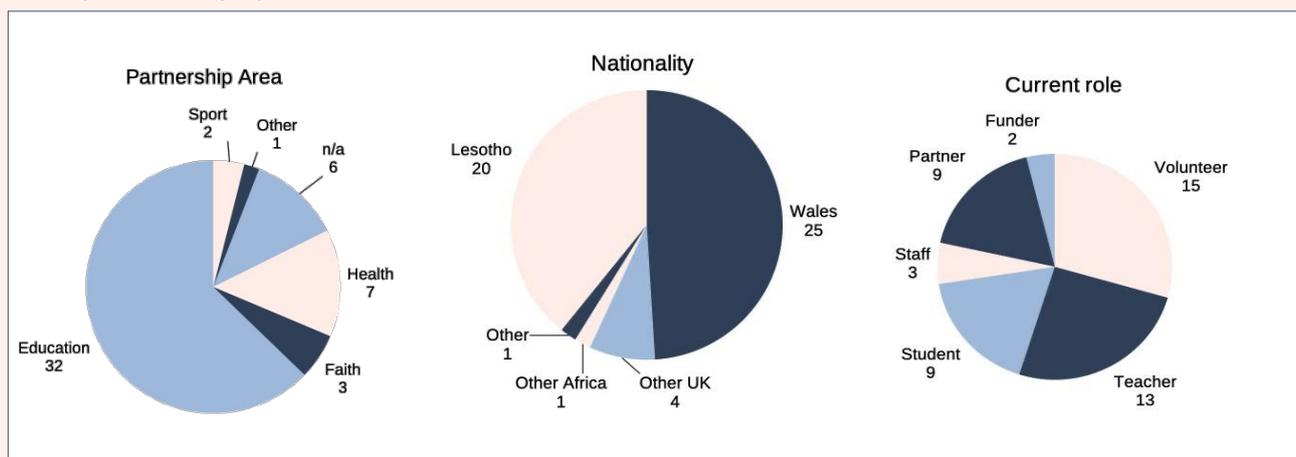
Stakeholders discussed the key concepts of “effectiveness” and “equality”: what they look like in practice, and how they would be recognised in a partnership. In addition, stakeholders identified key individuals or roles that should be asked to participate, as well as potential audiences for eventual findings.

### 3.3. Data collection

Research was carried out between June and August of 2024, using qualitative methods. In June and July I observed several activities coordinated around a visit from Lesotho to Wales. These included a board meeting and strategy session; a workshop for Basotho teachers on a placement in Wales; a school day at Glan-y-Môr Secondary School where several exchange students from Moyeni High School, along with two teachers, were visiting; and a *mokete* celebration for all visitors to Wales. Glan-y-Môr and Moyeni in particular have a longstanding and well known link; participants from both schools often refer to it as Glan-y-Moyeni.

In addition, I conducted qualitative interviews with Dolen staff, funders, board members, partners, volunteers, and exchange participants; and focus groups with board members, exchange participants, and teachers on placement.

Participant demographics are shown below:



One priority was to not focus on any one area to the exclusion of others, recognising that health and education have historically been the two main partnership areas while acknowledging that other areas (including faith and sport) have had less activity. While it does seem as though there were many more participants from education partnerships, it should be pointed out that my research in education settings (including with exchange students and teachers) included several group interviews and focus groups. For example, I conducted an interview with about 13 students who were involved in exchange visits; on another occasion I organised a focus group for five teachers and two volunteers assisting with the Wales Teacher Placement Programme. Overall, the total level of participation was about equal for health and education partnerships.

### 3.4. Analysis

I chose a comparative analytical approach, specifically comparing degrees of reciprocity and balance, and identifying commonalities and differences between partnerships. I used Dedoose for data analysis,

with a combined inductive and deductive coding approach. All interviews were transcribed for analysis, along with observational notes and outputs (flipcharts, worksheets, etc.) from focus groups and workshops.

## 4. Commonalities

The comparative approach I worked with starts with the acknowledgement that a definitive answer to Research Question 1 would be difficult to provide, since it would require:

- An extensive comparative research programme, including other well-defined partnership models
- Consensus on the meanings of “effective”, “equal”, or indeed “partnership”
- Consistent application of the “Dolen model”

It soon became apparent that while there are definite trends and tendencies, the research programme would not be able to rely upon these factors. Therefore, I looked at similarities between partnerships within Dolen. I took the concepts of balance, reciprocity, and equal involvement as key indicators, and sought to identify whether partnerships that seemed to implement these to a greater extent had anything in common; and conversely, whether partnerships that had a lower degree of balanced, reciprocal, or equal involvement had any commonalities. Four common characteristics emerged, all of which interlink with and support the others. Therefore I will use an image of woven strands to illustrate these common characteristics, and I’ll refer to them as the “Four Strands” (Figure 1).

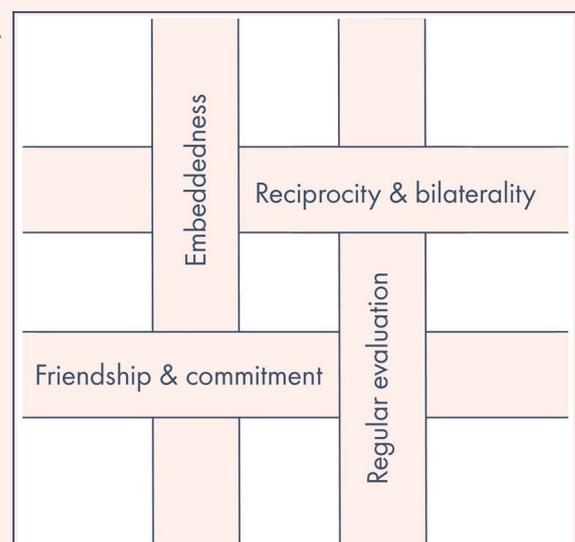


Figure 1: The Four Strands

### 4.1. Reciprocity & Bilaterality

This refers to a sense of balance: in travel, in programming, and in the roles that partners take on. That is, participants from Lesotho and Wales visit each other in more or less equal numbers, similar programming is happening in both locations, and partners in both locations make similar contributions to the partnership.

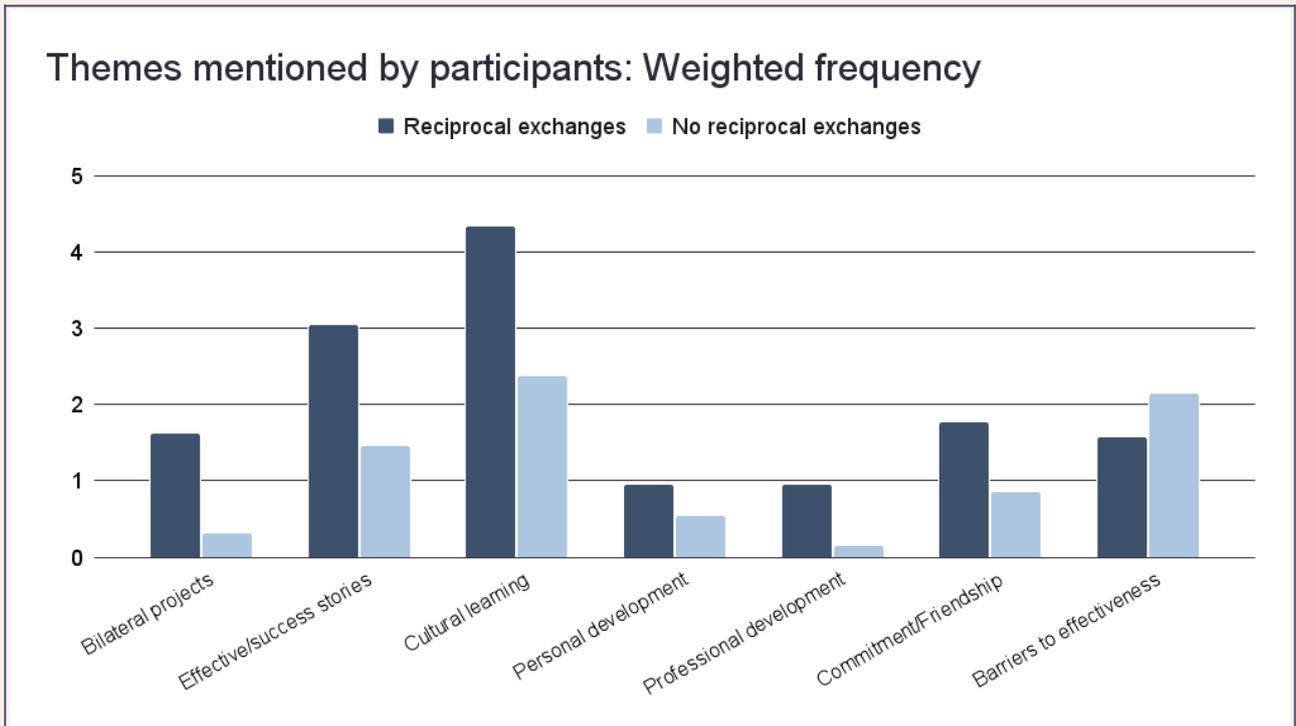


Figure 2: Themes mentioned by participants

The chart in Figure 2 illustrates how partners with higher levels of reciprocity and bilaterality mentioned positive themes more often in interviews than those with lower levels.

In addition, participants with higher levels of reciprocity and bilaterality directly and explicitly connected numerous benefits to the reciprocity of the relationship (Figure 3).

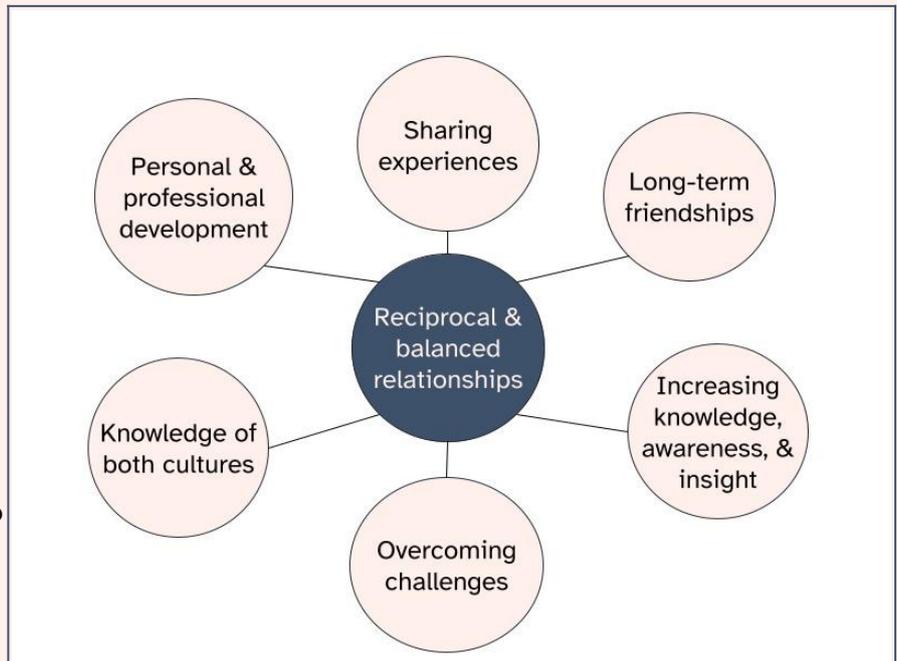


Figure 3: Benefits connected to reciprocal relationships

In contrast, partners with lower levels of reciprocity and bilaterality were more likely to mention challenges to effectiveness:

“I don’t do exchanges as such. What I do is fundraising. ... It’s hard to get [others] involved, though. I try and try, but no one has bought into it to the same degree [as my organisation].” *(Participant in a sport partnership from Wales)*

“We do get quite frustrated. It seems that everything we try just doesn’t yield the results we would like. It’s hard to know what to do to change that. *(Participant in a health partnership from Wales)*”

#### 4.2. Organisational embeddedness

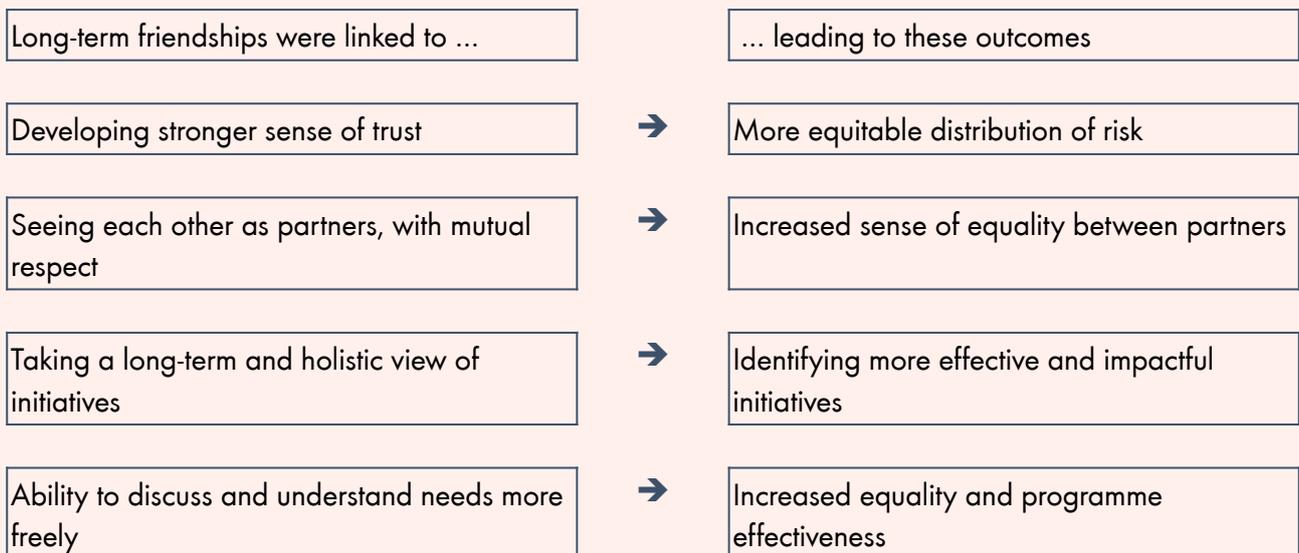
There are two aspects of embedding a partnership within an organisation that I observed. One is in terms of the organisation’s identity, where the partnership becomes part of what members or participants perceive that organisation to be (an excellent example is school twinning relationships). The other is having buy-in from the executive level, meaning that senior officers at the organisation are aware of the partnership and support it, and that official policies are in place to support participation. The result is that the organisation as a whole bears the responsibility to the partnership, rather than individual participants.

One specific contribution that Dolen has made is in providing a structure to support greater embeddedness. A Dolen board member, mentioning a previous partnership he had participated, said:

“That other partnership's died. I think it depended on the people. But, with Dolen, because of the structure, it helps it sustain itself. I've seen people come and go over the last 30 years.”

#### 4.3. Friendship & Commitment

Developing a sense of friendship or committed long-term relationship was linked by participants to greater effectiveness and equal working. By “friendship” and “commitment”, I mean a sense that the relationship itself is of value, worthy of attention and investment of time or resources, rather than looking more towards any specific projects or outcomes that come out of the relationship.



Participants consistently spoke of long-term involvement and commitment as a unique benefit of their partnerships through Dolen:

“ One thing I picked up quite early at working in Lesotho was people saying, oh yes, you've been around for some time. And it's the impression that many other agencies, people will come and work on the project, and then disappear. Whereas this is something that's actually lasted for 40 years. *(Dolen board member from Wales)* ”

#### 4.4. Regular evaluation

Finally, partners with higher levels of balance, reciprocity, and equality make a priority of examining and evaluating the health of the relationship—including efforts towards equality—at regular intervals. Many organisations do regular monitoring and evaluation exercises, but here I specifically refer to evaluating the relationship itself and not only its programming or initiatives. This may include external research or evaluation, but more often it is a regular part of the organisation's work where participants request and value partner's feedback, consciously question assumptions, dialogue with partners, and address power imbalances.

In the next three sections, I will discuss how these strands appear within partnerships, and highlight some outcomes identified by participants.

## 5. Education

Research indicates that the partnerships in education are by far the most reciprocal of all the types of partnership that come under the Dolen umbrella. Education partnerships enjoy a very high degree of reciprocity, as each school link that I encountered in my research had participated in both visiting and hosting. In addition, there is a high degree of bilaterality: Participating organisations are all schools, with the same basic objective (educating young people); and bilateral projects are common where each school carries out a similar project:

“ We looked at sustainability. We built a keyhole garden in Lesotho, which was out of plastic bottles and planted there. They'd also done a greenhouse out of plastic bottles as well, which was very cool. And then the idea was that when they came to Wales, we would build a keyhole garden in our country as well, which we did in the Burns Centre in Kidwelly. So that was introducing the idea. They planted vegetables that were suited for their country to be able to grow. We've had photos sent to us as well, so it's really nice to see that they're keeping it going. And we've got the same.” *(student exchange participant from Wales)* ”

Participants in school exchanges connected the reciprocal nature of the partnership with benefits in several areas which highlight the Four Strands:

#### 5.1. Developing friendships and relationships

Participants (both teachers and students) spoke about how the mutual nature of the partnership brought people together and contributed to the development of cross-cultural friendships. Several exchange participants have been in touch with people that they met on exchange, even after several years; in one case, a Welsh participant was invited to a celebration of a significant event in the life of a Basotho

participant. Those who participated in a homestay felt they were able to develop an even stronger sense of trust with their guest or host. This contributed to an atmosphere of equality: students identified other exchange participants as peers, and teachers regularly referred to other teaching exchange participants colleagues, thereby developing a sense of mutual appreciation and respect.

Participants also spoke about developing deeper relationships with people from their own country. One participant in the teacher exchange programme spoke about how she and the other four teachers (who had not all known each other previously) had developed a special bond between them as a result of their shared experience. These teachers felt that upon their return to Lesotho, they would have another network of support developed through this experience.

### 5.2. Embedding the relationship within the school's organisational identity

Having a more longstanding link that has become part of the school's identity was mentioned by some participants as an important outcome of reciprocal partnership. This, in turn, was linked several further benefits.

1. Travel between Lesotho and Wales can be daunting for a student, but having a known entity as the destination, and one that students' predecessors have visited, makes the experience smoother.
2. Students, even those who have not travelled themselves, have a wider scope of reference in terms of cross-cultural understanding. Student participants report that a majority of students in the school are interested or engaged in the link at least to some extent. In addition, there is the freedom to devote school time and resources to partnership activities for all students and not just exchange participants – for example, the "Cultural Day" that students had put on during the visit from Lesotho:

“There's staff involvement and school ethos – we are supported, we have always been supported by management to have a day like this happening.” (*Teacher at a school in Wales*)

3. Staff and students have a deeper level of commitment, and greater involvement in the partnership, with further develops a sense of trust: in a conversation with several Dolen ambassadors (college students who had participated in exchange trips as secondary students, at different schools), I asked roughly what proportion of the student body would be highly engaged in the partnership, how many generally interested but not engaged, and how many not interested. The ambassadors agreed that more students at Glan-y-Môr school were more highly engaged than at Bryngwyn, specifically because Glan-y-Môr had enjoyed a longer link whereas Bryngwyn's was much newer.
4. The partnership is more durable, and is not affected by staff turnover.

### 5.3. Effectiveness in working together

Participants connected having a reciprocal and mutual relationship which is part of the school's identity, to a greater sense of effectiveness in personal and educational outcomes. For example, Welsh staff compared their link with Lesotho to other exchange programmes they have participated in. With the Lesotho link, they said, students become more engaged, taking it upon themselves to suggest particular



initiatives (such as putting on a school-wide “Cultural Day”) or work together on specific projects (including improvements to the school grounds), rather than the exchange being something of a glorified holiday.

Teaching exchange participants from Lesotho also spoke about how their experience could increase effectiveness within the partnership by bringing a broader perspective to other educators, and widen participation:

“In the long run, it's we Basotho people that are now understanding – we could rethink, introspect ourselves. We know the benefits that we have got here, and we need to ensure that we bring light into other schools. Other schools have to benefit this – this is not for our sake, it is for the sake of a Mosotho child that we are working with. So it is through that mentality that we can now demonstrate the broadening, or the expansion, of this project. And even [meeting] the teachers, the certain principals, orientate them about this, show them what we have acquired, so that they voluntarily get into partnership.” *(Teaching exchange participant from Lesotho)*

#### 5.4. Promoting cultural learning & heritage

Participants connect the mutual partnership to experiences of improving their cross-cultural understanding, which connects strongly to both effectiveness and equality. Exchange participants spoke about learning more about their partner country and developing an interest in further study of global issues:

“It's definitely made me aware of the fact that I am very interested in what goes on in other countries. And just the cultures and history of the countries. Before going to Lesotho ... it was very much, if I'm abroad, I'm relaxing. But going there, it completely changed my mindset of how I approach going abroad. I was like, I want to know more, and I want to know why they do things the way they do, and how that affects their life, and how is that different from us? It really opened my mind to those type of questions.” *(Student exchange participant from Wales)*

In particular, both teachers and students report that they felt the learning they experienced was more profound, or felt more “real” to them, due to the personal and first-hand nature of their experience whether travelling themselves or hosting visitors through the exchange programme:

“Prior to my experience with Lesotho I didn't realize quite how transformational these kind of experiences could be but I think part of that is – it's a project, not a trip. It's very much about, they prepare, they work in their dinner times, they work after school, to prepare for their visit out, and prepare for receiving the visit. They put a lot into it. And as a result, I think they get far more out of it. And I think that's a really good life lesson at the base here.” *(Headteacher of school in Wales)*

One teacher in Wales, who was hosting visitors from Lesotho, reported that more than one of his students who had had xenophobic tendencies in the past were able to open up to the visitors and interact positively with them. The visiting teacher who was with them concurred:

“I’ve seen that those students who have never met other cultures – it was a great huge impact that I have, we have, experienced. Because you find that some of the students were cold to foreigners. But interacting with them, showing love, has made a better environment. Also that, as the learners, they can express their culture here, the Wales culture. How’s living here. And to me it has been so excellent.” *(Teaching exchange participant from Lesotho)*

Several participants in Welsh schools spoke of the exchange helping them feel in touch more with their Welsh identity:

“Because of this trip [to Lesotho] I did research a bit more into Wales and then me and my nan went to visit St Fagans, which is the National Museum of Wales. And then that prepared me a bit for [a subsequent exchange in] Korea, so I could speak about what being Welsh is and how it’s different to being British and English.” *(Student exchange participant from Wales)*

While staff in particular connected the exchanges to a process of discovering their own identity and cultural heritage by having a broader sense of the world in which to place themselves:

“For you to really appreciate or identify your cultural heritage, you need to have that sense of self and that sense of your place in the world, and I think this is where the program is really important, because you have teenage students coming together that, in so many ways—and this is what always surprising—have so much in common, yet their two different cultures give them very different takes. And I think that challenges the students in terms of where their own sense of place is and then helps them find it.” *(Headteacher from a school in Wales)*

In addition, teaching staff felt that a sizeable minority of Welsh student participants (one estimated it at 15-20 percent) were developing an understanding of deeper issues at a global political level which went beyond a surface understanding – that is, moving beyond a generalised sense of learning about cultural differences and feeling a greater sense of gratitude, to asking challenging questions about the drivers of global inequality. A teaching exchange participant from Lesotho felt that this could be built upon through increased collaboration throughout the year, more frequent communication and engagement, learning about politics, and discussing news and current events in each country.

### 5.5. Personal and professional development

Exchange participants connected the reciprocal nature of the programme to both personal and professional development. Teachers particularly mentioned development in both areas, with those on placement programmes emphasising professional development.

“A hundred percent. I’m going to say that for you. One hundred percent. Absolutely. A hundred percent.” *(Teacher at a school in Wales, asked whether the partnership has influenced her professional development)*

“We get to be exposed to different cultures and whatever we get from the schools—how the teachers teach, the strategies, the technology—it's some of the things that we take back home that's going to improve our educational outcomes. *(Teaching exchange participant from Lesotho)*

“I'm not bored of my job, okay. However, having those international projects going on, bringing people together ... brings a massive dimension to my job. I don't know whether I would have gone and done something else if I didn't have those, but I know for a fact that it is a motivating aspect of my – well, of myself as an educator.” *(Teacher at a school in Wales)*

“At our schools in Lesotho, we [also] have got different learners with special needs, and those who undergo through drug abuse, and different challenges at home. Looking at how they approach, and talking with them about how they approach the learners and bring change: that has made me, as a teacher, when I go back, I share with my fellow teachers, it's good. Okay, this kind of tool helps students to bring change, a positive change in their lives. We approach them with love, compassion. We don't shout at them.” *(Teaching exchange participant from Lesotho, on his experience at a Pupil Referral Unit school in Wales)*

Two participants (one from Lesotho and one from Wales) specifically attributed career progression to their experience of partnerships in education.

Teachers also pointed out personal development that students experienced. As for the students, they often mentioned aspects of personal development:

“When they go back, they're going to tell the stories about knowing Wales and how it has related positively to their lives. And they're saying also that the primary students already want to go to Moyeni High School to have the partnership or the relationship with Wales. And at their school, they are selected based on their performance. So that is improving their grades because everyone wants to work hard to be able to come to Wales. So they think it's making a very big impact in Lesotho.” *(Student exchange participants from Lesotho; translated by teacher)*

In addition, older students spoke of how they were inspired by the exchange programme to pursue education leading to specific career options.

## 5.6. Summary

Of the participants in education partnerships that I spoke to, all of them without exception were satisfied with the programmes. While many were able to identify areas for improvement, or point out places where they felt the programme could be better, every participant felt generally positive, encouraged, and motivated by the partnerships. Several interview participants specifically directed me to make sure I recorded in my notes how pleased they were with the programme, how strongly they believed in it, and how much they wanted it to continue and expand. Perhaps the best illustration was in my interview with the headteacher at a secondary school. When I asked if I could speak to him, he said, “Sure, though I have another meeting I need to be in at 4.” Our interview went on for a little while, and when I noticed it



was gone 4 o'clock, I asked if he needed to wrap up. He looked up at the clock, surprised, and said, "Whoops! No, this is important. If nothing else, that's the most important thing."

One pitfall that must be considered is the occasional tendency to see the basic lesson to be learned from an exchange as, "See how much better it is in Wales." While this was never the explicit message, Welsh students often mentioned their main takeaway as realising how fortunate they are, while Basotho teachers often discussed their classrooms in Lesotho in terms of deficiencies (whether in terms of technology, teaching practice, curriculum, or others). This is a difficult message to counter, as it connects to a near universal tendency to value material wealth and technological achievement.

## 6. Health

Compared to education, health partnerships seem to be less reciprocal or bilateral, for various organisational, technical, and bureaucratic reasons which I will discuss below. Therefore the health partnerships tend more towards one-way, funding- or project-based relationships – that is, on average they are less true to the ideal of the reciprocal "Dolen model" of partnership. This is not to say that reciprocal exchanges do not take place – they absolutely do. However, it is not on the same scale or with the same formality as with education partnerships; from the participants I spoke to, it seemed to be more ad-hoc. In addition, the perception of roles within partnerships seemed to be less balanced. In speaking to participants in both Wales and Lesotho, the general understanding of "what the partnership is about" leaned more towards a model of "Wales helps funds projects in Lesotho". This was not universal, but a noticeable tendency.

Given the hypothesis that a reciprocal partnership model contributes to more equal and effective partnership working, one would expect to find that education partnerships seem to be healthier and that participants in the health partnerships find them to be less equal and/or effective. Data collected for this research project indicate that this does indeed seem to be the case, at times.

In the health-related partnerships, participants on average do not share the same level of enthusiasm, and a few were feeling frustrated and discouraged. Some participants have complained about partnerships lacking effectiveness, not being sure if anything is getting done; or were unsure as to the sense of equality in the partnerships. Some Welsh participants mentioned that they are not sure how genuine their partners in Lesotho are being when they say they feel respected and equal; although participants in general do feel that there has at least been some progress made on equality.

This section will consider some of the barriers to reciprocity in health partnerships, some of the outcomes of lower reciprocity, and some opportunities – especially with reference to the Four Strands I have identified above.

### 6.1. Legal & practical barriers

Exchanges of doctors can be fraught, as practicing on patients in a different country is proscribed legally and ethically. One participant linked this to an unequal situation where clinical staff were much more likely

to travel from Wales to Lesotho than vice versa (although I must point out that this is not true of all health partnerships).

“I have not been involved with many people visiting from Lesotho because the health set up is not an exchange relationship, unlike education. ... Really people cannot, in any way, interact with patients if they come over here, unless they've gone through licensing. So it's a much more complicated procedure. And they've got to have the right qualifications, the right training, they've got to get approval and that's not done so readily.” (*Participant in health partnership from Wales*)

The rank-and-file participants in health systems, akin to students in education, are patients – and it is difficult to imagine an exchange of that sort taking place.

Broadening the scope of participants in health-related projects may address this somewhat. Of course, doctors can participate in exchanges where they are not practicing medicine; medical students may also benefit from exchanges. Participants report that this does indeed happen, and mention midwives, nurses, and administrative staff as other participants in exchanges. However there is scope to broaden this even further; potential participants could also include alternative and complementary practitioners (e.g. massage therapists, counsellors, traditional healers), patient advocates, social or care workers, community or public health workers, etc.

## 6.2. Lack of organisational embeddedness

Some participants spoke of health projects as being more ad-hoc, or dependent on an individual's personal connections (in contrast with some of the schools, where the relationship becomes part of the school's identity). This has several downsides (comparable to the benefits discussed in 5.2 above), all of which decrease effectiveness.

1. Lack of commitment or buy-in from colleagues or other staff, as they feel it has nothing to do with them. One participant specifically linked this to lower levels of effectiveness:

“There were very few of us. We didn't have the support that the education group had. We were on our own, we had no admin support.” (*Health link participant from Wales*)

2. Vulnerability to fizzling out due to staff turnover or availability:

“Other projects have had varying degrees of durability. We had some great multi-agency training. ... It was successful in the midterm. But there's such a high turnover of staff that it fizzled after three, four, five years.” (*Chair of a health board link*)

3. Lower levels of trust between participants, which can lead to poor communication and further misunderstandings, or to the adoption of more risk-averse approaches which are detrimental to partners in Lesotho.

One specific example of success in embedding a relationship institutionally is the Betsi-Quthing link; participants in this link that I spoke to were generally more satisfied and optimistic about their partnership and its effectiveness, and it appears as though they had given more consideration to partnership equality.

For example, in contrast to the point about lower levels of trust above, one participant spoke about clear communication and trust developed together:

“Communication. There was a clear communication, and communication wasn't one way. And their leadership wasn't authoritative. They were more like, Do your thing, tell us when we come in. And there was trust. There was trust between us. ... They understood that *we* understood, we know the community better. So they did not treat us like, ‘No, this is our money, so you do as we say.’ No, it was a conducive open relationship between us.” (*Participant in a health partnership from Lesotho*)

Participants from Wales and Lesotho consistently spoke about each other as peers and colleagues. One participant from Quthing even reported that the partnership had indirectly contributed to greater equality locally, outside of the partnership itself.

The Betsi-Quthing partnership also prioritises a commitment to the relationship itself, rather than discrete programme-oriented objectives, in its formal organisational agreement. Although I have not seen the Memorandum of Understanding myself, one participant described it as such:

“If I remember well, the MOU, that was the main objective – for us to work together, to assist each other technically, and also implementing any strategies that we come up with. (*District Medical Officer in Quthing*)

A further specific benefit of having the relationship formalised organisationally is that staff are more easily able to participate in exchange visits as this is allowed for work-wise; they are not forced to take vacation time (although even then, this can be improved as it is not consistent in practice and depends upon individual managers).

### 6.3. Funding requirements

Participants in health partnerships often feel that these partnerships, in practice, gravitate towards being project-based rather than friendship-based. This occurs even in partnerships that are set out as friendship-based. In other words, it is expected that the partnership must involve the Welsh organisation helping the Lesotho organisation with specific projects. Although many (not all) participants question this personally, they see it as an unfortunate fact due to funding requirements:

“We've always – I think we've struggled with this for a bit, and certainly during the time when I was on the board, it was a struggle. Not that people didn't believe that friendship was the main thing, but that, from a funding point of view, nobody funds friendship. It's actually really difficult to get funding for friendship. People want you to deliver a project, or to deliver a very specific outcomes or very specific deliverables. And friendship doesn't do that.” (*Participant in a health partnership from Wales*)

Changing the standard practice in funding bodies is a sizeable challenge which would require them to take a much longer and more holistic view of value. This is indeed something that health partnership participants have been doing. I asked one participant, a Dolen board member and chair of the health group, about whether he perceived a tension between prioritising friendships and needing to deliver

specific objectives. He spoke at length on the links between trust and public health, and conveying those to funders in a meaningful way. I will quote his response in its entirety, as it includes an unusual example of engagement with a funding body.

“That opens up massive questions about international public health, broader than this health partnership. I think there is probably reasonable criticism of funders, in that they're having funding structures [which are] fundamentally a misunderstanding of how public health works. Because by definition, you have to have trust. ... Not just to be able to deliver on things, but to know what it is you need to be delivering on. And very often, discovering that is a process of ongoing communication and actually understanding some of the cultural nuances that are not obvious when you first initiate relationships with people. So I think there is a deficit in terms of funding bodies being very process driven, and having a high turnover of staff themselves, who have a job where they want to say they've achieved xyz, they funded this many things that did this many things, but they're missing the point.

[Another] difficulty is that it also doesn't give due justice to some of the qualitative outcomes that we found actually are quite impactful, but don't always necessarily fit with quickly interpretable reporting that people like. People like to have a graph, but the graph is only as good as the person putting the numbers into it.

A great example of this is [a funded project] with Quthing. Lots of outcomes occurred that we never thought would, because of this long term relationship, building over this 24 months. Some things that we thought were a big problem actually weren't by the time we got there, and other things were.

So we really struggled to quantify some of those things. Some of the data collection in Lesotho was so poor [that] we couldn't evidence some things. That meant that support with data collection, monitoring, management, evaluation became a health system strengthening priority that we could provide support with – but wasn't in itself, ironically, an outcome that the funder was interested in, even though it was the area that was the most important.

What I did on that occasion was I did just got on a train, I went to London, I just turned up at the office of the funder. And I sat down and had a meeting with them in person. And they were gobsmacked because nobody had ever done this. They actually told me they'd never ever met any of their grant holders, ever. They'd just been sat behind a computer, which is depressing and amusing at the same time, because it made you realise how two dimensional this interface was.

He then sat down with representatives from the funding agency, telling them about the whole project. In the end, they were able to put together a report that had significantly more richness than it might have otherwise had. It did include quantitative data, but had a strong narrative element, including shared anecdotes and WhatsApp messages from people who'd been involved in different parts of the programme (this is an important point: Even for people who have reliable internet access, they may not have enough mobile data to be filling in long PDF forms; and when people are most often using mobile devices, email and traditional document editing software can be inconvenient. This makes WhatsApp or

similar messaging services the best modality for people to communicate). The funder had never considered that an inclusive methodology would be as important as any of their other requirements for reporting. The participant concluded,

“So I would turn that on its head and say that the issue there sits with the way in which funding is delivered and orchestrated, rather than how projects in themselves are intended to be or designed. There is cognisance of this, but I think again, because of how people are employed in the funder sector, they perhaps don't have time to follow through on some of those principles.”

This anecdote may seem unusual, but I include it here because it shows how it is possible to bring funding organisations into the conversation and help them understand what is really important in partnership work, and work with them to develop a more equitable funding landscape that recognises the value of commitment and trust in these relationships.

#### 6.4. Healthcare culture and expectation management

Volunteers in health links may come to the partnership with their own experience of what health work is or should be like. One participant whom I quoted above, on the difficulties of getting funding for friendship, went on to compare different types of partnerships:

“Health has always been a bit of an outlier because education fits quite well with friendship. A school visit can be a friendly thing. It doesn't have to deliver something specific, does it? ... Schools, and churches, those are natural friendship organizations. But health always is just a bit more tricky.”

I asked her why she thought that was the case – is there something about health that makes it less conducive to having friendships?

“I don't think it's less conducive to friendship, I think ... that perhaps health professionals feel they have to go over and *do* something and *fix* something, because that's why you're in the job, isn't it? That you don't want to see people suffering, or people without painkillers, or children having diseases that they could be vaccinated against, or whatever the thing is.” (*Participant in a health partnership from Wales*)

Another participant mentioned the changing nature of what healthcare work is like:

“People are scared of breaching what they think is a preset protocol. It's pretty reflective of what's going on in healthcare more widely, which is the protocolisation of doing everything. And so if that's happening within the healthcare system nationally, it's inevitably going to reflect how people approach working in a voluntary capacity.” (*Participant in a health partnership from Wales*)

Volunteers may also have their own ideas of what their involvement will entail, which may be at odds with what partnership coordinators are aiming towards, or what practical limitations may emerge in implementation. This can lead to a sense of frustration or a perceived lack of effectiveness. One example of this centres around a mental health project implemented in Lesotho, of which I heard three different



perspectives. One volunteer I interviewed expressed frustration that the initiative had not seemed to go anywhere; they felt the programme had the potential to be highly impactful but that it had not been followed through:

“The problem is that we did a lot of training and nobody, or very few people have taken it forward. There's one very good psychiatric nurse who's trying really single handedly to move it forward and she's done a lot of work, but of all the people we trained up, and I don't know how many it was, a lot of people, it's not really [been taken] forward.” *(Participant in a health partnership from Wales)*

Compare this with the summary I was given by that same psychiatric nurse:

“It turned out very well, I must say. The report that I get from the new psychiatric nurse that I left ... is that after the training, now there's harmony between these stakeholders [hospital, village health workers, chiefs, traditional healers, church leaders, teachers, and police]. They know what to do when they encounter a patient in a crisis. ... So there were a lot of positive outcomes. *(Participant in a health partnership from Lesotho)*

She spoke of bringing together different community members, and of putting a mental health first aid and hospital referral programme in place. One key aspect, she said, was collaboration and bringing certain key stakeholders on board:

“I engaged people from different backgrounds and different qualifications. For example, one of them was [a psychologist and] also a traditional healer. So she was able to switch when we're training a certain group, like when we train the traditional healers. So for the traditional healers to hear it from another traditional healers that no, being a traditional healer doesn't mean you have to harm. These patients have got their rights. They listened better when they heard it from someone with the same experience and training.

I asked her if she felt she had support from her employer, the district health board:

“They were supportive, even though ... there's a stigma attached to mental health. Those who are in the big offices do not necessarily understand the importance of mental health. I wouldn't get any [support]. I wouldn't at all. But after we received the funding [through the partnership with Wales], people started opening their eyes and developing some interest gradually.”

This highlights that positive outcomes may come gradually, and may not be fully apparent until much later – by which time volunteers in the partnership may have ended their involvement, and so they may be unaware of progress. It also supports the point above: encouraging a longer-term view is just as important for volunteers as it is for funding organisations.

Yet another research participant also referenced the same programme, and his experience seems to support the idea that gaps between what volunteers expect, and what happens in reality, can result in frustration and disillusionment. He described how this mental health project had encountered some



obstacles including difficulty with obtaining external accreditation, along with other technical and logistical difficulties, which significantly affected the initiative's feasibility. This participant suggested that setbacks don't necessarily mean failure:

“That doesn't mean you can't do anything, but that you might just have to think about doing it differently, and maybe learning more from the visits of mental health professionals in Lesotho here, and thinking about how they can be better equipped to deliver something there. What some people might do is, they're so invested in that one approach [that they think], ‘We're not doing anything anymore. Things aren't being followed through in Lesotho.’ In reality, though, that's not really what's happening.”  
*(Participant in health partnership from Wales)*

I would suggest that the lower level of enthusiasm, on average, among health link participants cannot be put down directly to differences in the level of reciprocity in relationships, nor should it be taken as straightforward evidence that the partnerships are less healthy, or that they are not moving towards greater equality and effectiveness in partnership working.

I also want to make clear that I do not intend to criticise volunteers who feel frustrated, or diminish their experience. My point is that it likely reveals an opportunity for improved communication between partnership organisers and participants.

I suspect that “expectation mismatch” is more likely in health partnerships than in education, for two reasons. First, students participating in educational exchanges are more likely to have their expectations directly addressed and informed by teachers, who have a more authoritative role; whereas health volunteers are adults and may not perceive as much of a learning dimension to their involvement. Second, with education partnerships on average being more deeply embedded institutionally, there will already be a stronger sense of the purpose of the partnership and a greater ability to appreciate long-term views, compared to health links where individual volunteers are more likely to draw on personal or professional interests and networks. I would suggest, then, that improving organisational embeddedness and continuity may also reduce expectation mismatch.

### 6.5. Difficulty coordinating in Lesotho

Several participants have mentioned that projects have lacked effectiveness due to the absence of a Lesotho-based health coordinator: Someone to champion the different initiatives that are going on and ensure smooth liaisons with the Ministry of Health. I understand that Dolen are aware of this and are working towards appointing a local health coordinator.

Despite these difficulties, individual participants do often feel a sense of equality between each other, speaking of their counterparts in Wales or Lesotho as colleagues or peers. Whether this translates to an organisational level is uncertain; and with existing data it is difficult to draw a conclusion on whether the partnership dynamics in the health sector contribute to more equal partnership working.

## 7. Other partnerships

Research to date has also included partnerships in sport, faith, and other areas of advocacy. Although research has been limited by time, these can be viewed as quick case studies which help give a fuller picture of dynamics surrounding partnership in general. These partnerships are also developing the Four Strands identified above, although progress can be uneven.

### 7.1. Faith partnerships

It is acknowledged that these exist somewhat on the fringes of Dolen, and that research has been limited. In this section therefore, some of my conclusions will be additionally informed by previous research on international faith links in general.

To date, research has indicated that faith links do quite well in having reciprocal exchanges in place, and at developing a sense of friendship. It is possible they are more able to do this because they are typically self-funded and do not need to report on tangible outcomes to any funding body; or because the legacy of missionary travel still privileges face-to-face visits and long-term views over project-based objectives. However, they can struggle to be embedded at an organisational level, and can be at risk of becoming a pet project of an individual or small group within the organisation. The relationship may struggle when those individuals move on, or a newcomer (for example, if a new pastor is appointed) may not feel able to make changes to inherited patterns:

“I just got into this journey. We just found that things were done this way, and we just continued. *(Participant in a faith partnership from Lesotho)*

This highlights that faith links can be quite variable in to what degree they prioritise reflection and evaluation, including of efforts toward equality. There is often the theological ideal of unity with their brothers and sisters worldwide (especially in Christian churches):

“It never crossed my mind, actually, whether there is one side unequal than the other. We see each other as one family, one team. And to our thinking, there's no distinction between them and us. When they come here they're welcome, they're part of us, part of the family, and the family of the church.” *(Participant in a faith partnership from Wales)*

This can nurture a strong sense of community – but there is also a danger that this ideal can offer a false sense of security where Welsh partners may not examine their assumptions. There is no suggestion of disingenuousness; I am speaking in terms of common dynamics I have observed in previous research. And it is not only in faith links where there is room for improvement in evaluating the health of the partnership – my purpose here is to point out one challenge that does seem to be more common in faith links.

Participants who have been involved with faith links in addition to others (education or health) have suggested that there is less support available for these links from Dolen, and there is not a clear mechanism for faith organisations to find a partnership through Dolen, or to request support for an existing partnership.

“Church partnerships are not really supported anymore through Dolen. ... There isn't a mechanism for a church, say, in Wales—as far as I understand, and I may have got this wrong—to get in touch with Dolen and say, ‘We would like to partner with a church in Lesotho.’ I think it just happens informally, if it happens at all.” *(Former participant in faith partnership from Wales)*

Data from this research is insufficient to support further conclusions, but from previous research I would suggest that faith organisations may feel that a secular organisation such as Dolen might not understand their needs, or be fully supportive of their objectives; in particular, evangelical organisations may prioritise independence highly and feel that working with Dolen may be a limiting factor in that sense.

One option may be to reach out to the head offices of denominations with significant representation in both Wales and Lesotho (particularly the Anglican and Methodist churches) to negotiate links. Additionally, having a clear communication mechanism about what working with Dolen means, what would be asked of organisations signing up, and what benefits it can offer would be beneficial.

A specific limitation here is that I have only discussed partnerships with Christian organisations. There are other faiths represented in Lesotho, in small numbers; many of them are connected to the South Asian diaspora. Engaging with these communities is indeed possible but may present a challenge in that there can be skepticism and even antipathy towards these communities within Basotho society in general. This has not come up in discussions with participants, but it is something to be aware of.

## 7.2. Partnerships in sport

As with faith partnerships, research shows that sport links have adopted the above mentioned characteristics in a somewhat patchwork fashion. It is apparent that they have developed good friendships and are committed to the relationship; they are also making progress in evaluating their approach and moving towards a more equitable partnership. However, they may struggle in embedding the relationship organisationally or making it a formal part of their identity, or in implementing reciprocal exchanges or programmes: The partnership which participated in my research had not had any reciprocal exchanges to date; only one person from Lesotho had visited Wales through the link. The practical outcome of this is that the Welsh organisation becomes a fundraiser for the Lesotho-based partner; the participant I interviewed from Wales said so in as many words.

Both participants from Wales and Lesotho said they sincerely hoped that they would be able to schedule a reciprocal visit. However, funding seemed to be the main challenge. Like faith partnership, a significant portion of this link was self funded – but *unlike* faith links, this aspect was seen as working against reciprocal visits. In one instance, where the Lesotho coordinator had invited the Welsh group for a visit,

“I said, fine, but who's going to pay for it? The cost of taking 25 people out there would be massive, and I think that money would be better spent in actual fundraising here and to go direct to the kids out there. To be quite honest, yes, it would be great ... you would have 25 converts who would be absolutely brimming with ideas, but the organization and the cost of it... I actually can't see it happening. No, it would be great, but let's be honest about these things.” *(Participant in sports partnership from Wales)*



In the overview of sport partnership I've presented here, I have focused mainly on reciprocal visits, and I want to make clear that this is only one of the four strands identified that contribute to equal and effective partnership working. All participants (in every sector, not only sport) acknowledged that reciprocal visits have benefits that cannot be replicated by other aspects of a partnership:

“When they are here at home, sharing experience with people from Wales, they do have that experience. But the actual visit, being there physically, it would be different. It would just change their mindset. If I talk about a certain place or area, you will just imagine the area ... But when they actually go to Wales ... their mind will start changing, and trying to develop something. Yeah. So that experience is another thing.” *(Participant in sports partnership from Lesotho)*

Even so, it is not strictly necessary for a partnership to include physical travel, and indeed there are good arguments for limiting it. However, it should be acknowledged that this will place limitations on the relationship. Decisions to forgo reciprocal visits should be based on transparent discussions between partner organisations and their members, and include considerations of what will be done to mitigate those effects and ensure that other supporting strands are not suffering. For example:

- Frequent mutual communication, not only between partnership organisers but between members or service users – e.g. in the case of sports partnerships this could include players or team members. This not only builds friendship and long-term commitment, but helps to embed the relationship organisationally.
- Introducing bilateral projects that each partner can work on (a good example is the gardening project undertaken by school links). This brings a sense of equality, that partners are working on something together, rather than entrenching a funder-implementer dynamic.
- Continue to prioritise regular reviews of the relationship and its activities, possibly including a third party to moderate.

This is a common challenge for many partnerships: Comparative values of “visiting” and “helping” are distilled into pounds and pence, and “helping” often comes out on top. However, if a partnership becomes mainly an enterprise where a Welsh organisation is fundraising for a Lesotho-based organisation, then the idea of the “Dolen model” becomes blurred. As I will discuss below, this is not limited to sport relationships.

## 8. Partnership ambiguities

### 8.1. “Dolen model” ambiguities

At the outset of this research, the “Dolen model” was described in this way:

Dolen Cymru Lesotho uses a partnership model that is based on equal involvement – that is, all parties to the link, in both Wales and Lesotho, join together in friendship based on our common work in promoting civic action and solidarity. Our Welsh partners are as active in promoting equality and advancing progress in education, health, etc. in Wales as they are



interested in supporting the promotion of the same in Lesotho. This is in contrast to the partnership models frequently found in other international NGOs, particularly the “funding-implementing” partnership model, where one partner (in the UK) funds and directs projects that are implemented exclusively by the other partner (in the global South) but no parallel work happens in the UK.

Numerous partnerships within Dolen, however, do not fit this model. In fact, they fit the description of the “in contrast to” partnerships, though often with the words “and directs” struck out: “One partner (in the UK) funds projects that are implemented exclusively by the other partner (in the global South) but no parallel work happens in the UK.” A few links, in practice, have no *raison d’être* besides funding work implemented exclusively in Lesotho. One Basotho participant spoke about their organisation’s other partnerships with similar groups, and considered Dolen to be definitely amongst the “funders” (although with that important difference of not directing), rather than with other consortia that work towards progress in their organisation’s area. I do not wish to undermine the contribution of these partnerships to equal and effective working; numerous participants in Lesotho (in health, sport, and other areas) have spoken at length about the great difference it makes in their lives that their partnerships through Dolen are more flexible, and that they are supported to do the work that matters to them.

“The major difference is that with [other] partners, ... they just come with something that they have proposed at the ministry, and they just come to implement. We are not directly involved. ... We are just told, expect a certain partner that is going to support a certain activity in the district, whether we need it or not. We are not really part of the roundtable discussions. But with [Wales], we look at ourselves as a team, and we come up with proposals on issues that we realise we need assistance on, and we submit our proposals to them. ... So with them, we implement what we have asked from them. ... For us, it's a lot of motivation. (*Participant in a health partnership from Lesotho*)

Participants value this extremely highly, and report that it represents significant progress towards equitable work compared to other partnerships that do not work this way.

“The working relationship with Dolen was a bit more flexible in that the funder was a bit more consultative—‘what would you want to do?’—and a bit less formal. Whereas with other funders, they issue a call for proposals, you apply, and you get shortlisted, they ask what they want from you, and then that's it. You get the money, you implement your report, that's it. But with Dolen it was more like, ‘Okay, we want to support a women's empowerment work. We were thinking this, what do you think?’ And I was like, ‘No, I think this.’ ‘Okay, so where do you want to work?’ So it was a bit of back and forth consultative decision making.” (*Dolen board member and participant in a community organisation partnership from Lesotho*)

Nevertheless, if Dolen wishes to focus on what it has put forward as its characteristic model of partnership, namely reciprocity, there is some shortfall. One suggestion is that prospective partners could be identified on a thematic basis and approached to propose a partnership. For example, organisations in each country working towards gender equality, eradication of child poverty, etc. could be matched up with the first priority being to form networks of friendship and communication between themselves, rather



than to fund specific projects in Lesotho (although this need not be excluded if partners decide that is what they want to do). This would also contribute to the role of Wales as an “outward-looking nation” by bringing in community groups who may not have been involved in global solidarity previously. In addition, Dolen could offer support for existing partners to move towards this model as much as possible: to identify areas where they can increase reciprocity, discuss any challenges or barriers to reciprocity, and find ways to overcome or mitigate these.

## 8.2. Nature of Dolen partnerships

One dynamic which emerged during the course of research was that, when discussing “partnership” with participants, it was not always clear what this meant, or who was the partner. Some participants perceived one partnership at play (i.e. with a counterpart organisation in Wales or Lesotho), with Dolen being in a supporting or facilitating role. This was common in school partnerships. Other participants saw their organisations as maintaining two partnerships: one with their counterpart organisation, and one with Dolen. Some may see Dolen as the primary partnership of those two; others the reverse. Still other participants spoke about their link itself as one entity (rather than a partnership between two entities), and the only partnership they discern is with Dolen.

This dynamic is not likely one to be resolved; it is perhaps inevitable given the wide range of stakeholders that Dolen works with, and the differing nature of their work and relationships. However, it is one to be aware of, so that Dolen can communicate clearly about what it expects and can offer with regards to partnerships both internationally, and with itself.

Furthermore, some partnerships may be unclear about what is involved in working with Dolen. For example, a faith link participant suggested that they were fully supportive of Dolen’s work, but unable to be involved themselves because they were focusing their energy on their faith link: This participant saw two partnerships, one with another church in Lesotho and one with Dolen. Working with Dolen, then, was perceived as an additional partnership and an additional responsibility (including possibly being involved with other organisations that Dolen works with), which they were unable to add to their current schedule. Again, this can be ameliorated with a clear communications strategy regarding what working with Dolen entails and what it can offer.

## 9. Implications for Wider Wales-Africa Community

Research Question 1 asks whether the “Dolen model” contributes to equal and effective partnership working, and if so, how. Research Questions 3 and 4 ask what potential implications this may have for the wider Wales-Africa community; and what lessons can be learned from investigating the effectiveness of partnership working – especially through the lens of solidarity and the Wales Africa Anti-Racism charter.

### 9.1. Presentation at Global Solidarity Summit

To address this question, I and one of Dolen’s co-directors presented an interactive session at the Hub Cymru Africa’s Global Solidarity Summit in September 2024. The session included a summary of research (organised around the Four Strands mentioned above: Reciprocal exchanges, organisational



embeddedness, long-term commitment, and regular evaluation of the relationship). Participants then had an opportunity to work together in groups with a graphical handout showing some of the research outcomes visually, to comment on it and add their own thoughts. At the end of the session, in a “head-heart-hand” exercise, participants were invited to contribute something they had learned, something they felt, and something they could do.

Overall, the initial conclusions presented seemed to track with participants’ experiences. Groups were generally in agreement that there is ample evidence that reciprocity is highly effective and offers numerous benefits, but occasionally commented that despite its importance, it is difficult to achieve and some organisations do not have the capacity to deliver parallel projects. Similarly, participants agreed that embedding relationships at organisational level is important, but that ongoing recruitment of volunteers can be a challenge.

Participants offering contributions at the end of the exercise frequently mentioned the importance of evaluation or “partnership health checks” as something they had learned, along with the benefits of greater reciprocity and of building trust and commitment. Most participants felt positive about the research presented: Happy that the subject was being talked about more frequently, motivated to improve their practice, or more confident in their ability to build relationships. Others did mention feeling overwhelmed or vulnerable, but reassured that they had a useful forum in which to discuss partnership challenges.

Finally, participants suggested concrete actions that could come out of the presentation. Several mentioned investigating more balanced or reciprocal approaches (e.g. investigating possibilities for school-to-school partnerships, or mutual education), while others mentioned implementing regular evaluation or health checks. Others mentioned listening to their partners more closely, or re-examining power dynamics. One participant mentioned bringing this information to their charity funder.

## 9.2. Summary and implications

The workshop, in summary, pointed towards a few implications of this research for the Wales-Africa community. Organisations are generally interested in, and see the value in, developing more balanced, reciprocal, and equal relationships – but they would benefit from greater support. This might include in:

- Delivering parallel projects (e.g. identifying areas to work on with their partner, bringing Welsh organisations on board that work in similar thematic areas as their partners in Africa)
- Recruiting volunteers; or having support in communicating their priorities and values to potential volunteers
- Embedding partnerships in the organisation (e.g. getting buy-in from senior executives)
- Clear and useful guidance on partnership health checks, evaluations, and examination of power dynamics
- Influencing the funding landscape to continue re-orienting itself towards longer-term and friendship-based approaches



These areas may provide some scope for collaboration between Dolen, Hub Cymru Africa, and other members of the Wales-Africa community to develop support for organisations working in partnership.

## 10. Limitations

It must be acknowledged that this research has been necessarily limited by time, and only a small subset of partnerships and participants have been consulted. Therefore any report will be, in effect, a snapshot – which is only one out of many possible.

Of the data that have been analysed, it is possible that these may be affected by “exceptional case bias” which can be either positive or negative – for example, participants in education partnerships are mainly from schools that have highly active partnerships; there may be other school partnerships that are moribund, and the less-enthusiastic participants would not have been identified to take part in research. Or, conversely, participants in health partnerships that I contacted may have been more likely to respond if they were more frustrated with their experience.

With all research participants, I introduced myself as a researcher who was not affiliated with either Dolen (or any of its member organisations), or the Welsh Government – but that my research was being funded by the Welsh Government. It is possible that some participants may have tried to make things “look better” if they felt it might impact their programme or its funding in future.

## 11. Summary

Research question 1 asks, “Does the Dolen model contribute to equal and effective partnership working? If so, how? And can these contributing factors be built on further?” My research indicates quite strongly that the answer to the first part is yes.

To answer the question “how?” a number of avenues have emerged, as described above. These four strands which I have identified are all inter-related, and each contributes to the others.

Focusing on a friendship- or solidarity-based partnership builds trust and commitment within the relationship. This in turn leads to more equal and effective work. For example, by building trust, Welsh organisations can move away from a “risk avoidance” approach to partnership working, which in itself entrenches inequality as the organisation in Lesotho is then [forced to assume a greater share of risk](#). A position of more trust and commitment allows a longer-term and more holistic view of any initiatives, which improves effectiveness.

Prioritising reciprocal or balanced relationships (where each partner is working towards a shared goal in their own context, in addition to any initiatives carried out through the partnership; and where any exchanges or visits are also reciprocal) improves buy-in and ownership of the partnership work from each side, and increases motivation for participants on the work they do locally.

Embedding partnerships and making them part of an organisation’s identity also contributes to equality and effectiveness by facilitating easier participation, shoring up the durability of the partnership and



reducing its vulnerability especially to staff turnover, increasing buy-in from members or employees of the organisation, and extending benefits of the partnership even to those who are not direct participants themselves.

Finally, regular self-evaluation and examination of partnership dynamics supports greater effectiveness and equality by allowing partners to examine unconscious assumptions, automatic habits, or unhelpful approaches which may have been brought to the partnership or developed over time. Checking in regularly on whether decision-making has been shared, resources allocated fairly, and communication made clearly and unambiguously, is a major contributor to progress in both effectiveness and equality.

With regards to what implication these findings have for the wider Wales Africa community, they track with community experience fairly closely. It appears that for community members, the challenge is in implementation. This may include overcoming inertia, ingrained habits, unconscious assumptions, or existing structures in their organisation; it may be getting more people (e.g. volunteers) on board or broadening their visions of what could be done; or it may be advocating for changes to funding structures or requirements from donors, or communicating more clearly to funders the importance of long-term relationships and holistic views, as indeed one participant narrated to me.

What remains to be done going forward will be for Dolen, its staff, volunteers, board, members, and partners, to address the question: What implication does this have for us, for what we do and how we do it? To that end I have prepared a [reflection guide](#). It is my hope that these materials will be useful and able to spark ongoing discussions that guide progress towards greater equality and effectiveness in partnerships, towards deeper friendships, towards furthering collaboration and cooperation between Wales and Lesotho and in the Wales-Africa community, and towards greater global solidarity.