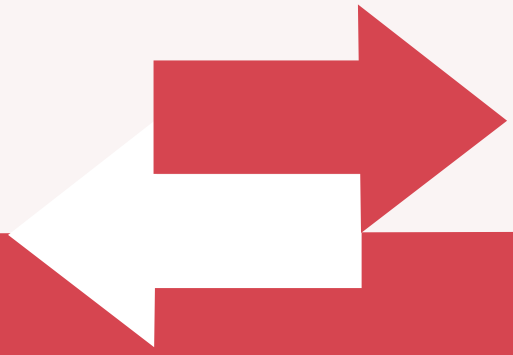
Shifting the Power

Future Brief Series No. 2



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Introduction

For all actors working in the development sector the notion of 'shifting the power' is undoubtedly familiar. Publications on this topic abound and seminars and debates are organised almost weekly. Within this ongoing dialogue, there seems to be widespread agreement that power asymmetries – within the sector itself and in the broader global system – are a root cause of many development problems and, hence, should be a prime concern for development cooperation efforts. While tackling these asymmetries may be a shared goal, there is less clear and shared understanding of how this can be accomplished – i.e. of what 'shifting the power' would entail in practice. To begin a targeted and joint pursuit of a fundamental power shift, development actors need the drive, perseverance, a clear goal, cooperation and knowledge. Yet, faced with the overload of information and discussions on this topic, it has become difficult to know where to start to acquire the necessary.

The document you have before you was developed by Partos and The Broker to guide readers in their quest for knowledge and help them navigate the vast amount of information out there. It builds on and seeks to provide input for a knowledge trajectory Partos has facilitated on the issue of Shifting the Power (see box 1). This 'future brief', as we have called it, traces some of the most relevant manifestations of and shifts in power dynamics currently happening in the development sector. Additionally, it identifies key questions and promising pathways for the future. Following this introduction, the first section looks at three dimensions of the development sector in which power asymmetries and power shifts manifest themselves: in the organisational structure and partnership practices of (I)NGOs; in the funding mechanisms that characterise the development sector; and finally, in the sector's leadership structures. In the second section we delve a little deeper and look at what lies beneath the surface of these manifestations: a history of colonialism, Eurocentric understandings of what progress and modernity are, and socio-cultural conventions that shape the language and idea(l)s that define the development sector today. Finally, the third section shifts attention to what lies before us: identifying some key questions and recommendations for the road ahead as well as some of the most helpful resources for continuing the work on shifting the power in the future.

Box 1: Partos' actions towards shifting the power

Partos has been actively working on the theme of Shifting Power for multiple years. Among the organisation's first activities was the establishment of the Shift-the-Power Lab, which aims to shed light on power relations in development partnerships and the forces underpinning them. Together with a number of committed members, Partos has developed some key resources and is undertaking various activities to learn about and take action towards a meaningful transformation of the development sector:

- The Power Awareness Tool, which assists development organisations to make internal power imbalances more visible and analyzs power relations;
- The Decolonisation of Aid series, which consists of webinar conversations among expert speakers on different aspects of the decolonisation debate;
- The Partos Future Exploration, which is a series of podcasts in collaboration with Disrupt Development, voicing development professionals' views on the sector's future and its implications;
- The Partos Innovation Festivals, which provide inspiration, solutions and connections towards a more sustainable, equitable and just future.

1. Power structures in the development sector and their alternatives

The organisational structures of (I)NGOs, the funding mechanisms within development cooperation, and the leadership structures in the sector constitute three dimensions within which power imbalances in the development sector are manifested. By exploring these dimensions these imbalances become more concrete and, hence, can be better understood and addressed. Other structures and relationships in the sector – that are both shaped by and further perpetuate existing power imbalances – could be discussed as well. For the scope of this brief, however, we will zoom in on the three aforementioned areas.

As stated in the introduction, there seems to be widespread agreement on the need to rectify current power imbalances within and outside the development sector. There is less consensus, however, on how to achieve the envisioned shifts in power, which impedes a shared sense of future direction. This section looks in more detail at organisational, funding and leadership structures. First, for each of these dimensions the current state of affairs and ongoing debates is discussed. Thereafter, examples of emerging alternatives and the questions they raise, are presented. The presented examples may be seen as the harbingers of a more widespread transformation. It is from these experience and practices – both good and bad – that we can learn and determine what will work for a sustainable and systemic power shift in the future.

1.1 Organizational structures of (I)NGOs and partnership practices

The current state of affairs

For most working in the development sector, it will come as no surprise that successful partnerships are built on such principles as mutual trust and support, clearly articulated and mutually agreed-upon goals, equity, and transparency with regards to organisational and financial matters. Given this widespread understanding, it is all the more surprising and worrying that North-South partnerships in the development ecosystem generally diverge gravely from these ideals[1]. Traditionally, North-South partnerships have been organised in a top-down, hierarchical manner, with donors at the top of the power pyramid, Northern (I)NGOs acting as the middlemen, and Southern, local CSOs at the bottom[2]. Even when partnerships are formed that explicitly seek to include Southern partners, in practice, the terms of the partnership agreement and governance structures are usually in the hands of the Northern (I)NGOs. The limited power allocated to Southern partners is further perpetuated by the premium placed on technical and financial resources and a lack of appreciation for the assets local CSOs bring to the table – such as deep knowledge of and connections with grassroots communities.

The push for more resources and decision-making power for local CSOs was most prominently launched at the World Humanitarian Forum in 2016, resulting in the Grand Bargain – now updated to become the Grand Bargain 2.0. Central to this international agreement is a commitment to participation, taking as a starting point "the need to include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient".

Despite this commitment, however, a systemic, lasting transformation of the development sector has yet to be seen. To date, local CSOs generally still have little negotiating power to alter the terms of their partnerships, often have tokenistic roles at the decision-making table, and are still forced to comply with the directives and procedures of international partners and donors[3]. Proposal submission processes and monitoring- and evaluation-reports, for example, are tied to donors' timetables, even if these do not align with local realities and priorities.

Emerging alternatives and questions for the future

Over the past couple of decades, critical voices in the development sector have urged to take a more localised, bottom-up approach in their organisations and to embrace truly inclusive partnerships[4]. Various initiatives have seen the light of day aiming to put these critical views into practice, transforming partnerships and organisational structures with varying degrees of success.

- In terms of organisational transformation, radical relocation was initially seen as an important step towards localisation and shifting the power. However, experience of organisations like Oxfam and ActionAid shows that, while the relocations sent a strong political message with potentially positive spin-offs, impact remained limited.
- Decentralisation, in various guises, is also seen as a form re-organisation that may be conducive to shifting the power to the South. This process, it is argued in 'The Future of Aid INGOs in 2030', is the direction in which the aid system is increasingly moving.
- Part of the decentralisation trend, but often discussed separately is the 'localisation' agenda. Interpreted as a form of decentralisation, 'localisation' is the remedy against excessive centralisation. It becomes a pragmatic measure that minimises the 'transaction costs' of aid; making aid more efficient by bypassing intermediary brokers, particularly international NGOs with expensive transaction costs. Interpreted, by contrast, as a transformational concept, localisation becomes a way to redress power imbalances; a means to recalibrate relationships between international and local actors in the organisation of aid.

These forms of re-organisation are often packaged as a step towards 'shifting the power'. Whether this is indeed the case, however, can be questioned. As argued in an open letter by a group of over 140 Southern CSO, these efforts may even have a negative effect on Southern leadership, "reinforc[ing] the power dynamic at play and ultimately clos[ing] the space for domestic civil society." When talking about emerging alternatives for shifting power, re-organisation practices may be part of the puzzle, but they will have no transformation impact if they are not adequately combined with a rethinking of partnership practices. Various NGOs have been experimenting with ways of involving communities and Southern CSO partners in their decision making processes, exploring promising pathways that go beyond intra-organisational shifts.

- One interesting example is the 'Shifting the Power' project. Carried out by six international NGOs –ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund, Concern and Oxfam – worked together to support local actors to take their place alongside international actors in order to create a balanced humanitarian system. The project sought to meaningfully shift the power by 1) strengthening local and national organisational capacity for decision making; 2) supporting local organisations to have greater representation, voice and recognition in relevant networks and platforms; and 3) influencing international organisations to promote the role of local and national actors. Also including a large research- and learning component, the Shifting the Power project has yielded valuable insights for all actors who want to pursue a meaningful transformation in current partnership dynamics and realise a true power shift.

New organisational and partnership models are vital but not enough, to accomplish a meaningful shift in power. This demands a comprehensive strategy, combining multiple changes. And success, moreover, depends to a large extent on (I)NGOs' capacity and willingness to adjust to their new role and answer one difficult question with 'yes': Are you willing to change your identity: from leaders to facilitators[5]?

1.2 Funding mechanisms

The current state of affairs

Current funding mechanisms that dominate the sector form another manifestation of the power imbalances in the development ecosystem. Under these mechanisms, local CSOs are generally either hired as sub-contractors to attain specific tasks or receive restricted project funding on short funding cycles[6]. In line with the organisational structures discussed in the above, the bulk of funding is channelled through large (I)NGOs, leading to grave inequities in resource allocation and decision-making, whilst also breeding imbalances in responsibility and accountability[7].

As the power imbalances fostered by this funding system and the need for more flexible funding become apparent, new funding models are emerging and being implemented. The intention of alternative funding mechanisms is shift power to the South and to better support smaller, local and less formal groups by enhancing the flexibility, accessibility, responsiveness, quality and relevance of the resources for Southern CSOs. A CIVICUS consultation in 2019 brought to light what the aid sector regards as essential elements for transforming existing structures into inclusive funding mechanisms that benefit local CSOs and grassroots movements. To realise funding mechanisms that can meaningfully shift the power actors should:

- Offer long-term or flexible funding with accessible application processes and light-touch, meaningful reporting requirements;
- Offer funding for more informal, potentially unregistered grassroots movements;
- Build relationships between and among activists, funders and experts, enabling reciprocal sharing of non-financial resources;
- Unlock other sources of resource that would reduce reliance on international funding.

Emerging alternatives and questions for the future

Various alternatives for the funding mechanisms that define today's development sector have been initiated over the last decade. Many of those alternatives carry within them one, more or all of the aforementioned elements.

- Local or community philanthropy constitutes a form of, and force for, locally driven development that aims to bolster community capacity and voice, build trust, and tap into local resources[8]. A good example here is Tewa, a women's fund based in Nepal with a network of over 5,000 individual donors – all of whom are ordinary Nepali citizens. Their (often small) donations are pooled together to be allocated as grants to community initiatives and women's groups[9].
- Beyond community philanthropy, the idea that funding from outside the community should be temporary and ultimately redundant is gaining ground. A greater number of development organisations have started working with local governments, countering wide-held misconceptions that governments cannot or do not want to contribute to development projects[10]. The projects of the Karuna Foundation, for example, require the local government to make a substantial contribution. Collaborating with the local government can ensure that a project is managed locally, so that when the project's financing stops, the changes can endure. Moreover, NGOs not working with local government run the risk of establishing parallel systems, with potentially detrimental effects: Bypassing government may undermine the latter's capacity and legitimacy.

As already mentioned, neither community philanthropy nor working with the state are new ideas: they have been around since at least the 1990s. Where they have been implemented in isolation, however, they have not brought about the envisioned shifts in power.

Therefore, it would be more effective to look at those approaches as pieces of the puzzle, which, once connected with other structural changes in funding mechanisms, will yield more impact and complete the puzzle. Shifting the power in development cooperation is about systems change. Changes in organisational strategies (see foregoing section) and in practical funding applications are important but, in themselves, insufficient.

They operate on the surface of the problem. What is needed is a combination of new funding practices and a new funding system. And to realise the latter, one questions remains key: Are donors and funding institutions able and willing to bring about structural change in their operations – and, as a result, transfer their power? Only if the answer is 'yes' will new funding mechanisms be able to take root and generate a lasting transformation[11].

1.3 Leadership structures

The current state of affairs

Intimately connected to organisational and funding structures are the leadership structures of the development sector. Although much progress has been made, globally, the majority of leaders in the sector are still white and male. Leadership remains unequally distributed, and the people whose lives are most affected by the support provided, often have very minimal input in decision-making processes. It thus appears that, while diversity, equity and inclusivity are the buzzwords of the day, the development sector itself is not able to live up to its own standards.

An additional issue linked to current leadership structures is the occurrence of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in the development sector. Power imbalances resulting from the donor-recipient relation between aid organisations and community members may result in such exploitative relationships. Additionally, within (I)NGOs malpractices have been signalled as well. To improve the situation, development organisations have adopted varying safeguarding practices, such as stronger codes of conducts, more systematic risk assessments, and updated grievance procedures. A comprehensive approach, dealing with both safeguarding as well as with power aspects, is contained in the Integrity System Guide, developed by Partos, GoedeDoelenNL and Governance & Integrity.
The difficult conversations ensuing from the #AidToo movement (see box 2) can be seen as part of a broader reflective process in which power relations within organisations as well as between (I)NGOs and their Southern partners are being reimagined.

Emerging alternatives and questions for the future

The aforementioned shortcomings and the urge to foster greater diversity in the development sector have led to the realisation that safeguarding practices will not yield a lasting transformation without some structural changes. In consequence, new leadership models are being adopted, aiming to correct the power imbalances of today.

- One such model is the feminist leadership model, which espouses such principles as self-care, collaboration, inclusion, dismantling of biases, and sharing of power[12]. The model is that it establishes women's issues as a top priority for (I)NGOs and donors – issues that are currently often treated as 'special topics' and, as a consequence, have long remained underfunded[13]. Inspiration and examples can be found in the Feminist Leadership Project, where feminist leaders in the development sector share how they have come to their leadership positions, what they have learned, and what challenges they are facing.
- Another model that is experimented with is the model of members leadership. Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA), a grassroots organisation of Latina immigrant women in the San Francisco area, provides a clear example from which much can be learned. MUA transformed itself into an organisation that was led rather than influenced by the people who make up its base. To realise the transformation from a member-based to a member-led organisation commitment was not enough. Shifting the power demanded technical assistance and capacity building, significant dedicated financial resources, as well as time, patience, and the flexibility to be responsive to conditions on the ground[14].

When attempting to implement new leadership models, it is important to grapple with issues of representation and ask who speaks for the community. A good starting point is the realisation that communities are not homogeneous and have their own internal power dynamics. If the aim of alternative leadership models is to give people decision-making powers, then the most marginalised individuals and sub-groups within a community need to be identified and represented in emerging leadership structures.

The membership and feminist leadership models are examples of alternative intra-organisational approaches. Again, it must be underscored that, while these changes are important, in isolation they are mere drops in the ocean. Leadership in organisations is a starting point; but addressing leadership structures in the development sector at large and, going beyond that, in the broader global system, is the main challenge. To meaningfully change these big structures and realise a lasting shift in power, the undercurrents that feed the manifestations of power imbalances discussed in this section need to be dissected.

2. What lies beneath: The deep roots of power imbalance

At this stage it is important to explicitly differentiate between various levels of 'power imbalances' that are relevant in our journey towards a meaningful power shift: 1) the aid we provide and the actions that come with it; 2) the system of development cooperation in which that aid is embedded; and 3) the broader global system in which development cooperation is, in turn, embedded and shaped. Shifting the power means addressing power imbalances at all three levels. It also means recognising that the behaviour and mechanisms we seek to change – regardless of the level at which they are played out – have not developed and been sustained in a vacuum. Rather, our behaviour, organisations, mindsets and mechanisms are rooted in and produced by underlying, often invisible forces. We may change our organisational structures, implement new funding mechanism, or adopt leadership models that safeguard more diversity and inclusion, but without addressing these forces lurking in the background, 'shifting the power' is not likely to move beyond those superficial changes.

Towards a decolonised system

A critical look at the forces that underpin today's power imbalances in the development sector immediately reveals the sector's intimate entanglement with the European colonial system of the 19th and 20th centuries. Increasingly – of their own accord as well as pushed by societal developments like the #BlackLivesMatter movement – development actors are entering the process of the 'decolonisation of aid' (see, for example the dialogue series organised by Partos, KUNO and the International Institute for Social Studies).

Ultimately, this difficult process serves three interlinked objectives: 1) to reveal how our historically rooted relations and cultural conventions still shape the sector; 2) to facilitate an inclusive conversation about how structural racism manifests itself in the aid sector; and, finally, 3) to identify a shared path towards a decolonised system that is truly inclusive and no longer mirroring colonial power dimensions of our past.

Box 2. The impact of the #AidToo movement

In 2018, revelations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in Haiti by Oxfam personnel turned the industry's attention to sexualised forms of power abuse and triggered the #AidToo movement. This movement fostered momentum for a process of change that was already underway in some organisations. Despite the firing of staff and the various summits to establish codes of conduct, new allegations surfaced against humanitarian organisations, implicating them in aid-for-sex scandals in African refugee camps. These later scandals showcased the discrepancies between high level policy actions and the situation on the ground. The #AidToo movement illustrated the need for alternative leadership models that harness organisational structures free of sexism, racism and other forms of power abuse.

Rethinking language and idea(l)s

Colonial relations are not the only historical continuities that are fuelling present-day power imbalances in the development sector. European notions of modernity and progress still define the goals and objectives of the development project to a large degree. The current development model is still geared towards the ideal of 'Western' modernisation, thus maintaining the domination of the South by the North and undermining the agency and capacities of recipient countries and people[15]. The ideals of Eurocentric modernisation are also reflected in the language used in the development sector. Rigid dichotomies such as 'modern' vs 'traditional' and 'donor' vs 'beneficiary', as well as seemingly apolitical terms like progress and development are manifestations of normative ideas about the 'right' path dictated by the global North. This language is a symptom of, and at the same time reinforces, our ideas and concepts.

It is vital, when talking about language and concepts, to also critically reflect on North-South dichotomy that has pervaded our discourse. Sticking to this dichotomy in our language and thinking may create a barrier to real dialogue and to the achievement of two-way learning and transformational global cooperation[16]. Moreover, understanding power imbalances along the fold lines of the North-South dichotomy, may also make us blind for power imbalances between groups in society. National or local elites deciding on the sharing of or access to governance, resources, services and justice at the expense of marginalised groups is a power imbalance that warrants correction as well.

In short, if our language continues to reflect power asymmetries of old and if it limits our understanding to particular levels or areas of imbalance, meaningful transformation will not be realised. Reinventing the development dictionary, with Southern actors – including the most marginalised – taking the lead, will be a critical step on the road towards shifting the power.

3. Towards a power-shifted future

In the foregoing we have discussed some of the key manifestations of power imbalances in the development sector. Thereafter, we have presented some examples of how development actors are working towards more equitable and inclusive structures and the questions these efforts are generating. Finally, we have briefly looked beneath the surface of these manifestations, and showed that they are rooted in historical, cultural and linguistic structures that demand critical reflection if we want to meaningfully shift the power in a sustainable manner. In this final section, an attempt is made to summarise the key take-aways that can be derived from the foregoing and present the most promising pathways for future action towards a transformed development sector. Finally, a list of useful resources is included, to help the reader along on this road towards a power-shifted future.

Key take-aways

Current power asymmetries must be tackled once and for all but there is insufficient clarity about how to achieve the envisioned shifts in power, impeding a shared sense of future direction and the upscaling of concrete actions.

Meaningfully shifting the power means addressing power imbalances at various levels: 1) in the aid we provide and the actions that come with it; 2) in the system of development cooperation in which that aid is embedded; and 3) in the broader global system in which development cooperation is, in turn, embedded and shaped.

Successful partnerships need to be built on such principles as mutual trust and support, equity, and transparency but North-South partnerships in the development ecosystem are generally top-down and hierarchical, with Southern, local CSOs in a disempowered position.

There is a strong **focus on financial resources and measurable results, and a lack of appreciation for the assets local CSOs bring to the table.** This means the hierarchical power relation is kept in place and CSOs often have little negotiating power to alter the terms of their partnerships and local communities cannot take charge of their own development.

To shift the power, **alternative organisational models are being implemented that aim to accomplish more localised, bottom-up structures**. The success of such models hinges to a large extent on (I)NGOs' ability and willingness to embrace their own new role: that of facilitator instead of leader.

Dominant leadership structures reflect the patriarchal and colonial assumptions pervading the development industry. The large majority of leaders lives in the global North, is white and male. This means that a power shift is not only needed between North and South, or between large (I)NGOs and local CSOs; **a power shift is also needed within the organisations in the development sector**.

When implementing new leadership models considering issues of representation is key. Especially the **most marginalised individuals/groups within a community need to be adequately represented in leadership structures.**

Forces underpinning today's power imbalance – colonialism, socio-cultural conventions and language – must be brought to the surface and addressed. The decolonisation of aid should be key priority for the sector.

Understandings of power imbalance must go beyond the North-South dichotomy. Sticking to this dichotomous understanding reinforces the 'us and them' narrative, hampers collaboration and creates a blind spot for power imbalances between groups in society; e.g. between national or local elites and disempowered communities.

Recommendations and potential pathways for the future

To realise a meaningful and lasting transformation of the development sector and generate the desired shift of power, many actions have yet to be taken and much difficult reflection and dialogue lies ahead:

- In an inclusive and participatory dialogue, **identify how power imbalances manifest themselves in your organisation, programmes as well as in your partnerships**. Consider organisational, funding and leadership structures as well as other dimensions. Make the power dynamics and their effects on particular groups or individuals in your organisation and work explicit. Only by knowing what forces are at play can a process of transformation take off. The Partos Power Awareness Tool can be of help.
- When developing strategies to realise a shift of power in your organisational, funding or leadership structures, make sure that actions are not only correcting imbalances 'on the surface' **but also include steps that address underlying power dynamics**. In other words, the necessary **practical changes should go hand in hand with more fundamental and structural reflection and transformation**. For inspiration, consider the critical questions asked for each of the example from practice provided in section 1. Additionally, engage in or initiate dialogue within your organisation (and in the broader development sector) about racism, misogyny, in- and exclusion and the effect of colonialism in your organisation and work.
- When embarking on a trajectory of 'shifting the power' ensure that, from the beginning, **the process of transformation is inclusive and that all stakeholders – especially the marginalised or traditionally disempowered parties – are represented**.
- **Flexible, long-term and better accessible funding mechanisms** should not be the exception but the norm.
- **A mindshift is needed with regards to resources for development**: they are not property of the global North to give away; they are a public goods to be spent on development. This mindshift also implies that **decisions over funding allocation should not be made by traditional donors or Northern (I)NGOs but by Southern organisations** with intimate knowledge and understanding of what is needed on the ground.

Key resources for action on shifting the power

Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation, Peace Direct (2021)
Shares the insights of 158 consulted practitioners and academics on power dynamics and imbalances in the aid sector. The report focuses on structural racism and presents visions of a decolonized system.

Addressing the Resourcing Problem: Strategic Recommendations on Mechanisms to Increase Resources Going to Civil Society Groups in the Global South, CIVICUS (2019)
Outlines 4 potential mechanisms to increase resources for and shift the power towards global South grassroots movements.

Fostering Equitable North–South Civil Society Partnerships: Voices from the South, WACSI (2021)
Captures the voices of global South NGOs in an attempt to identify, understand and inform what is needed to better respond to the challenges of engaging in partnerships with larger INGOs.

Shift the power! Local ownership of the global agenda, Vice Versa (2019)
This special edition of Vice Versa contains stories of change of organisations and communities from the global South who are taking steps toward reducing their dependence on foreign donors.

Joining forces, sharing power: Civil society collaborations for the future, Partos/The Broker (2018)
Showcases examples of new ways to engage in development cooperation towards more inclusive and sustainable development.

How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power: What donors can do to help make that happen, Grantcraft (2018)
Outlines key aspects of community philanthropy and provides practical recommendations for donors to fostering this type of funding.

Turning the tables: Insights from locally-led humanitarian partnerships in conflict-affected situations, Saferworld (2020)
Presents examples of successful, locally-led crisis responses to illustrate that local leadership can fulfil its promise when a supportive environment is created.

Feminist Leaders for Feminist Goals: An agenda for change for the social impact sector, FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders (2020)
Sketches the contours of the feminist leadership model and offers practical recommendations for its implementation.

Power Awareness Tool: A tool for analysing power in partnerships for development, Partos/The Spindle (2020) Tool to help make power imbalances in development partnerships more visible, enabling partners to analyse and reflect on power relations.

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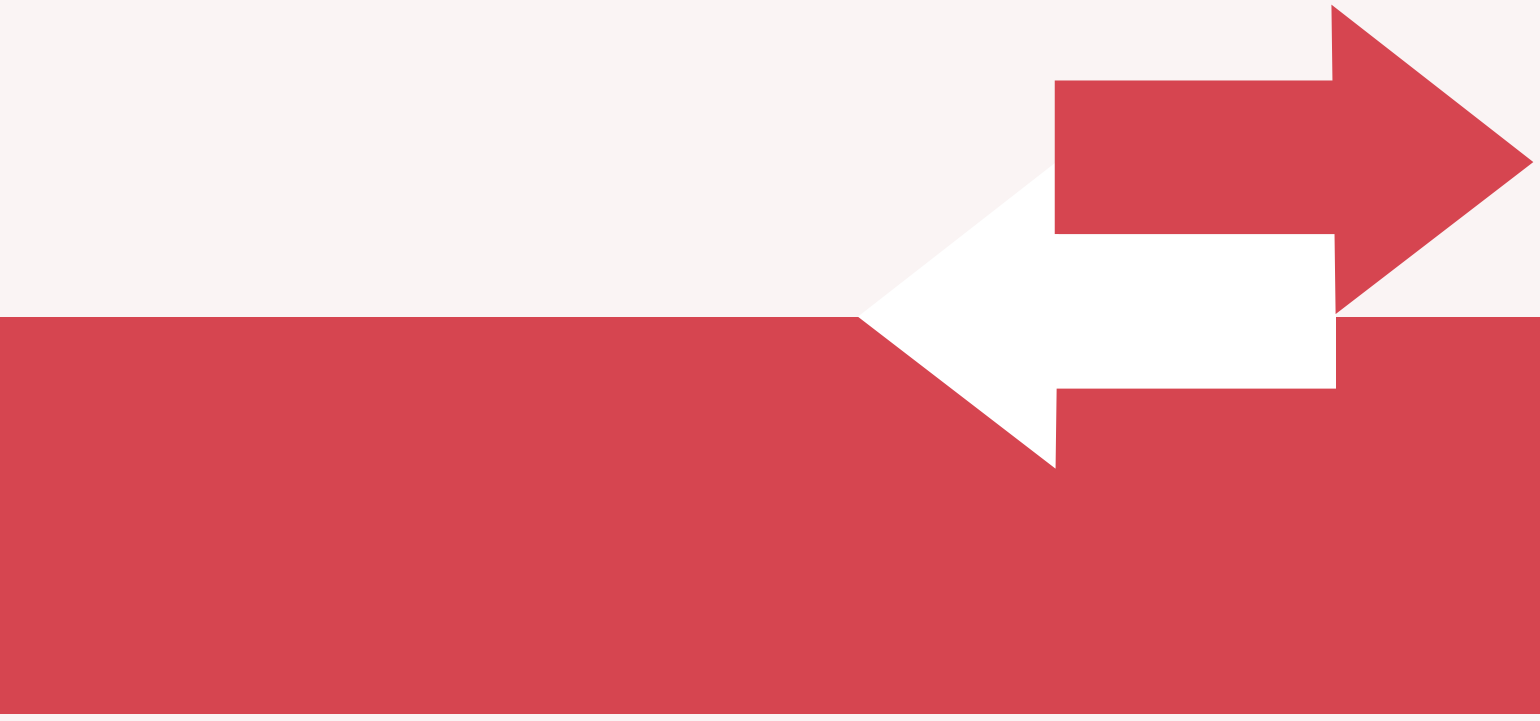

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