

Keller, Carina; Schwarzmann, Vera; Kreutzer, Karin; Hein, Patricia

Article — Published Version

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Journal of Management Studies

Provided in Cooperation with:

John Wiley & Sons

Suggested Citation: Keller, Carina; Schwarzmann, Vera; Kreutzer, Karin; Hein, Patricia (2025) : If You Can't Let Go: The Role of Emotional Dependency in Global South–North Social Enterprises, Journal of Management Studies, ISSN 1467-6486, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 63, Iss. 1, pp. 195-231, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13252>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/335638>

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If You Can't Let Go: The Role of Emotional Dependency in Global South–North Social Enterprises

Carina Keller^a , Vera Schwarzmann^a , Karin Kreutzer^a 
and Patricia Hein^b 

^a*EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht*; ^b*Ivey Business School*

ABSTRACT While social entrepreneurs' pro-social motivation and other-oriented emotions often drive their collaborative efforts to tackle grand challenges like poverty or gender inequality in the Global South, we know little about how collective emotions shape Global South–North partnerships over time. Drawing on a comparative longitudinal study of two Ugandan–German social enterprise partnerships with the joint goal of achieving the Southern partner's self-reliance, we problematize how collective emotions may lead to various stages of collective emotional dependency and hence foster postcolonial repercussions. We introduce collective emotional dependency as an inherent micro-level mechanism that may manifest, surface, and become (dis-)embedded beyond macro-level dependencies. Our findings illustrate the double-edged nature of the collective emotions in each phase of the partnership, as they can be both beneficial and detrimental. Our study shows that longstanding power inequalities, which South–North social enterprise partnerships set out to reduce in the first place, remain present in the everyday relational practices of organizing and collaborating.

Keywords: collective emotions, emotional dependency, Global South–North partnerships, qualitative research, social enterprises, social entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurs are often driven by pro-social emotions to tackle grand challenges, such as gender inequality and poverty, as they strive to alleviate the suffering of others (Bacq and Alt, 2018; Mair and Noboa, 2006). Social entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a powerful tool for economic, social, and cultural decolonization in

Address for reprints: Carina Keller, EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht, EBS Business School, Rheingaustraße 1, Oestrich-Winkel 65375, Germany (carina.keller@ebs.edu).

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the Global South—where colonial history and ethnic identity shape the self-perceptions and activities of social ventures (Banerjee, 2021; Thorgren and Omorede, 2018) – due to its potential to emancipate people from extreme poverty (Yousafzai et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, collaborative ventures have emerged to tackle enduring colonial legacies and multifaceted socio-economic challenges that individual social entrepreneurs often cannot address alone (Mair and Marti, 2006).

Social entrepreneurs enter South–North social enterprise (SE) partnerships, which are collaborative ventures in which co-founders from the Global South and Global North jointly tackle grand challenges predominantly situated in the Global South. In these partnerships, each partner contributes complementary resources to co-create solutions that address complex societal issues, while navigating inherent power asymmetries and striving for equitable development and self-reliance of Southern partners (Banerjee, 2021; Thorgren and Omorede, 2018). Examples include SEs where founders from the Global North establish ventures in the Global South, Northern donors fund SEs in the Global South, or fair-trade SEs created by Northern partners to connect markets across the Global South and North.^[1] In other instances, Global North actors engage in facilitative or advisory roles within innovation hubs and incubator programs that prioritize local leadership (Sadri et al., 2024; Yousafzai et al., 2023).

The foundation of such SE partnerships oftentimes lies within the Southern and Northern partners' shared other-oriented emotions, such as compassion and empathy for local communities (Argiolas et al., 2024; Busch and Barkema, 2022). Such collective emotions, which are defined as “common feelings by members of a social unit as a result of shared experience” (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 6), are relational, as they create a deepened relationship between partners. However, while collective positive emotions may signal how much partners care about their pro-social mission, these emotions may overshadow conflicting desires (Ford, 1992; Miller et al., 2012). Partners may feel compelled to maintain harmony, often at the expense of addressing critical viewpoints. For example, partners from the Global North may prioritize efficiency and control, while those from the Global South may focus on immediate community benefits (Ansari and Reinecke, 2015). This can lead to tensions that can undermine the attainment of goals by the partnership or even jeopardize survival (Fowler, 2000; Kruckenberg, 2015).

While research on partner-level emotional dynamics is scarce, scholars have problematized the impact of the emotions that *individual* social entrepreneurs experience. High levels of positive emotion may motivate entrepreneurial action toward the social suffering of others (Miller et al., 2012), but, on the other hand, a prolonged sense of achievement may also increase complacency, impeding success (e.g., Baron et al., 2011). Conversely, negative emotions may impair decision-making and make entrepreneurs more risk-averse (Baron, 2008) but could also improve performance by redirecting attention toward solving urgent issues (Foo et al., 2009). Yet, we cannot expect the same emotional dynamics once we move from an individual to the collective setting of partnerships given that partners' emotional experiences are socially embedded (Zhang et al., 2024), interwoven (Barsade, 2002), and consequential to behaviours (van Kleef et al., 2017). While prior research has pointed to the complexity of emotions over the lifecycle of SEs (Farny et al., 2019), we do not yet understand how the experience of collective emotions, such as compassion and empathy, influences how partnerships unfold. We therefore ask the

following question: *How do collective emotions shape SE partnerships between the Global South and North over time?*

We explore this question by comparing the emergence, evolution, and outcome of collective emotions in two SE partnerships between Uganda and Germany. Both partnerships were set up to combat poverty and gender inequality by implementing microcredit alongside entrepreneurial training and access to essential supplies in Uganda. By drawing on observations, interviews, focus groups, and secondary data, we cover the period from 2022 to 2024 with real-time data and from 2006 to 2021 with retrospective data. We show how emotional dependency – the extent to which partners rely on each other for continuous emotional support and validation – may manifest, surface, and get (dis-)embedded over the lifecycle of both partnerships. Our model suggests that the extent to which SE partnerships may eventually (dis-)embed their emotional dependency relates to their different emotional engagement practices (Sloan and Oliver, 2013), i.e., how they connect to others on an emotional level. In one pathway, the partners *embedded* emotional dependency by continuously seeking only positive emotional feedback – even when experiencing setbacks – and engaging in the collective maintenance of emotional presence. In the other pathway, the partners *dis-embedded* their emotional dependency by actively reflecting on their emotions – following the announcement of unmet objectives and concrete actions – and facilitating a collective emotional distancing process. Although this pathway led to the termination of the partnership, it also laid the foundation for the Southern partners' self-reliance.

Our study offers three contributions. First, we introduce emotional dependency as a distinct mechanism that extends beyond persisting macro-level and tangible dependencies (Gray et al., 2022) and can impede attaining the goal of SE partnerships, such as achieving the Southern partner's self-reliance. While previous research has highlighted (individual) social entrepreneurs' other-orientation (Miller et al., 2012), we show that the intrinsic satisfaction of acting compassionately may not only become a source of personal gain but also of collective dependency. We argue that emotional dependency constitutes an enduring pattern of (unmet) emotional needs, which partners in SEs attempt to fulfil at times in a dysfunctional manner, as it delays their willingness to confront the possibility that their ventures may not be a plausible or desirable way to “help.”

Second, while prior research on emotions in South–North partnerships has illuminated how affective expectations shape humanitarianism (Ahmed, 2004; Fassin and Gomme, 2012) – such as the display of gratitude by Southern actors (Richey, 2018) – we understand little how partners may escape entrenched postcolonial asymmetries under the guise of collaboration. Our findings reveal that Northern partners may have different means to navigate and, ultimately, escape emotional dependency, while Southern partners may align their emotions toward the expectations of Northern partners in response to an implicit emotional domination of the Northern partners. Yet, we also show how Southern partners may overcome this dominance together with their Northern partners if they actively reflect on their emotions at the partnership level and emotionally distance themselves from their counterparts.

Third, we elucidate the double-edged nature of collective emotions by illustrating the interplay between self- and other-oriented emotions. We explain how these emotions can be either beneficial or detrimental to the partnership in decoupling the

partners' emotional engagement and collective dependency. Our conceptual model shows that each phase of the partnership involved a distinct emotional engagement practice (Sloan and Oliver, 2013), which depended on the emotions experienced by partners. While the early phase of the partnership was driven by other-oriented emotions, in later phases these were eclipsed by more self-oriented emotions, which helped the partners to focus on their ultimate long-term goal of the Southern partners' self-reliance.

THEORETICAL MOTIVATIONS

Dependencies Embedded in Global South–North Partnerships

Social entrepreneurs are key in addressing grand challenges such as inequality, health access, or climate change (George et al., 2016; Haugh and Talwar, 2016), as they pursue social goals through business venturing (Battilana et al., 2015). Given the complexity, uncertainty, and evaluativeness of the social goals SEs target (Ferraro et al., 2015), it is difficult for a SE to solve them alone. Therefore, SEs may address these challenges via partnerships between two or more actors from the Global South and North to bring about long-term change that serves a mutual interest (Branzei et al., 2018; Manning and Roessler, 2014).

SE partnerships that engage businesses in international development collaborations are part of a new shift toward private sector development and market-based approaches to poverty alleviation (Richey and Ponte, 2014). They are often designed as temporary projects aiming to achieve self-reliance in the Global South to address grand challenges locally. Examples include Global North donors backing SEs in the Global South, like Oikocredit and Acumen, which focus on social investments such as microfinance services. Fairtrade SEs such as Cafédirect or Divine Chocolate aim to connect markets in the Global North and South (Mason and Doherty, 2016).

However, research on partnerships in the Global South is only beginning to gain traction (Bennett et al., 2018), especially when it comes to the efficiency and effectiveness of such partnerships (Kolk et al., 2008), i.e., “the societal impact produced by the partnership beyond the individual activities of the different partners” (Vestergaard et al., 2021, p. 2). To explore this, it is important to consider how power imbalances in Global South–North SEs may perpetuate dependencies between high-power and low-power partners (Gray et al., 2022), which largely stem from colonial legacies (Banerjee, 2021; Becker, 2020).

Existing studies have explored the various forms of dependencies created through this power differential at different points in the lifecycle of (SE) partnerships. In the formation phase, SEs often require external funding to initiate their operations, while over-dependency on specific donors can limit their self-reliance and create financial dependency (Lister, 2000). Hence, partners from the South often refer to their counterparts as “donors” rather than “partners,” thereby primarily perceiving their relationship as a means of resource transfer (Lewis, 1998). As the partnership evolves, continued reliance on external expertise may inadvertently foster reliance on external support (Dados, 2020; Harris, 2023), which can create political dependencies on certain donor-driven social policies such as health security (World Economic Forum, 2023). Finally,

underrepresenting the Global South's policymakers in international institutions can create institutional dependencies such as external control over local monetary and economic policies (Sylla, 2017).

While the macro-level-dependencies explain some of the challenges of Global South–North partnerships to meet their objectives, they tend to ignore (a) how dependencies become embedded after the formation of partnerships, (b) how these dependencies become dis-embedded during the process of achieving self-reliance, which is the goal of the partnerships, and (c) how complex interpersonal dynamics shape evolution of partnerships over their lifecycle. Furthermore, attributing tensions embedded in South–North partnerships solely to macro-level constraints ignores the social and emotional dynamics of the everyday events faced by local partners (Hor, 2022; Rauch and Ansari, 2024). Therefore, it is important to explore the local “intricacies of how partnerships work and how they fundamentally shift, and have the potential to shift, power-relations” (Richey et al., 2021, p. 4). One important way to account for this micro-level perspective is to investigate the role of (collective) emotions (Jakimow, 2022) as critical drivers of the evolution of SE partnerships.

The Role of (Collective) Emotions in South–North SE Partnerships

Social entrepreneurs enter partnerships with others who share their prosocial motivation – the desire to benefit others (Batson, 1987) – rooted in their unique emotional experiences (Branzei et al., 2018). While individual pro-social emotions play an important role in explaining social entrepreneurs' motivation, existing research tends to overlook the collective emotions (Zhang et al., 2024), i.e., shared psychological reactions (von Scheve and Salmela, 2014), that simmer “beneath the surface” of partnerships (Hardy and Phillips, 1998, p. 222). Such collective emotions have important implications for intra- and interorganizational processes (Vuori et al., 2018; Vuori and Huy, 2015), specifically in SE partnerships, as they may shape emotional expression within and between partners over time and thus affect the partnerships' evolution beyond the initial motivation and founding phase. The foundation of SE partnerships is largely driven by social entrepreneurs' pro-social, positive emotions such as compassion and empathy, which strengthen identification with the SE and the common pro-social objective (Molderez and Fets, 2023). Compassion is the overall “sensitivity to the pain or suffering of another, coupled with a deep desire to alleviate that suffering” (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351). Empathy refers to thinking about, feeling, and experiencing others' emotions (Eisenberg, 2000), enabling individuals to emotionally connect to the experiences, particularly the suffering, of others, which motivates them to alleviate that suffering (Shepherd et al., 2023). Driven by such pro-social emotions, SE partners build an affective commitment that helps them to sustain their energy and reduce stress (Grant, 2008) while caring for often geographically and/or psychologically distant other beneficiaries (André and Pache, 2016).

However, this intense affective commitment can also hinder progress in the entrepreneurial process (Baron et al., 2012), pointing to the complexity of emotions that unfold over the lifecycle of SE partnerships. Social entrepreneurs seem particularly susceptible to experiencing fatigue through their compassion-based actions (Miller et al., 2012) and helping to address social problems (e.g., Au et al., 2021). Such unpleasant emotional reactions

may reduce their engagement in the partnership (Welpel et al., 2012). Moreover, driven by their pro-social emotions, SE partners may be “over-committed” to their social cause and override negative feedback, contradictory desires, and potential tensions (Ford, 1992). To regulate their negative or contradictory feelings, they strengthen their collective action, which in turn elevates positive emotions and reinforces their sometimes unhealthy or unproductive emotional attachment to those with whom they are connected (Thomas et al., 2009), such as the local beneficiaries in the Global South. Hence, despite general agreement that positive emotions are necessary and result in positive outcomes, they can disrupt partnerships by leading individuals to reconstruct past experiences positively, glossing over contradictions that might otherwise prompt action (Geers and Lassiter, 2002).

In sum, while collective emotions are at the heart of Global South–North SE partnerships, we understand little about how partners collectively experience and navigate their joint venturing, and how this potentially creates dependencies beyond the macro-level. Specifically, the extent to which collective emotions may be beneficial or detrimental when SEs from the Global South collaborate with the Global North over time and the long-term ramifications of such emotional alignment remain unclear.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

Our comparative cases provide a revealing setting for comparing how emotional dependency unfolds in Global South–North SE partnerships. We conducted an 18-year comparative study (2006–2024) on two Ugandan-German SEs operating in Uganda (“GoSe” and “SoSe”). Both SEs offered microcredit, agricultural products like farming equipment, and advisory services to smallholder farmers, while also contributing to the community through job creation and health and education initiatives. GoSe and SoSe also faced similar constraints, including resource scarcity, governance, and social issues that were largely shaped by Uganda’s colonial past (Dana et al., 2018).

We selected those SEs because they were co-founded by partners from Uganda and Germany (GoSe in 2006 in Kasese Region and SoSe in 2020 in Mpigi and Iganga) to achieve self-reliance for the Ugandan partners. While the GoSe partnership was established earlier, both followed a similar trajectory but over different periods, with GoSe taking longer to establish emotional dependency than SoSe. Nonetheless, both were equally committed to investing time and money, and both aimed to cease resource provision eventually. Our analysis draws on retrospective data covering the period from 2006 to 2022 and on real-time data covering the (dis-) embedding phase from 2022 to 2024. We provide a timeline of key events in Figure 1.

Data Collection

We used several data collection methods to gain comprehensive insights into the intra-organizational dynamics between partners from the Global South and North in both SEs, as outlined in Table I.

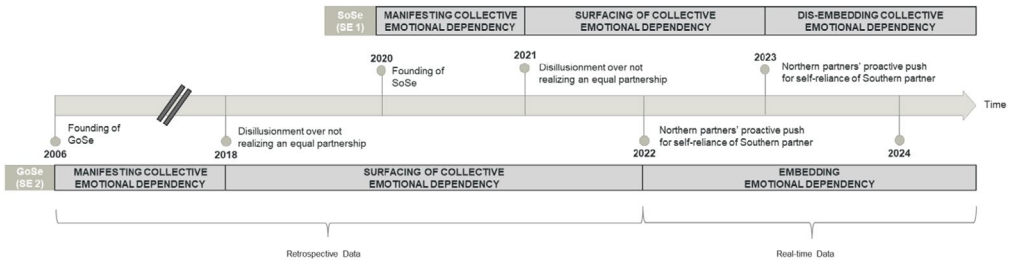


Figure 1. Timeline of events in both SEs [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Interviews. The first two authors conducted 42 interviews in a first wave, lasting 60 minutes on average, before, during, and after a 60-day field stay in Uganda in 2022. We interviewed the co-founders of both SEs, employees (e.g., operation managers, farm workers, executive directors, community managers, financial officers), beneficiaries (e.g., female smallholder farmers, farmer groups, village saving groups), experts in seed bank consulting and development aid in Uganda, and other community members who were not affiliated with the SEs (e.g., neighbouring farmers and community organizations). To mitigate cultural biases, we conducted 18 follow-up interviews with beneficiaries of both SEs by our local translator, and four follow-up interviews with the SEs' members in 2023 and 2024. The interviews were held in German, English, and local Ugandan languages, and were conducted either in the office or virtually. They were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed. A local translator accompanied the research team during the field visits. Ugandan and German members spoke more openly with us than in the meetings with their partners. Thus, topics of dependency or emotional distress emerged naturally in all interviews.

Observations. The first two authors conducted observations in Uganda for 30 days each, during which they spent 25 days with GoSe and 20 with SoSe. They attended more than 30 meetings, ranging from strategy workshops, financial planning sessions, community gatherings, and visits with farmers to regular team meetings in which South and North members participated. During the fieldwork, the first two authors also shared offices with staff, enabling them to observe the daily work routines and engage in informal conversations. Before and after their stay in Uganda, both authors continued participating in virtual team chats and workshops. One recurrent theme was the emotional dilemma faced by the Northern partners, as they were torn between their desire to help “their friends” and their (personal) need for emotional distance. Observing these meetings virtually and in person gave us a unique opportunity to collect data on the everyday lived experiences of individuals within SE partnerships, including their nonverbal displays of emotions such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, and gaze.

Focus group discussions. We conducted eight two-hour focus group discussions (four in SoSe and four in GoSe) involving smallholder farmers and project managers, with six to 20 participants. These focus groups, which met in the villages in which they were active, aimed to provide first-hand insights into the operations of both SEs. They allowed us to gain deep insights into how co-founders and the members of both SEs were emotionally entrenched

Table I. Data sources

<i>Data source</i>	<i>Types of material</i>	<i>Use in analysis</i>
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42 interviews in 2022 with co-founders, employees, volunteers, advisors, and experts from the Global South and North. <i>SoSe</i>: Uganda: 1 co-founder, 10 employees; Germany: 3 co-founders (one of them 2x) <i>GoSe</i>: Uganda: 1 co-founder, 1 Executive Director (2x), 1 Community Manager (2x), 1 Farm Manager, 1 Head of Health Center, 1 School Director, 1 Financial Officer, 9 employees; Germany: 1 co-founder, 5 team members • 8 focus group discussions in 2022 with 6–20 participants from the SEs' programs on village saving, smart farming (4 focus groups per SE) • 5 expert interviews in 2022 and 2024 • 18 follow-up interviews in 2023 and 2024 • 4 member check interviews in 2024 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaining insights into the perceptions and emotions as expressed by individuals from the Global North and Global South in both SEs. • Analysing of our informants' perspectives on Global South–North partnerships not openly expressed during meetings. • Tracking the dynamics shaping the manifesting, surfacing, and (dis-) embedding of emotional dependency over time with a focus on the emotions experienced. • Comparing the emergent themes focusing on similarities and differences between individuals from <i>GoSe</i> and <i>SoSe</i>.
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-month observations of both SEs, including 16 virtual team meetings and workshops (<i>GoSe</i>: 9; <i>SoSe</i>: 7) • Two 30-day fieldwork periods in Uganda Oct/Nov 2022, observing formal events (2 board meetings, 2 strategy workshops, 4 team meetings), daily business activities (e.g., farming, accounting, training, and monitoring), informal conversations, and community work • More than 100 pages of field notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing and comparing themes and patterns of emotional dependency within South–North SEs. • Tracking and comparing the dynamics and emotions involved in interactions between South–North teams in both SEs, including verbal and non-verbal expressions of emotions. • Analysing the efforts to increase self-sustainability from the Global North within both teams in both SEs. • Focusing on similarities and differences in the process of manifesting, surfacing, and (dis-)embedding of emotional dependency within both SEs.
Secondary data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 documents (>500 pages) including: management reports, budget planning, strategy plans, handbooks, decision sheets and presentations for internal and external use, stakeholder presentations, official announcements, conference proceedings and books, brochures, websites, social media data, status updates, e-mails, and project-related draft documents (<i>GoSe</i>: 340; <i>SoSe</i> 160) • Full access to the collaboration platform of <i>GoSe</i> (the documents date back to 2009) and partial access to the collaboration platform and relevant documents from <i>SoSe</i> (the documents date back to 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconstructing the timeline of manifesting, surfacing, and (dis-)embedding of emotional dependency in both SEs. • Examining official communication in the context of South–North interactions and intra-team interactions within the South and North teams in the SEs. • Analysing themes and patterns of emotional dependency as expressed in documents. • Tracking agendas and minutes of meetings for evidence of shared collective emotions.

in their entrepreneurial endeavours, as during our visits, everyday challenges continued to occur, such as the flooding of a field. The translator translated our questions into the local language. To prevent bias, we actively promoted respectful and open communication. Given the participants' willingness to broach sensitive topics (e.g., poverty, domestic violence, and perceived paternalism by the German partners), we are confident that we were able to create spaces in which the participants could express themselves freely.

Secondary data. We were allowed to access large parts of both SEs' drive and communication platforms, where all documents were shared. Those included protocols, decision papers, presentations, brainstorming materials, research documents, images, and reports. These documents played a pivotal role in our understanding of the context of both SEs, including the founding philosophy, vision, mission, and journey of both SEs. Moreover, the documents allowed us to track the various attempts of both SEs to foster the self-reliance of the partners from the Global South and reduce the support of the German partners over time. We used the following abbreviations in the findings section: INT (interview), INFCON (informal conversation), OBS (observation), WS (workshop), FOCGR (focus group discussion), DOC (document), INDOC (internal document), WEB (website), UG (Uganda), and DE (Germany).

Data Analysis

In our inductive comparative case study, the principles of constant comparison in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the method of Gioia et al. (2013) guided our data analysis. We used iterative cycles between our growing theoretical understanding, emerging findings, and the existing literature. Initially, we were interested in studying dependencies in South–North partnerships in SEs. However, we soon realized the pivotal role of emotions in such dependencies. To account for the mutual influence on each other, we analysed emotions as a dyadic phenomenon to understand the emotional interplay between South and North partners. Our data analysis proceeded in four steps. First, we employed an open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), looking at both SEs separately. We read and re-read the interview transcripts and assigned codes that encapsulated the various perceptions of the partnerships. We used concise phrases or in-vivo codes that reflected the interviewees' language (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), for example; “Ztttt [making a sound with the tongue] – this is a typical Mzungu idea again... [laughs]. But what should I say? Kale, kale, we'll do it... [smiles]” (OBS39, UG team member SoSe, 11/2022). By comparing the “first-order codes” we had assigned to each SE, we searched for patterns across them. Our initial coding pointed to an emotional dimension in dependency, a concept we refined in the next step.

Second, we focused on (collective) emotions at the partner and partnership level. Adopting an emotion coding approach similar to that of Pradies (2023), we coded emotional statements (Reilly and Seibert, 2003) and the narrative expressions of emotions (Kleres, 2011) in which informants referred to emotions they had felt when sharing stories about the partnership. For instance, one farmer participating in SoSe's program shared that “when [SoSe] came, we were a bit skeptical in the beginning and not so confident to

join as women” (FOCGR2, SoSe beneficiary, 10/2022). Moreover, we coded non-verbal emotional displays, including tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and posture, gaze, and touch (e.g., Riskind, 1984; Rothman, 2011). We also critically scrutinized the coding of emotions in several rounds, for example, to cross-check whether certain facial and verbal expressions should be coded as “anger” or “frustration.” We then compared and matched similar emotions and concluded that collective emotions were present. We identified distinct collective emotions, which we clustered in two different categories of emotions, namely, other (e.g., compassionate empathy) and self-oriented (e.g., frustration) emotions. For instance, when showing us around, partners from the Global South shared their pride “to do something in and for the community,” expressed in bright smiles, energetic and self-confident body postures (e.g., standing up straight, touching our shoulders), and positive words (OBS61, 10/2022). Table II provides details of the data sources for our coding of emotions.

Third, after several rounds of iterations and supported by our member checks, we realized that although both South–North SE partnerships were on distinct pathways, they went through the same emotional lifecycle. We labelled these phases as manifesting, surfacing, and (dis-) embedding collective emotional dependency. We also realized how emotional dependency *manifested* and *surfaced* in both SEs. However, only one partnership (SoSe) *disembedded* emotional dependency while the other (GoSe) perpetuated the dynamics and *embedded* emotional dependency. At this point, we realized that the emotional dependency we uncovered was characterized by an unbalanced nature that reinforced certain postcolonial patterns.

Fourth, our analysis pointed to two different pathways: one of emotional distancing and consequently dis-embedding, and one of collective maintenance of emotional presence and perpetuating collective emotional dependency. We developed a model depicting how each phase involved a specific emotional engagement practice shaped by the emotions partners experienced. Table III shows our coding tree. Examples of our empirical material are available in the supporting information.

Reflexivity, Empirical Discovery, and Challenges for the Researchers

Our approach to field access and data collection warrants critical reflection. As four white women researching Ugandan-German SEs, we were aware of the cultural distance and paid attention to the colonial context (Banerjee, 2021). We opted for the advantages of this unique field access while taking steps to address potential biases.

First, we conducted four extensive member checks with both SEs and their partners from the Global South and North in 2024. To challenge our findings, we also interviewed experts from the microfinance industry (e.g., an impact fund manager). During our fieldwork, we were accompanied by a Ugandan translator, who helped us bridge cultural and language gaps. To minimize biases related to our Global North backgrounds, a Ugandan researcher conducted 18 follow-up interviews. We consulted individuals well-versed in the Ugandan and German cultures, such as scholars studying colonial dependencies, to refine our data collection and analysis. In response to their feedback, we expanded the size and duration of our focus groups to gain deeper insights into the perspectives of the field workers and farmers. Moreover, they agreed that the strong other-orientation was not only inherently embedded in SEs, but “in

Table II. Coding of emotions

<i>Data source</i>	<i>Observable signs of emotions</i>	<i>Empirical examples</i>
Interviews (real-time and ex-post) and observations: Verbal emotional expression	Narrative expression of emotions (Kleres, 2011)	In interviews, our respondents told stories about the emotions involved in the creation of the partnership and the subsequent collaboration, for example when describing the enthusiasm at the beginning of the project
	Verbal expression of emotions (Reilly and Scibert, 2003)	In interviews, the Ugandan teams talked about “ <i>being disappointed</i> ” (INFCO55, UG team member SoSe, 11/2022) over “ <i>being helped again</i> ” (INFCO71, UG team member GoSe, 11/2022) by Germans. Ugandan field workers referred to German partners as being “ <i>helpful</i> ” or “ <i>dominant</i> ” (FOCGR3, SoSe, 11/2022)
Observations and interviews (real-time and ex-post): Nonverbal emotional display	Tone of voice (Scherer et al., 2003)	Raising or lowering tones of voice in interviews or during meetings. Ugandan staff member whispering: “ <i>we don’t really know how to fix this on our own</i> ” (INFCO85, UG team member GoSe, 11/2022). Raising one’s voice or shouting during a meeting. Speaking particularly slowly, openly containing anger
	Facial expression (Keltner et al., 2003; Rothman, 2011)	German partners furrowed their eyebrows in concern over an individual emergency in Uganda (WS, DE team member GoSe, 3/2023). In a focus group, participants widened their eyes, furrowed their brows, and pressed their lips together when talking about “ <i>being left on their own</i> ” (FOCGR5, GoSe, 11/2022)
	Gesture and posture (Riskind, 1984)	Movement of the head or arms in interactions, for example shaking of the head in disbelief, pointing fingers, and bowing of head in meetings
	Gaze (Adams and Kleck, 2003)	Ugandan employees smiled at German partners, avoiding eye contact
	Touch (Hertenstein et al., 2006)	Interviewees described physical contact as a sign of empathy, for example placing a hand on someone’s shoulder or offering a comforting hug

Table III. Coding tree

<i>Aggregate dimensions (phases)</i>	<i>Second-order themes</i>	<i>First-order concepts</i>
Manifesting collective emotional dependency	Collective compassionate empathy in the Global North (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressing sympathy with the local communities after witnessing their needs on-site Being hopeful about creating a positive social impact Feeling emotionally validated when called to help Frequently offering emotional support to Southern partners
	Collective pride in the Global South (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling proud of co-founding the SE Validating own mission through support from the Northern partners Increasing collective efficacy to contribute to the farmers' self-reliance Being excited to create positive impact in the community where locals grew up
	Collective sharing positive emotions (partnership level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing positive emotions on multiple communication platforms Sharing excitement to implement a joint mission Sharing a sense of unity through the initial successes of the partnerships
	Transition to phase 2: Disillusionment over not realizing an equal partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not achieving the short-term goals of the partnership Experiencing an internal crisis (e.g., the delayed handout of beans or irregularities in receipts) slowing down partnership's progress toward goal achievement (self-reliance) Signalling early on that the partnership's goal (self-reliance) is at risk
Surfacing of collective emotional dependency	Collective frustration in the Global North (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing perceived responsibility for partnership's goal attainment Feeling frustrated through everyday disruptions in the Global South hindering partnership's progress Blaming Southern partners for not meeting the goals set in the given timeline
	Collective fear of isolation in the Global South (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling emotionally reliant on Northern' partners instant validation Being fearful of telling the truth Being fearful of correctly portraying local realities (e.g., disruptions due to weather, starvation) Being fearful to lose the Northern partner
	Collective buffering of negative emotions (partnership level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing of negative emotions at the partner level Not sharing negative emotions on the partnership level to maintain a positive spirit Implicitly imposing an emotional culture (social order) by Northern partners through reducing platforms for sharing negative emotions
	Transition to phase 3: Northern partners' proactive push for self-reliance of Southern partner	<p><i>Active reflecting of emotions on partnership level (Dis-embedding):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Venting negative emotions Experiencing open conflict through explicit discussions (e.g., around (missed) goals, different expectations, different ways of communication) <p><i>Continuous seeking of positive emotional feedback on partnership level (Embedding):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exacerbating sharing positive emotions Not having platforms to openly express negative emotions Implicitly expecting only positive news (Northern partner)
Dis-embedding collective emotional dependency	Collective relief from handing over responsibilities to the Global South (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively emotional detaching, not coming to the rescue in emergency situations Transferring responsibilities to the Southern partners Taking a distant outsider's perspective Gradually reducing contact with the Southern partners
	Collective confidence in one's own abilities (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivating a strong team spirit Making decisions without consulting the German partner Experiencing collective feelings of self-efficacy through goal achievements
	Collective emotional distancing (partnership level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structurally separating operational day-to-day practices Seeking emotional support among local partners Collectively planning the partnership's transition toward self-reliant organization for the Southern partners Strengthening local ties in the Global South with local partners and NGOs

(Continues)

Table III. (Continued)

<i>Aggregate dimensions (phases)</i>	<i>Second-order themes</i>	<i>First-order concepts</i>
Embedding collective emotional dependency	Continuous collective urge to help in the Global North (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being able to emotionally detach from the partnership and its stakeholders in the Global South (e.g., local communities) • Experiencing ambivalent feelings of compassion, obligation, and resentment
	Collective feeling of helplessness in the Global South (partner level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not trusting that the organization would work without the German partner • Perceiving self-efficacy as low when problems occur • Experiencing disappointment about different perceptions of partnership goal • Hoping for long-term commitment by the Global North
	Collective maintenance of emotional presence (partnership level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being continuously reliant on frequent emotional support • Regularly visit Southern partners by Northern partners • Highlighting progress toward self-reliance

any type of venturing you do it with and for the community, the family, the neighbors ... this is how Ugandans have been doing business. So, everything is about relationality that builds up.” (INFCON89, UG Expert 10/2024), which confirmed our nuanced analysis of emotions.

Second, we actively maintained contact with ten Ugandan individuals within (six) and outside (four) of the SEs, including founding members and experts in agriculture, development cooperation, and social entrepreneurship. Regular debriefings allowed us to identify potential cultural misunderstandings and fostered self-reflection. For example, we presented our preliminary findings at a research workshop held at Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda) to critically reflect on the research process (Chowdhury, 2023), where local researchers challenged our findings. While our data displayed signs of emotional differences (e.g., frustration in the Global North if goals and agreements were not achieved in the given timeline vs. collective fear of isolation in the Global South) and an implicit emotional domination from the Global North, the main concepts of sharing versus buffering emotions and collective distancing versus maintaining emotional presence seemed to be largely unrelated to specific cultural differences.

Third, in analysing our observational and interview data, we paid particular attention to our relationships with informants and the potential biases associated with our identities. Having worked in the Global South, the first two authors had previously addressed critical whiteness in workshops involving Ugandans and Germans. The first author’s personal ties to Ugandans facilitated joint reflections on cultural behaviours, and her ability to speak Swahili, though not Uganda’s official language, enabled deeper engagement with some locals.

FINDINGS

Our investigation of how collective emotions in Global South–North SE partnerships unfold enabled us to delineate a three-stage evolution of collective emotional dependency during the lifecycle of such partnerships. Each phase is initiated by specific triggers

and sustained by distinct emotional engagement practices that either reinforce or mitigate emotional dependency. Figure 2 shows our conceptual model.

In the first phase, partners from the Global South and North *manifest collective emotional dependency*, which may be fueled by sharing positive other-oriented emotions, such as the Northern partners' collective compassionate empathy and the Southern partners' collective pride to co-found the SE to support their community. The sharing of these emotions may tie partners closely together and may fuel their joint activities, thereby promoting their partnership's goal, for example, of achieving the Southern partners' self-reliance.

In the second phase, *collective emotional dependency surfaces* as partners may be caught in a cycle of mutual positivity, withholding negative emotions to avoid disrupting the partnership's positive spirit. This phase may be prompted by a trigger (in our case, the disillusionment over not realizing an equal partnership), often laden with negative emotions on the partner level. These disappointments may mark a shift from the initial sharing of other-oriented emotions at the partnership level to a focus on self-oriented emotions, such as the Global North's frustration with unmet goals. The Northern partners might implicitly impose an emotional climate that prevents open sharing of negative emotions, while the Southern partners may equally refrain from expressing their concerns. This dynamic may highlight one-sided emotional dependency, as the Southern partners may align their emotions with Northern expectations, potentially "buffering" their emotions to maintain a positive spirit.

In the third phase, the partnerships may evolve along two different trajectories following a trigger. In our case, the transition to (dis-)embedding emotional dependency was triggered by the Northern partners' proactive push for the self-reliance of the Southern partner, driven by an increased self-orientation, as they unilaterally announced the termination of the partnership. First, if the Northern partners' announcement was followed by concrete and immediate actions such as hand-over sessions, negative emotions that have accumulated over time about unmet goals could be vented and eventually *dis-embed emotional dependency*. In turn, this may result in collective relief for the Northern partners, for instance, by handing over responsibilities to the South and increasing the confidence of the Southern partners in their own abilities.

Second, announcing the termination of the partnership without taking concrete steps may lead to continuously seeking positive emotional feedback on the partnership level, eventually *embedding collective emotional dependency*. For example, partners may exacerbate sharing positive emotions and highlight progress even when goals are not met, leaving hope for a continuation of the partnership. Both partners maintain an emotional presence on the partnership level, despite having ambivalent feelings and a desire to detach emotionally from the partnership. On this trajectory, the Northern partners' continuous urge to help and the Southern partners' collective feeling of helplessness can hinder the disembedding of emotional dependency.

Manifesting Collective Emotional Dependency

During the founding phase of both SEs, we observed how collective emotional dependency manifested between the Northern and Southern partners. The partners became tied together through their collective experiences in which they shared other-oriented emotions such as compassionate empathy, which fueled their partnership activities. The

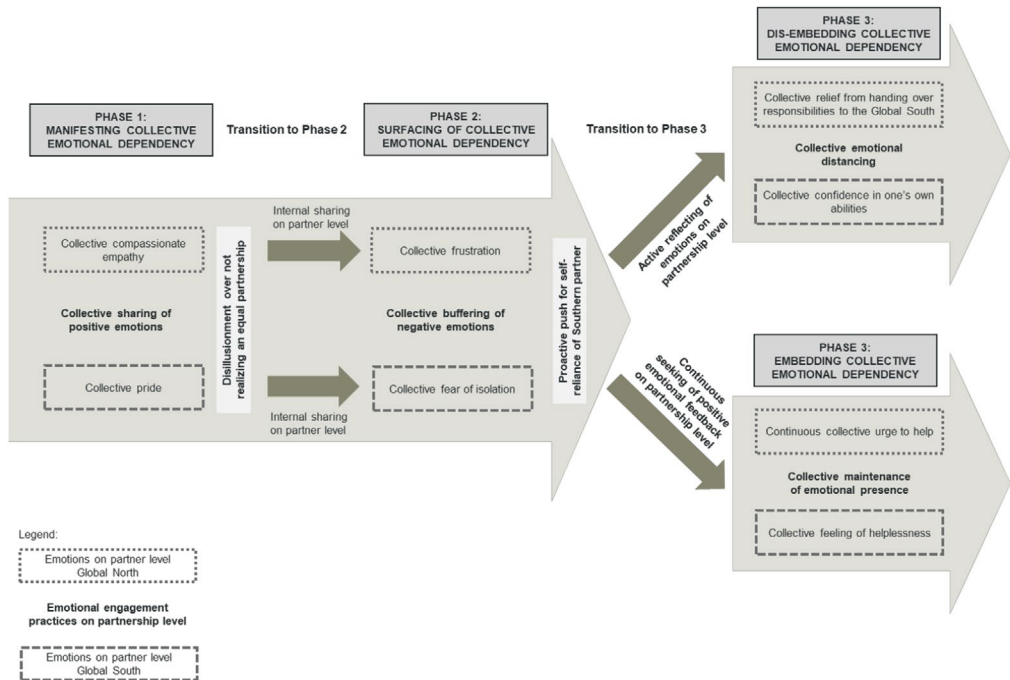


Figure 2. Process model of collective sharing emotional dependency in Global South–North SE partnerships [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

partners increasingly relied on each other for emotional support, affirmation, and commitment to their shared goal of self-reliance of the Southern partner.

Collective compassionate empathy in the Global North. GoSe was set up by two German and three Ugandan co-founders who jointly developed the idea of “giving out goats to the community” (WEB, GoSe, 3/2024). One of GoSe’s German co-founders recounted their mission:

We wanted to change something, make a difference after we saw the circumstances on site. We visited families there and saw the problems. [...] We then came up with the idea of goats as a microfinance program. (INT5, DE co-founder GoSe, 10/2022)

After seeing the people’s pain, struggles, and needs in Uganda firsthand, the German co-founders acted on their empathy with the local communities by collecting funds in Germany and co-founding the organization (GoSe). They returned to Uganda regularly, helping to build “a special place on the hill for the community with the community” (INFCON5, UG co-founder GoSe, 10/2022). When a need was brought to their attention, the German co-founders offered immediate emotional support. Even when not physically present in Uganda, they had a feeling of “just be[ing] there and connected at all times” (INFCON4, DE co-founder GoSe, 4/2022); “[the Ugandan partners] send us a photo on WhatsApp, and can’t wait to respond ... even though I [a doctor] am actually in an operating room in Germany, I just take these messages along

in my head and heart because I tried to help” (INFCON4, DE co-founder GoSe, 4/2022). Knowing that “relatively little money could change lives” (INFCON8, DE co-founder GoSe, 5/2022) made the German co-founders feel hopeful.

A German co-founder of SoSe told us, “While strolling around in Mpigi and all the farms in the villages, we saw a lot of opportunities and venture ideas [...]. I was particularly struck by all the women working so hard to care for their families yet living in desperate poverty” (INT2, DE co-founder SoSe, 5/2022). In an interview with an Impact Hub (OBS17, DE co-founders SoSe, 1/2021) the German co-founders expressed their compassionate empathy for the Ugandans:

German co-founder 1: We are a German–Ugandan team and have worked together since 2018. I had met [the Ugandan co-founder] in Uganda where I was living at that time. I studied with [names of the other two German co-founders], and we started various projects and now, since 2020, SoSe.

Interviewer: What is the big goal of SoSe?

German co-founder 2: [Looks determined directly at the camera] The big dream is to scale the whole thing effectively so that as many small farmers as possible around the world, first with the focus on Uganda and then also Africa, benefit from it and achieve food security.

The German co-founders expressed enthusiasm, stating, “The idea has great potential for impact,” while sadly reflecting on the difficult situation in Uganda [exacerbated by the COVID-pandemic], highlighting, “We wanted to make a difference in this world” (INT5, DE co-founder SoSe, 7/2022).

Collective pride in the Global South. One of GoSe’s Ugandan co-founders described the aspirations of their project: “It all started as an idea about how we could help the people out of poverty. The goat was a symbol of economic improvement.” He proudly added: “It was a Ugandan idea... we had very big dreams and were proud of the support from our German partner” (INT23, UG co-founder GoSe, 11/2022). During our first days of fieldwork, the Ugandan co-founder showed us around using dramatic gestures [pointing from the top of the hill to a distant coffee farm] to illustrate the expansive progress and development of their work: “It was just a hill in the beginning, without any buildings, without the goats, without the farm” (OBS31, GoSe, 10/2022).

Similarly, at SoSe, the partners in the Global South expressed collective pride with their Northern counterparts in their ability to “give back to their communities” (INFCON12, UG team member, SoSe, 10/2022) and in co-founding their own *Ugandan SE* [emphasis raised in INFCON23, UG co-founder SoSe, 10/2022], “which is not yet another American or European NGO” (INFCON23, UG co-founder SoSe, 10/2022). This pride was voiced by saying, “We are proud Ugandans, proud to build something on our Ugandan land for our people with the support of our German friends” (INFCON12, UG team member SoSe, 10/2022), and it was visible in non-verbal behaviours, such as broad smiles, upright postures, and enthusiastic gestures

that were apparent when they showed visitors, relatives, and governmental representatives around (OBS29, 37 and 2, GoSe + SoSe 10–11/2022). A Ugandan team member explained his excitement about having a positive impact in the community he grew up in: “I was really passionate about [SoSe] because I come from a family where farming was the major source of income, and I was raised by a single mom” (INT6, UG team member SoSe, 9/2022).

Emotional engagement practice 1: Collective sharing of positive emotions on the partnership level. In both organizations, the partners from the Global South and North shared their collective emotions by “exchanging texts, sharing pictures, and supporting each other through personal and professional challenges” (INFCON3, DE team member GoSe, 4/2022), especially at the beginning of the partnership. Having the partnership’s goal in mind, the partners became increasingly compassionate to build an SE that “benefits the community here in the Kasese region” (INT23, UG co-founder GoSe, 11/2022).

During this initial phase, there were “various platforms” for emotional exchange, such as “field visits, emails, and exchange rounds” (INFCON3, DE team member GoSe, 4/2022 and OBS9, GoSe, 6/2022) that enabled collective sharing between both partners despite the geographical distance. While the Northern partners were excited about raising more funds, the Ugandan partners were proud of sharing their first successes in the field, which increased a sense of unity among the partners:

Every year, we create a GoSe calendar with pictures of the project in Uganda, and on the back of each page, we record the progress we made in the different departments – the goat breeding, the farm, the health center, the community programs. To see the progress and the beautiful pictures over the years is so rewarding. (INFCON13, DE team member GoSe, 9/2022)

Both the German and Ugandan partners of GoSe and the local community regularly shared excitement about the progress of the project, like “celebrating the inauguration of the Main Hall in 2011” together (INDOC5, GoSe, 12/2011). The teams’ close personal relations went beyond just work. One of the Ugandan co-founders “named his children after the German team members” (OBS32, GoSe, 11/2022) and affectionately referred to the German co-founder as “one of us; he is family” (INT23, GoSe, 11/2022).

In the case of SoSe, the partners equally celebrated their successes, for instance, after they had been accepted for funding by an accelerator program: “The initial funding was a great success, and we celebrated with the German partner” (INT6, UG team member SoSe, 9/2022). Both teams were “in contact on a daily basis” to share their progress (INFCON6, SoSe, 3/2022).

Every evening, we would share how many farmers we had reached during the day and how the beans were growing. We were sending them [the German partner] lots of pictures so that they could see how we work here. And you feel good when they [the German partner] ask you how the day in the field was [smiling warmly]. (INFCON25, UG team member SoSe, 11/2022)

The continuous engagement followed by initial successes tied the partners together, manifesting reciprocal collective emotional dependency, as the partners were impatiently waiting for each other's emotional validation, reassuring each other of the importance of their work.

Transition to phase 2: Disillusionment over not realizing an equal partnership. While both SE partnerships were established with the explicit aim of fostering self-reliance of the partner from the Global South, the partners began to recognize that their plans were not unfolding as expected. They encountered setbacks, and some of their ideas proved to be difficult to implement. The notion of an equal partnership gradually faded as it became clear that the success of the initiatives depended to a certain degree on the resources provided by the North. This realization led to disappointment as the unequal nature of the partnership became evident.

Within GoSe, after years of voluntary work, the German partners realized that they could not sustain this approach indefinitely and, in 2018, began pushing for more income-generating projects to establish a self-sustaining business model. "We realized that we [the German partner] cannot continue putting our money and energy into the project forever. So, we [the Ugandan and German partner] brainstormed for ideas on how to generate more income in Uganda" (INFCON9, DE team member GoSe, 8/2022). However, this strategy repeatedly faltered because many projects did not generate the anticipated revenues (INDOC34, GoSe, 12/2020). The German partners often spearheaded ideas that, despite their anticipated potential, did not align well with local realities in Uganda. One example involved an attempt to introduce dairy processing in the community:

Sometimes, we [the Ugandan team] share ideas, but they [the German team] have the final word [not making eye contact]. They told us we should get milk from the goats and process it into butter. And then we should sell that butter. That didn't work because people here don't eat butter... At the end of the day, we did it, but of course, it did not work. (INT31, UG team member GoSe, 11/2022)

For SoSe, this disillusionment became evident as they faced mounting challenges and a growing need of both partners to consider self-reliance within a finite timeline. Despite the realization that "the farmers did not pay back enough beans after the first season" (INFCON28, UG team member SoSe, 10/2022), the German partner still decided to add more farmers for the next season to stick to the business plan:

In hindsight, it was somewhat overwhelming for us as a team. Being new to the region, we felt pressured to enroll a large number of farmers into our program. It's not a step we would have taken independently, as we hadn't yet optimized the core elements of our program. (INFCON32, UG team member SoSe, 10/2022)

A German co-founder at SoSe expressed missing the initial spirit of the collaboration: "We all believed in SoSe, we believed in the idea, and we didn't want to acknowledge that it might not be working as we initially thought (referring to the ideal of an equal partnership)" (INFCON10, DE co-founder SoSe, 6/2022).

Surfacing of Collective Emotional Dependency

The disillusionment over not realizing an equal partnership marked a pivotal transition in both partnerships, triggering a shift from positive other to rather negative self-oriented emotions, such as the partner's frustrations or fears. Yet, to maintain a positive spirit, partners buffered their negative emotions rather than addressing them directly on the partnership level. In particular, Southern partners felt like they had to align or suppress their genuine emotions with the (positive) expectations of the Northern partners who implicitly dominated this process.

Collective frustration in the Global North. In both SEs, the Northern partners experienced collective frustration when setbacks occurred in achieving the partnership goal of creating a self-sustaining organization. A German team member articulated his frustration during a workshop with the German team, raising his eyebrows: "I am annoyed by the decisions that are made in Uganda without consulting Germany; [raising his voice] why do we always have to double-check everything?!" (WS, DE team member GoSe, 3/23). The emotion was echoed by other participants listing their complaints about the Ugandan partner: "empty promises; excuses; lies; laziness; lack of ideas; lack of motivation; passivity; no will for independence; Germans as a cash cow" (WS, DE team GoSe, 3/23). While some of the issues faced by the German partners could be seen as typical challenges inherent to any collaborative effort, the depth of their built-up emotional connection added a unique layer of complexity. A German team member from GoSe had the following to say: "We are like a family to them, and the Ugandans are very proud [of GoSe]; you have to be careful not to hurt their feelings" (INFCON22, DE team member GoSe, 5/2022). This comparison to a "family" highlights the intense emotions that had developed, making it hard to address critical issues while still wanting to maintain harmony and emotional support within the partnership.

The German co-founders of SoSe frustratingly blamed the Southern partner for not meeting the goals set in the given timeline:

A lot of things that are supposed to work don't work because they aren't very meticulous, even if it's just sending an email to a potential donor without any errors or careless mistakes. These things are just very annoying and time-consuming. (INT51, DE co-founder SoSe, 3/2024)

However, they were reluctant to express frustration or criticize their Ugandan partners openly, fearing it might harm their close relationships.

Collective fear of isolation in the Global South. For partners in the South, the underlying collective fear of isolation became evident in both SEs as they realized, in times of internal setbacks, how dependent they were on the support from their German partners. We observed that when the Ugandan members of GoSe were confronted with the hypothetical scenario of their German partners discontinuing their involvement, the response was one of fear and anxiety [widened eyes; sighing], with a consensus view that the organization's survival was

intrinsically linked to Northern partners' financial and emotional support (OBS36, UG team GoSe, 11/2022). The executive director of GoSe captured this emotion: "If the Germans were to pull out tomorrow, the organization would collapse. People would not feel motivated to work here anymore." (INT28, 11/2022).

In fear of losing the support of the German partner, the Ugandan team shied away from expressing their genuine thoughts and emotions when negative incidents occurred. A particularly illustrative case involved a farm worker who, after accidentally "damaging a watering system," decided not to tell anyone, driven by an unspoken fear that the damage would eventually be discovered by a German team member (INFCON20, DE team member GoSe, 11/2022). Despite his anxiety, he refrained from sharing it, following the learned expectation that "we knew they [the German partner] would get upset when mistakes happened, so we just kept it to ourselves" (INT31, UG team member GoSe, 11/2022).

In a similar vein, a Ugandan team member from SoSe disclosed that "when such things [not meeting the expected numbers] started happening, there was no clear communication. They [the Ugandan team leader] didn't want to openly share it with the North because they were afraid of disappointing them. We were deeply invested in the mission, but showing any struggles felt like betraying their trust, so we kept it to ourselves" (INT52, 3/2024). These instances showed that, driven by a fear of isolation, the partners from the South in both SEs refrained from disclosing genuine concerns and challenges.

Emotional engagement practice 2: Collective buffering of negative emotions on the partnership level. Following the implicit emotional climate set by the Northern partners, both partners exclusively shared positive emotions on the partnership level, despite contradictory genuine feelings of fear and frustration. Thus, both partners became increasingly self-oriented, rather than openly addressing issues together. The one-sided domination was further stressed as the Northern partners in both SEs restricted the platforms available for sharing negative emotions, while the collectively shared, unfounded optimism masked underlying tensions within the partnership. For example, a GoSe team member explained, "We shifted from having frequent personal communication to relying more on written communication and status reports" (INFCON53, DE team member GoSe, 2/2023).

The shift in communication illustrated how emotions, especially negative ones, were suppressed in exchange with the partners. This was also evident when a German team member expressed concern about not knowing the Ugandan partner's true feelings:

So they [Ugandan partner] say they have the same wishes and goals that we [German partner] have, whether that's really true or whether they just say it because they think they should say it because then there will be [...] support from the Europeans, that's an open question. (INT7, DE team member GoSe, 9/2022)

There were multiple team meetings at which SoSe's Ugandan team discussed that "the fields are not looking good [placing a hand on the forehead]" (OBS39, UG team meeting SoSe, 10/2022). However, the Ugandan team decided not to share their concern with their German partner when they asked how it was going during their next joint meeting, thereby leaving them unaware of the actual situation at hand (OBS41, joint team meeting SoSe, 10/2022).

Transition to phase 3: Proactive push for self-reliance of Southern partner. The third phase of “(dis-)embedding collective emotional dependency” was initiated by the *Northern partners’ proactive push for self-reliance of the Southern partner*. After experiencing significant setbacks in their attempts to foster self-sustaining business models and eventually self-reliance of the Ugandan partners, both SEs’ Northern partners announced that they would gradually reduce their involvement in the partnership. In SoSe, this decision was announced in a meeting of the leadership team, which was followed by a two-week stay by the German team in Uganda. During these two weeks, the Ugandans and Germans took concrete steps to plan the long-term goal of self-reliance. There was room for open conflict and negotiations on site:

Hearing this was a shock for us [the Ugandan team] at first. We knew that we weren’t reaching the planned numbers. In the beginning, although they [the German team] had considered doing SoSe full-time as a regular job, it was obvious that it would not be financially possible to pay the Germans a German salary. But it was still hard to hear that they wanted to be less involved [raising his eyebrows, staring in the distance]. This decision was very emotional for us, as it totally changed our partnership. (INFCON27, UG team member SoSe, 10/2022)

GoSe introduced income-generating projects in 2018 to foster the Ugandan partner’s self-reliance. By 2022, it became evident that these projects were not meeting the revenue targets, which created an emotional turning point. The German partner grew increasingly concerned over what they saw as “a lack of ownership and proactive initiative from the Ugandan team” (INFCON56, DE team member GoSe, 5/2023), which compounded their frustration over the financial setbacks. Finally, the German partner declared that they expected the Ugandan partner to “cover a minimum of 30 per cent of the expenses” (INDOC34, GoSe, 2022).

While SoSe Northern partners’ announcement was followed by immediate action, such as travelling to Uganda for extensive discussions and handover sessions, GoSe Northern partners’ push was not as proactive, as the announcement followed a series of attempts for distancing between partners, which were constrained by the partners’ continuous emotional presence. Following the nuanced quality and intensity of these triggers, the partnerships were shaped by different emotional engagement practices, which put them on different trajectories: *Active reflecting of emotions on the partnership level* (SoSe) and *continuous seeking of positive emotional feedback on the partnership level* (GoSe).

At SoSe, during the German partner’s stay in Uganda, the partners *actively reflected on their emotions on the partnership level*. Both partners were able to vent and see their negative emotions in ways they had not done before: “We were afraid of announcing that we cannot put more time in [tense voice]. [...] After this, we had a very open discussion where we gave everyone in the team [Uganda and Germany] room to voice their concerns.” (INFCON19, DE co-founder SoSe, 10/2022). The Ugandan partners similarly expressed their negative emotions toward the German team:

I have the feeling that we can’t do what we actually aspired to do – I wanted to work here to help those women, but now, with the increasing pressure to reach our so-called

“impact targets,” we don’t deliver what we’re supposed to deliver anymore and although this makes me really sad, it was good to discuss it with the team [Ugandan and German]. (INFCON33, former UG team member SoSe, 10/2022)

The open expression of emotions highlighted a significant shift within SoSe. It demonstrated that the Ugandan team had become self-confident and sufficiently committed to voice their concerns and take decisive actions, such as redesigning the project when they felt the project’s goals were being compromised. The Northern partner’s announcement of departure, followed by initial steps toward leaving, triggered the release of suppressed negative emotions. This allowed the Ugandan partners to vent and, in doing so, gradually disemerged from the emotional dependence. As a result, they developed increased confidence, despite the persistent fears of isolation.

On the contrary, at GoSe, both partners continued to suppress their negative emotions and were *continuously seeking positive emotional feedback on the partnership level*. Both partners chose to emphasize positive feelings and continued to believe in the aspired self-reliance of the Ugandan partner:

With the school up and running now, we have achieved so much; that was always our dream from the beginning on, and to have the first pupils running around in the project is amazing. And when the number of pupils increases in the next year, the school will be able to finance itself. (INFCON92, DE team member GoSe, 3/2024)

Moreover, the German partner’s expectations toward the success of the income-generating projects shaped the collaboration further, since they expected only positive updates from the Ugandan partner (OBS27, DE team meeting GoSe, 11/2022). “I write monthly progress reports where we focus on the development of the different projects. They [the German partner] also like to see pictures and want to share them with the donors and on social media” (INFCON51, UG co-founder GoSe, 11/2022). These actions celebrated successes but also subtly discouraged the sharing of setbacks or failures. A Ugandan team member said: “K. feels pressured to share only good news. He didn’t mention that our truck rental business was struggling due to the rainy season, knowing that the German partner would be disappointed” (INFCON49, 11/2022). This was also evident at GoSe team meetings, where the focus was on celebrating achievements without addressing challenges (OBS61, German team meeting GoSe, 5/2023).

Embedding Collective Emotional Dependency

Following the proactive push for more self-reliance of the Ugandan partner, GoSe’s partners continued to suppress their negative emotions and actively sought positive emotional feedback on the partnership level. Despite the partnership’s goal of achieving the Ugandan partners’ self-reliance, the enduring emotional connection between the South and the North led to a continuous urge to help in the Global North, while the Global South exhibited signs of feeling helpless, reflecting its deep-rooted dependencies. As both partners

maintained an emotional presence, the Ugandan partners were unable to take proactive steps in managing the SE on their own, thus impeding efforts toward self-reliance.

Continuous collective urge to help in the Global North. We observed that GoSe's German team experienced a complex interplay of emotions, including ambivalent feelings of compassion, obligation, and resentment. They "aspired for the Ugandan partner's self-reliance while having doubts about their capabilities" (OBS62, DE team meeting GoSe, 3/2023). This manifested in a continuous collective urge to make sure the project would survive. A German team member said: "This project is their [the German co-founders'] *baby* [emphasizing 'baby']. It's hard for them to let go, so not all of their decisions are rational [laughing]" (INFCON58, 3/2023). The German co-founder felt unable to detach and offered continuous support:

We're still pursuing, more or less successfully, the goal of eventually being no longer needed. The overall goal is independence. This is their project, and we are working together to ensure that they stand completely alone. (INT15, GoSe, 10/2022)

Although they sought to encourage self-reliance, the German co-founder longed for a sense of being needed when the Ugandan partner is facing "difficulties along the way" (INT15, GoSe, 10/2022). Moreover, the German partner recognized their emotional dependency on the Ugandan partner, because they felt compelled to make decisions to sustain the SE's existence, sometimes even against their better judgement:

Uganda also has power over *us* [emphasizing the word] in the sense that we are forced to make decisions where we could do nothing other than agree to funding whether we wanted to or not, to ensure the existence of the organization ... We also have to protect ourselves [putting hands on chest] because we just have put so much time, money, and energy into this for 16 years; of course, we want the project to continue. (INT15, GoSe, 10/2022)

The German GoSe team faced a dilemma: to stop providing financial support risked undermining the long-term goal of fostering growth and ultimately self-reliance, yet continuing to inject funds only reinforced the very dependency they aimed to overcome – leaving them emotionally entangled in a cycle they had hoped to end. Yet their continued involvement risked perpetuating the dependency they sought to eliminate, binding them emotionally to a cycle they had hoped to break.

Collective feeling of helplessness in the Global South. GoSe's Northern partner grappled with an ongoing urge to help, which gradually fostered a sense of helplessness among the Ugandan partner:

We've gotten so used to our German partner guiding us that sometimes it feels like we hesitate to make our own decisions. We always wait for their approval, even in situations when we could take the lead ourselves. (INFCON49, GoSe, 11/2022)

The Ugandan team members were convinced that GoSe would not work without the German partner, saying: “We need their support. If they leave, I don’t think the organization will survive” (INT27, 11/2022). GoSe’s Ugandan executive director told us: “We’re counting on the support of the German partner. I know they’re talking about self-sustainability. But I’m telling you, it’s a theoretical term” (INFCON50, 11/2022).

We also observed that Ugandan team members frequently mentioned needing approval from the German partner before implementing new ideas (OBS43, GoSe, 11/2022). The reluctance to initiate projects without prior confirmation from the German team was a sign of a low sense of ownership: “They want us to work and control ourselves, but we are running to them to control us” (INT23, UG co-founder GoSe, 11/2022). For the Ugandan team members, the “reliance on the Global North for guidance and reassurance” was profound (OBS16, 11/2022). For instance, when faced with decisions on expanding their agricultural programs, they asked their German partners for permission before proceeding, thereby reflecting a deep-seated dependency on their approval and advice (OBS24, UG team meeting GoSe, 11/2022).

Similarly, during a focus group discussion with a farmer group, we asked about their everyday lived experiences and the challenges they faced:

Interviewer 1: Do you have ideas on how to improve your community?

Farmer 1: They [the German partner] should come and bring us ideas.

Farmer 2: [raised voice] Last time they told us they would bring water tanks; we are still waiting for that. We are praying for their [the German partner] return.

Group: [Nodding in agreement and pleading looks]

Farmer 3: You tell them to come back to help us.
(FOCGR6, GoSe, 11/2022)

Emotional engagement practice 3: Collective maintenance of emotional presence on the partnership level. GoSe team members collectively maintained an emotional presence, consistently providing and receiving emotional support from one another. Despite the inability to generate sufficient income in Uganda, both partners continued to highlight progress toward self-reliance as a rationale for maintaining the partnership. After the German co-founder visited the project in 2023, he shared a report accompanied by pictures of the partners smiling, celebrating together with the community, and holding goats in their arms:

A great experience with a lot of positive things and the clear conviction that we have done a good job, and, thanks to all our supporters, we have to keep it up. There is still a lot to do until the school is completely expanded and the project stands on its own two feet. (DOC55, Update report from the German partner, GoSe, 12/2023)

These shared positive experiences let the Germans regularly visit the Southern partners to reconnect and check how their partners and the community were doing. This also became evident when a German co-founder asked us to observe “what the mood is like in the project” (INFCON11, GoSe, 9/2022) before we started the fieldwork. Furthermore, one German team member who frequently visited the project shared the following:

It’s always so nice to come back and see the development, the people, the children, they really grow on you. Of course, they always send lots of pictures of their children and the project, and in the pictures, everything usually looks rosy, but then sometimes the reality is different. I think it is important to visit the project regularly... I don’t think that we would otherwise really know what’s going on there. [long pause] I guess you wouldn’t call this a healthy relationship. (INT50, GoSe, 3/2024)

In summary, GoSe’s Southern and Northern partners had normalized their collective emotional dependency as a standard and indispensable element of their collaboration, which was sustained through ongoing emotional support, regular visits by Northern partners, and a continuous emphasis on progress toward self-reliance.

Dis-Embedding Collective Emotional Dependency

After announcing their withdrawal and openly sharing negative emotions on the partnership level, the German SoSe partner started to dis-embed their collective emotional dependency by actively distancing themselves emotionally from their Ugandan counterpart. While the Global North was relieved to hand over more responsibility to the Global South, the Ugandan partner gained confidence in their abilities.

Collective relief from handing over responsibilities to the Global South. After being confronted with the negative emotions of their counterparts during their stay in Uganda, the German partner planned to hand over “more responsibilities to the Ugandan team,” and they were later “relieved to see that it worked quite well” (INT51, DE co-founder SoSe, 3/2024). As part of the internal capacity build-up and strengthening of the Southern partners, the “[Ugandan co-founder] [was] taking a fundraising class every Thursday” (INT35, UG co-founder SoSe, 11/2022). Moreover, the partners agreed to plan a transition phase in which the “number of meetings and communications gradually declined” (INFCON15, UG team member SoSe, 10/2022), thus reducing contact between the Global North and the South. This included “post-exit support and follow-up assistance for a defined period” as well as “periodic check-ins, advisory services, or technical assistance” to ensure a smooth transition (INFCON37, DE co-founder, 12/2022). By establishing “these bi-weekly calls and then only monthly calls,” the German co-founders had to cope with no longer being needed: “We tried to take an outsider’s perspective, reminding ourselves not to come to the rescue all the time” (INFCON39, DE co-founder SoSe, 11/2022). Additionally, the German co-

founders talked to coaches “to get support and an outsider’s perspective on managing the transition and exit phase” (INFCON37, 12/2022).

This allowed the German co-founders to move away from emotional responses to calls for help that had often focused on immediate “rescues” or short-term fixes, such as hastily solving a sudden shortfall in funding. Consequently, the German team did not get involved in the decision-making processes anymore:

The March season is over and was completely organized by the Ugandan team. The agreement was that we would withdraw from the decision-making processes. They also independently raised additional funding. (INT51, DE co-founder SoSe, 3/2024)

This shift brought a collective sense of relief in the Global North as responsibilities were handed over.

Collective confidence in one’s own abilities in the Global South. The collectively planned transition also opened new avenues for the Ugandan team, who saw it as an opportunity to enhance their abilities: “I thought it would give us [the Ugandan team] the freedom to make decisions quickly, also on the ground as we know what is happening” (INT52, UG team member SoSe, 3/2024). A Ugandan team member added: “The implementation is now faster because decisions are taken here, internally, at the local level. It used to take much more time when the international team helped us make decisions because everyone had to have an opinion on the matter” (INT40, 11/2022). This allowed them to “tailor decisions more closely to local contexts and needs” (OBS37, UG team meeting SoSe, 11/2022). Recognizing these shortcomings, the team’s new approach marked a significant shift toward greater contextual sensitivity. Overall, the Ugandan team gained confidence in their own abilities after the strategic shift toward greater self-reliance.

Emotional engagement practice 4: Collective emotional distancing on the partnership level. SoSe engaged in collective emotional distancing through reducing emotional involvement and attachment in interactions or decisions, as an emotional engagement practice to disembody collective emotional dependency.

By separating operational day-to-day practices structurally as part of their transition plan, the German partner reduced everyday emotional encounters that would otherwise continue to involve them in local realities, for example, the everyday challenges of the farmer groups. A German co-founder told us: “As we only met every other week, we didn’t know what exactly was going on. If they [the Ugandan partner] needed our support, we discussed it during those meetings. Last week, they forgot about it [...] I think they are busy with bean distribution [smiling]. For me, this is also a sign that they don’t need us anymore” (INFCON45, 11/2022). Furthermore, the partners started to seek more emotional support from their local team:

We have a strong team here [in Uganda]. [Name of Ugandan co-founder] is still in contact with the German team, but only in their biweekly calls. [...] We now discuss

more within the local team, and everyone brings in ideas on how we can improve [name of SoSe]. [...] We know that we can rely on each other when one needs help in the field, for example. (INFCON40, UG team-member SoSe, 11/2022)

By focusing on building strong local connections by “collaborating with local NGOs” (OBS35, UG team meeting SoSe, 11/2022) and communities, the partners became less emotionally dependent on each other. Ultimately, the German co-founders stepped back and allowed the Ugandan partner to gain confidence in their abilities and decision-making.

DISCUSSION

In a context shaped by colonial legacies, South–North SE partnerships have emerged as instrumental conduits to tackle entrenched social issues. To understand how such partnerships may attain their ultimate goal of Southern partners’ self-reliance, prior research has predominantly focused on overcoming tangible forms of dependency, such as financial constraints or know-how imbalances, thereby drawing an incomplete picture of the multifaceted nature of dependency in Global South–North partnerships. Our study uncovers the intangible and intricate dynamics at play, as we introduce emotional dependency, shedding light on the double-edged nature of collective emotions. Our findings indicate that while both tangible and emotional dependencies can reinforce longstanding power imbalances, they do so in distinct ways. In what follows, we will discuss how our findings contribute to the literature on emotions and social entrepreneurship in three ways.

Uncovering Emotional Dependency and the Dynamics of Collective Emotions

Social entrepreneurs’ pro-social motivation and their felt “obligation to ameliorate and prevent wrongdoing to others” (Laqueur, 2009, p. 37) have been considered essential to tackle today’s most pressing grand societal challenges. Driven by their compassion and empathy, social entrepreneurs aim to focus on the social needs of others, for instance, by forming partnerships with SEs in the Global South. While the literature portrays such (collective) venturing as an effective and altruistic act (André and Pache, 2016; Grant, 2008), it remains unclear how their pro-social motivation affects social outcomes (e.g., Stevens et al., 2015a, 2015b). Understanding these micro-dynamics is important to explain how partners build social relationships, assert their social standing, and potentially preserve power, sometimes at the expense of others (Fischer and Manstead, 2008).

Our study addresses these gaps by exploring how the collective emotional experiences of Southern and Northern partners in a joint SE unfold. We found that the strong desire to have a positive impact on others and the ongoing patterns of (unmet) personal emotional needs led to dependencies created by shared emotions of individuals involved in the partnership. Specifically, we introduce emotional dependency as a new form of

dependency that refers to the extent to which partners rely on each other for ongoing emotional support and validation.

In so doing, we add to recent studies that have sought to move beyond the emotions of individual agents (Zietsma and Toubiana, 2018), particularly those of individual social entrepreneurs (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019). Embedded in the theory of collective emotions (von Scheve and Salmela, 2014; Zhang et al., 2024), we offer insights into how and why collective emotions become constitutive and constituting elements of mutual dependency.

Furthermore, we challenge the prevailing one-sided assumptions that positive pro-social emotions unilaterally lead to positive outcomes for SEs (Bacq and Alt, 2018; Miller et al., 2012). We illustrate how such emotions (e.g., compassionate empathy) may inadvertently maintain the status quo of mutual dependency. We find that social entrepreneurs' compassionate yet sentimental feelings for "distant strangers" (experienced by Northern partners) and the sense of close collaboration (experienced by Southern partners) may bind partners for self-serving reasons. This may not only prevent the partnership's goal attainment of self-reliance but can also ultimately distort development interventions. In our cases, empathy and compassion (i.e., other-orientation) toward the partners in the Global South were soon accompanied by an intrinsic satisfaction of being needed in the North and a feeling of emotional validation through the support of the German partners in the South (i.e., self-orientation).

Proliferating Postcolonial Patterns in South–North Partnerships' Emotional Dependency

Recent research highlights how inequalities in South–North partnerships are enacted through everyday interactions and emotional norms (Pingeot and Pouliot, 2024; Richey et al., 2021). These micro-level experiences (Mir and Mir, 2013) can subtly reinforce structures of domination, turning ostensibly collaborative SE partnerships into one-sided arrangements (Ulus, 2015). Emotional scripts – such as the performative display of hope, humility, or gratitude – often legitimize unequal partnerships while shaping how Southern actors are expected to feel and respond (Ahmed, 2004; Larsen, 2021). However, while this research has revealed how affective expectations reinforce asymmetries in South–North partnerships, it remains unclear how partners dissolve or, eventually, resist these emotional dynamics in practice.

Our study problematizes the potentially extractive nature of emotional dependency embedded in South–North partnerships of SEs, reinforcing ongoing postcolonial micro-practices. Despite their seemingly benevolent intentions to help marginalized partners (Hein and Ansari, 2022), Northern partners failed to adequately assess their true impact (Ormiston and Seymour, 2011), specifically concerning disempowering Southern partners and hence reinforcing the prevailing social order (Stadtler and Karakulak, 2020). Specifically, our findings reveal that experiencing conflicting emotions led to emotional engagement practices that masked (Vuori et al., 2018) and redirected the Northern partners' own but also others' negative emotions. To meet the Northern partners' expectations, the Southern partners implicitly suppressed their negative emotions, hence engaged in imbalanced emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), even in the face of inequality and frustration (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014). This subtle form of emotional

dominance reveals how affective hierarchies are reproduced within unequal relationships (Ahmed, 2004; Bergseiker et al., 2010).

While prior research highlights how less powerful actors strategically manage emotion through masking or scripting (Scott, 1990), our findings complicate this view. Emotional expression in our study was not merely performative or goal-directed – for securing legitimacy or approval (Burkitt, 2012) – but often unconscious and ambivalent, rooted in deeper affective entanglements. Southern partners suppressed discomfort not only to conform, but also because of internalized emotional attachments to Northern partners. They were caught between an internally-focused anxiety (Vuori and Huy, 2015) over speaking the truth and a genuine desire to maintain the relationship. This reflects emotion-focused strategies of coping with oppression (Phillips et al., 2015) and aligns with the observation that “the most serious negative impact of colonialism has been psychological” (Boahen, 1989, pp. 107–8) – a process through which emotional alignment becomes internalized, relational disconnection deepens, and emotional agency is gradually eroded. By foregrounding the extractive facets of emotional dependency, we move beyond material or institutional analyses of inequality to emphasize the affective architectures of power. We illustrate the invisible but pervasive ways in which emotions are shaped, silenced, or mobilized in unequal organizational settings, leading to social and intraorganizational consequences – particularly by limiting partners’ attention to emerging issues and reducing their capacity to take corrective action toward the partnership’s goals (Vuori et al., 2018). This lens opens space for a more nuanced understanding of emotional agency (Jakimow, 2022), showing how even seemingly minor emotional acts – like expressing frustration or withdrawing affect – can carry structural implications. We thus extend the postcolonial discourse (Ulus, 2015) to collective emotions embedded within organizations (Banerjee, 2021) and partnerships.

The Role of Self- and Other-Oriented Emotions over the Partnership’s Lifecycle

Prior studies on the evolution of inter-organizational partnerships have mostly focused on their formation (Koschmann et al., 2012), outcomes (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019), and developmental stages (Selsky and Parker, 2005), while less attention has been paid to the mechanisms sustaining partnerships or facilitating purposeful disengagement upon goal accomplishment. However, partnerships often endure solely based on the shared convictions of dissimilar actors about the central issue (Selsky and Parker, 2005), remaining vulnerable to derailment or even dissolution. As many partnerships end up as “paper tigers” (Poncelet, 2001), it is important to examine the factors contributing to the partnership’s goals over time.

We address this gap by exploring the evolution of SE partnerships, illustrating the emotional challenges encountered *after* their formation, and explaining how collaboration may be sustained until mutual goals are reached. Our findings show that triggers may lead to different emotional engagement practices by and between the partners. While in the early phase, both partnerships were driven by other-oriented emotions, they transformed into more self-oriented emotions in later phases. This intertemporally helped

the partners to focus on their long-term goal of the Southern partners' self-reliance. Moreover, we elucidate how partners in one of the SEs (SoSe) maintained their commitment toward the partnership's goal by recognizing each other's emotions and adjusting to them.

In so doing, we add a fine-grained understanding of why and how partners experience other- and self-oriented emotions (Miller et al., 2012) over time. While prior studies in the context of social entrepreneurship unequivocally focused on pro-social motivations and emotions and (to a lesser extent) motivation that is pro-self (Mittermaier et al., 2023) as drivers for engaging in SEs, they neglect factors that are external to the entrepreneur. We argue that the interplay between the emotional other-orientation *and* the emotional self-orientation is a constituent of the lifecycle of SE partnerships. While all partners were driven by high other-orientation that translated into positive shared experiences in the initial stage of the partnership, both Northern and Southern partners were more driven by self-orientation in later stages, led by their focus on the partnership's goal of self-reliance and survival. By highlighting that there may be critical turning points in which the self-orientation overrules other-orientation, we challenge the prevalent argument that a high degree of pro-social motivation by an entrepreneur will ultimately turn into a collective motivation (Shepherd et al., 2019). Instead, in contexts marked by asymmetric power relations, emotional strain, and conflicting expectations, pro-social motivation can become fractured or reoriented toward self-preservation and boundary-setting. Self-oriented emotions may then serve as a form of protective agency, prompting partners to recalibrate their engagement. Additionally, this finding moves beyond seeing social entrepreneurs, particularly founders, driven by stable, trait-like motivations (Koe Hwee Nga and Shamuganathan, 2010; Stephan and Drencheva, 2017) but as a context-dependent and relationally constituted process (Clarke and Holt, 2010; Goss, 2005), shaped by structural conditions and emotional dynamics.

Moreover, we argue that the emotional engagement practices of emotional distancing, such as withdrawing from others' feelings, reducing emotional sharing, or emotionally withdrawing from relational obligations, emerge as critical forms of affective boundary work (Burkitt, 2012; Hochschild, 1983), which may mitigate the negative side of compassion. While emotional distancing is often interpreted as detachment or dysfunction, we show that it can serve as a coping mechanism that protects individuals from compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002), empathic strain (Frost, 2003), or perceived emotional exploitation (Larsen, 2021). For Northern partners, such recalibration allows for emotional containment, helping them to avoid over-identifying with Southern partners in ways that reinforce saviorism or hinder local autonomy/Southern partners' self-reliance (Nilsson et al., 2022). For Southern partners, emotional distancing represents a form of agency – a means of reasserting control over emotional labor that is often undervalued or rendered invisible in South–North partnerships (Ahmed, 2004). This aligns with recent scholarship that has moved beyond depicting Southern actors as passive recipients of Northern influence to emphasizing their relational and strategic agency (Eyben, 2010; Kim, 2024). Even when their responses appear reactive, Southern partners in our cases were not merely conforming but engaged in subtle emotional negotiation – choosing when to perform, suppress, or resist (implicit) emotional expectations. Hence, expressing negative emotions may be particularly relevant when the partnership reaches the end of

the lifecycle and transitions toward self-reliance. As demonstrated in the “active reflection of emotions” (SoSe) pathway, collective expressions of conflict, disappointment, or frustration acted not as breakdowns but as moments of emotional release (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014), enabling actors to renegotiate and facilitate the (dis-)embedding of emotional dependency.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study has several limitations, it also presents opportunities for future research. First, the focus on two SE partnerships may not capture the varied dynamics in other Global South–North partnerships, suggesting a need for broader empirical investigations. The dynamics we observed may be shaped by unique contextual factors, such as the duration and intensity of partnership engagement, as well as varying levels of resource availability. Future studies could explore how these emotional dependencies manifest in different settings to determine whether similar boundary conditions influence these dynamics across diverse Global South–North partnerships.

Second, while we offer insights into the build-up, embedding, and dis-embedding processes of emotional dependency in the case of SoSe, following the partners’ collective emotional distancing, we lacked further data to explore more deeply the specific *conditions* under which the dis-embedding phase itself may unfold. Therefore, a critical avenue for future research lies in unpacking why and how certain actors or partnerships overcome the nested emotional engagement practices, specifically, resisting imposed emotional scripts (Ahmed, 2004), while others remain entrenched in emotional dependency. One plausible explanation is that psychological safety within the partnership – defined as the perceived freedom to express vulnerability without fear of retaliation – may play a pivotal role (Edmondson, 1999). Similarly, emotional reflexivity at both the individual and organizational level may influence actors’ capacity to recognize, name, and reframe their emotional dependencies (Burkitt, 2012). Moreover, differences in organizational culture – such as a commitment to mutual learning, feedback structures, or shared governance – may either enable or inhibit these shifts. Future research could therefore benefit from longitudinal or comparative case studies to examine how these factors intersect to shape emotional trajectories over time and across contexts. Such investigations would clarify the antecedents of conducive emotional engagement practices and deepen our understanding of emotional agency in postcolonial and asymmetric organizational relations.

Third, although we problematize the extractive facets of emotional dependency, future research should dive deeper into the emotional tactics employed by seemingly powerless actors, particularly those in structurally subordinate positions within South–North partnerships. While existing studies have highlighted the emotional burdens imposed by hierarchical work environments (Hochschild, 1983), specifically within humanitarian and development sectors (Ahmed, 2004), less is known about how marginalized actors actively and strategically engage in micro-resistance, hence overcoming or reconfiguring potential dependency structures. These tactics may include emotional withdrawal that entails practices through which actors selectively perform, withhold, or reshape their emotional responses to subtly negotiate power

and agency (Jakimow, 2022; Scott, 1990). Such emotional strategies may not dismantle dominant structures outright, but they offer crucial insights into how emotional agency is exercised even under conditions of asymmetry. Exploring these practices can uncover the nuanced ways through which individuals resist emotional extraction or redefine the terms of emotional engagement in partnerships that are otherwise framed by dependence or obligation. By attending to the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat, 2010, p. 14), future research can challenge the narrative of passive emotional compliance and instead recognize the strategic emotional labor of those navigating North–South relational inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Our study sheds light on the intricate role of collective emotions within the context of South–North SE partnerships. We demonstrate how emotional dependency, shaped by both positive other-oriented and negative self-oriented emotions, develops during the lifecycle of the partnerships – ranging from the manifestation and surfacing of collective emotional dependency to their eventual (dis-)embedding. We highlight how distinct emotional engagement practices on the partner and partnership level may contribute to the partners’ goals through the active sharing of negative emotions instead of suppressing or masking them. By unpacking the inadvertent outcomes of emotional dependency in SE partnerships and considering the unintentional manifestation of postcolonial dynamics, we offer a novel and fine-grained understanding of the micro-dynamics in addressing grand societal challenges locally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the editor, Robert Nason, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive guidance and developmental feedback.

We are also deeply grateful to the social enterprises and their members. They generously welcomed us into their organizations, shared their experiences, and placed their trust in us.

We would like to thank Martin Luba for his dedicated support in data collection and translation, and Anthony Tibaingana as well as the participants of the Doctoral Research Colloquium at Makerere University Kampala for their warm hospitality and thoughtful guidance during data collection and analysis.

We are especially grateful to Sergio Lazzarini and Peter Musinguzi for their generous feedback. We also thank the participants of the EGOS Colloquium in Sardinia (Sub-theme 27: Constructing Businesses’ Social and Environmental Responsibilities in the Global South: Tensions between Tradition, Innovation, and Imposition), in particular Emamdeen Fohim, for their valuable input.

Further thanks go to Michael Meyer and the participants of the Research Colloquium at Vienna University of Economics and Business, Matthias Waldkirch and the participants of the EBS Impact Institute Research Colloquium, and Frank-Martin Belz and the participants of the Research Seminar at the Chair of Corporate Sustainability at the Technical University of Munich for their helpful comments, questions, and encouragement.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the EBS Research Fund for enabling the research stay in Uganda. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

NOTE

- [1] The terms “Global South” and “Global North” do not pertain to geographic regions but describe the varying levels of economic power and wealth among countries in different parts of the world (Braff and Katie, 2022).

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