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Dream paper:
Shift the Power

Colophon

The Dream paper Shift the Power is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation.

The Partos Innovation Hub is a hybrid ecosystem where development professionals interact, create, inspire, undertake, work, learn and innovate together to become better able to navigate the future and accelerate change within themselves, their organisations, and in development cooperation.

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Daniel Liévano

Preface

We humbly present this *Dream paper: Shift the Power*. We take pride in the contents: a richness of insights and recommendations for development organisations in the global North and South, donors and bilateral agencies; as well as the many participants and organisations who have made valuable contributions and had the courage to explore an inconvenient issue, addressing both power related malpractices of international development organisations and flaws in the systems in which they operate.

We are aware that meeting the recommendations will require substantial effort on the part of the broader international development sector – both to internalise the insights and implement the suggested changes, with adjustments to be made in terminology, behaviour, practices and systems. But we believe it will be well worth it. It is pivotal that our own systems, conduct and partnerships reflect the principles guiding development cooperation, such as solidarity, equality, respect and mutuality. **These principles of ‘fairly shared power’ are also key to unleashing and leveraging the countervailing, convening and co-creative civic power for the bigger ‘Shift of Power’**, both in wider society and particularly in overcoming the imbalance between those who own and decide and those who are excluded from or have limited access to governance, services and justice.

Unbalanced and misused power remains a major challenge for development cooperation, and is often a root cause of poverty, inequality, exclusion, mismanagement of natural resources and conflicts. This applies to all three domains of development cooperation:

- Humanitarian and emergency aid.
- Nationally and internationally partnering for prevention, resilience and sustainable development.
- Policy coherence for sustainable development; i.e. minimising the negative footprint of ourselves, our governmental and private institutions and our society at large on others, in particular on the poorest and most vulnerable groups and regions.

In this respect, our pursuit of broader systems change is only credible if our own activities, behaviour, and partnerships reflect an appropriate and fairly shared balance of power.

We hope that this *Dream paper: Shift the power* informs and inspires all those who want to implement and further the insights and recommendations contained within. We can make the world a better place for everyone, and we start with ourselves!

Bart Romijn
Director, Partos

Introduction

The Netherlands works with civil society organisations globally, helping to protect and raise their voices in the fight for equality, human rights and democratic processes, with a particular focus on women's rights and gender equality. Civil society organisations (CSOs) like trade unions, human rights and environmental organisations play a vital role in keeping people informed, advocating for rights, and expressing people's concerns. Investing in and working with CSOs is what makes Dutch Development Cooperation so unique internationally, particularly its unique focus on the working with the most marginalized communities. These partnerships are underpinned by engagement in strategic dialogue on goals and results, exchanging knowledge and networking.

However, these partnerships are often based on unequal power relations. Often, but not solely, in the relationships between CSOs from the Global North and the Global South. The Partos Community of Practice (CoP) – Shift-the-Power aims to develop practical solutions to address the problem of power imbalances between CSOs in the global North and those in the global South. While the problem of unequal power relations is addressed in many platforms and networks, this CoP seeks to make a unique contribution to this movement by exploring new ways of working within Dutch Development Cooperation, specifically the Power of Voices Partnerships (PoV).

Power of Voices Partnerships (PoV) is a grant instrument of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Netherlands and part of the [Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society](#). It focuses on the strong, independent role of civil society organisations. Cross cutting themes include working in strategic partnerships, and the promotion of women's rights, gender equality and inclusion.

Knowledge brokering

The CoP – Shift-the-Power brings together more than 130 development professionals from Dutch development organisations, as well as their partners. In 2020 the CoP embarked on an exploratory journey to explore a new division of roles between CSOs from the Global North and South. This publication is not a comprehensive guideline on how to work towards a more equal and just international development cooperation system but rather provides a summary of the thought processes, dialogues, debates, workshops and events organized under this CoP.

Partos hopes that this publication is another stepping stone in our collective learning journey as a sector to work towards a more equal and just international development cooperation system.

If you want to join the CoP – Shift-the-Power or if you want to provide feedback on this publication, please get in touch: info@partos.nl

Summary

This synthesis paper summarizes the Working Group's discussions about a desired division of roles between Northern and Southern CSOs. The more clearly we can envisage these roles, the better we can see what system change is needed. And we will continue to ruminate, collectively, on these dynamics, resulting in recommendations for donors, CSOs themselves, in the North and in the South, and other relevant actors whose commitment is needed to bring about system change.

The richness of the papers on which the synthesis builds, goes beyond the division of roles and includes a critique of the current system, as well as additional ideas for system change. These dream papers are the result of four parallel co-creative processes that we are sharing 'as they are' without substantive editing, the streamlining of terminologies or eliminating overlap and duplication. This allows others to use this raw material to develop more, possibly diverging insights.

Partos 'shifting the power'

For multiple years Partos has been a driver of change within the 'shift the power' movement pushing for more equal power relationships within development cooperation. This is an interesting collection of projects and initiatives that Partos has led or supported:

- The [Power Awareness tool](#) assists development organisations to make internal power imbalances more visible.
- The [Decolonisation of Aid series](#) where international thought-leaders explore the decolonisation debate from different perspectives.
- The [Future Brief on Shift the Power](#) guides readers in the vast amount of information out there related to shifting the power.
- The [Publication: Joining Forces, Sharing Power](#), Civil society collaborations for the future.
- The [Re-imagining the INGO \(RINGO\)](#) is a two-year social lab where international thought-leaders develop and launch prototypes to transform INGO institutions and systems in which they function.

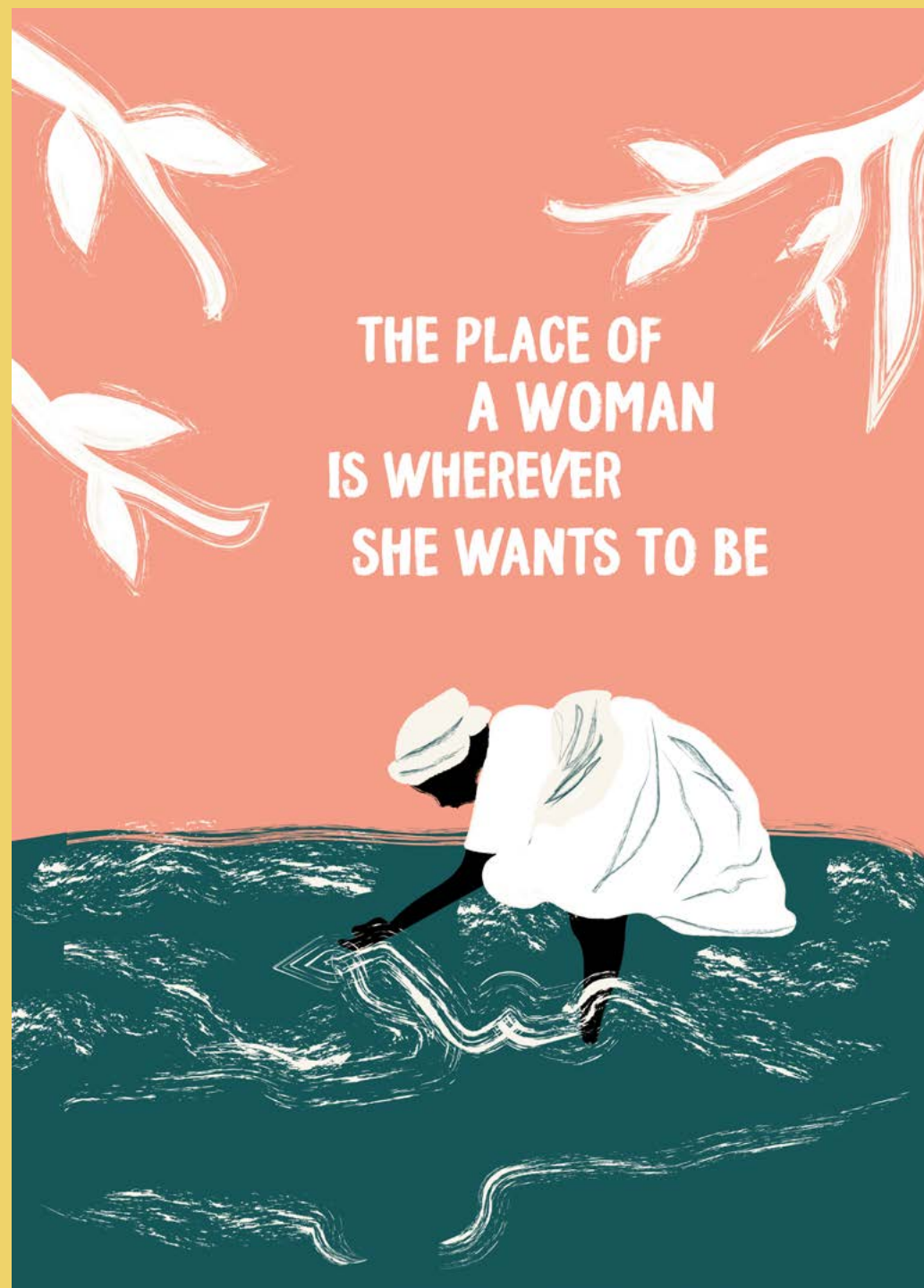
In the upcoming years, Partos will scale its efforts to accelerate the shift of power dynamics within international development cooperation. Together with our members and constituency, we aspire to:

- Co-create **policy recommendations** for Partos members and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs through our Community of Practice Shift the Power and Strategic Partnership Lab.
- Pilot **practical solutions** for systems change with the RINGO social lab
- Co-create more **inclusive narratives and communications** approaches for the sector with communication experts
- Develop an **Inclusion & diversity benchmark** to support Partos members in their journey to become more inclusive & diverse
- And continue to improve the '[Power Awareness tool](#)', create knowledge products like the [Future Brief](#) and organize dialogues and debates like the [Decolonisation of Aid series](#).

If you like to stay updated register for our newsletter from the [Partos Innovation Hub](#).

If you like to become involved send a mail to info@partos.nl

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Synthesis: Towards a new division of roles between Northern and Southern CSOs

Why is it that in the current international development cooperation system, Northern CSOs end-up being the most powerful in most partnerships for development?

This is the core question that the Partos CoP – Shift-the-Power began with addressing. This point of departure was chosen because a shared understanding of how power relations emerge is a crucial step towards finding solutions to improve the system. The scope of the analysis was limited to the Power of Voices Partnerships (PoV). These partnerships can be considered a sub-system of the larger international development cooperation system.

Understanding the system

The Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society emphasises local ownership and balanced power relations in CSO partnerships. This is a priority that is reflected in the selection criteria for funding. At the same time, the policy triggers dynamics that undermine the development of balanced power relations. As the sub-system of PoV partnerships evolves, patterns of decision-making unfold that contradict with the principles of local ownership, community led development and equality. Factors that influence this process are related to the way policy is formulated, the way programmes are selected for funding, the way Dutch CSOs take the lead in the formation of consortia, and the way Southern CSOs are invited to participate in the implementation. Based on a mix of financial muscle, culture and interests, a practice of decision-making evolves in which the roles of Dutch CSOs are biased towards decision-making, and the roles of Southern CSOs are biased towards decision-taking. In the early stages of the policy cycle, power relations take shape that determine how decisions are likely to be taken throughout the entire programme cycle. The table on the right depicts the 14 factors identified by the CoP that are at the root of unequal power relations.

14 factors root causes of unequal power relationships

Three different angles for analysing the PoV sub-system	Factors identified by the Community of Practice	
	Categories of factors	Factors
Relations	Relations between the Dutch government and its citizens	1 The Dutch Government is accountable to parliament whose members are elected by Dutch citizens. 2 Policy priorities are based on Dutch and international agenda setting.
	Relations between the Ministry and Dutch CSOs	3 The policy supports partnerships that are selected through a competitive tendering process that is based on Dutch priorities and agenda setting. 4 Dutch CSOs are best positioned to be in the lead of building consortia and applying for a strategic partnership with the Ministry.
	Relations between Dutch CSOs and Southern CSOs	5 In the competitive tendering process Dutch CSOs become the spiders in the web of building alliances. 6 Dutch CSO select partners in South (not the other way around). 7 Southern CSOs become partners after important decisions have been taken already.
	The chain of relations facilitating upward accountability from South to North	8 The development cooperation chain becomes like a cascade of South-North oriented contractor-client-relationships, in which the contractors must account for their performance to the clients.
Perspectives	Money is more valued than other resources	9 Sources of power of Northern CSOs (mainly control over money) provide more influence than sources of power of Southern CSOs (knowledge and legitimacy). 10 Southern CSOs are too dependent on external funding, which puts them in a weak negotiation position.
	Ethnocentrism	11 Western knowledge is given a higher status.
	Interests	12 Organisational interests are often not made explicit.
Boundaries	Eligibility criteria	13 Eligibility criteria are in favour of well-established CSOs, that are not necessarily the most effective change agents.
	Risk aversion	14 Risk aversion by Dutch CSOs dominates the selection of partners.

Although within the system there is some room for manoeuvre to counteract the above-mentioned systemic factors, the effect of these measures is too limited. System change is needed.

The next logical question to be addressed is: ***What should that system change consist of?*** Of course, system change should create an enabling environment for more balanced power relations. But what do equitable relations look like? It was felt in the CoP that before thinking about the system we want, we need to become much more specific about the relations we want. Therefore, the CoP engaged in addressing the question: ***What would the division of roles between Northern and Southern partners look like in an ideal situation?*** The answers to this question need to go beyond making a list of principles. They should not be limited to addressing only one or two of the above-mentioned factors. There is no silver bullet. Answers need to address the entire spectrum of revised roles, responsibilities, modalities for risk sharing, change in mindsets, language and culture, that are needed to bring about real change. This should include: how agendas are set, by whom, and how different agendas and interests can be consolidated or harmonised. In the course of answering the above question concerning the division of roles positively, and in substantive detail, it becomes easier to think about the features of a changed system that makes the dreamt division of roles possible.

The next section is a synthesis of what the CoP came up with concerning the division of roles with regards to:

- Partnership building
 - Agenda setting, strategy development and implementation
 - Advocacy
 - Resource mobilisation (and allocation)
- Communication, representation and the language we use cuts across all these areas.

“

There is no silver bullet. Answers need to address the entire spectrum of revised roles, responsibilities, modalities for risk sharing, change in mindsets, language and culture.

”

Towards a new division of roles in partnership building

The role of Northern CSOs in partnership building

When CSOs in the North engage in partnerships with CSOs in the South:

- They need to do so on the basis of equality and be aware of the factors that often lead to power imbalances in partnerships for development.
- They need to engage in partnerships that go beyond working within the framework and the timeframe of a funding policy or programme.
- They need to be open to partnerships that are initiated and led by others, including actors in the South that want to choose those partners that are most suited to address the needs of the communities they are working in.

The role of Southern CSOs in partnership building

When CSOs in the South engage in partnerships with CSOs in the North, they need to act and position themselves in a way that they can negotiate on a basis of strength and equality.

Strength is derived from:

- A strong constituency;

- Well-established linkages with- and knowledge about communities;
- Capacity to raise and manage funds from local and international sources.

Evidence of such strength provides a basis to negotiate as equal partners.

Mechanisms to make such partnership building possible

Preferably, the partnership terms are laid down in MoUs for long term collaboration, in which partners agree on issues such as decision-making, mutual accountability, transparency, mobilising and sharing resources, communication and representation.

One of the more practical measures to enable CSOs from the North and South to have equal opportunities to initiate partnerships and to search for and find suitable partners, is the establishment of market-places or match-making platforms where civil society organizations can present/showcase what they can offer and what they need. This way, partners can find each other and negotiate on a more equal footing.

Systemic change needed to create an enabling environment for balanced partnerships

From the division of roles described above it can be deducted that in a new system partnership building precedes the development of project and programme proposals for funding purposes. This is to ensure that all partners, including CSOs and CBOs from the South, have a seat at the discussion table right from the start, and that they fully participate in co-creation and co-investment throughout the entire project or programme cycle.

With regard to a policy framework that creates such an enabling environment, one of the core questions that needs to be addressed is: ***What is needed to make the transition from a vertical aid chain, in which a policy***

at the top-end sets the rules of the game for everything that is funded downward the chain, to a system where relational ‘horizontalism’ prevails? (see chapter 6).

Towards a new division of roles in agenda setting, strategy development and implementation

The role of Northern CSOs

Northern CSOs supporting marginalised people and communities in the South, should respect and apply the principle: nothing about us without us. They need to become enablers of community-led agenda setting which includes harvesting priorities, ideas and solutions from the global South, including from the most marginalized at community level, CBOs and CSOs acting at higher levels.

Northern CSOs will have to work in close collaboration with Southern CSOs who are best positioned and who have adequate capacity to fulfil the listening role at community level. Northern CSOs need to check the integrity of these processes and make sure that the nothing-about-us-without-us principle is respected. To this end, Northern CSOs need to develop the capacity to understand SDG related issues from various perspectives including from a Southern CSO perspective and from a community level perspective.

Northern CSOs need to advise donors on how to organize funding in a way that the voices of the most marginalized and ideas and solutions formulated in the South can become a main reference point for determining what will be supported with which resources.

The role of Southern CSOs

Southern CSOs are at the frontline of harvesting priorities, ideas and solutions from the global South, including from the most marginalized at community level, CBOs and CSOs acting at higher levels. This needs to be done through dialogue and in a careful, bottom up and participatory

way, not protocol driven or limited to checking boxes. Time frames for harvesting priorities and ideas need to be determined by local and national dynamics, and not by project-, programme- and policy- cycles of donors in the North.

Listening to communities requires intimate knowledge of the social fabric at the community level. Such knowledge cannot be acquired from distance or through occasional short visits. Therefore, Southern CSOs are best positioned to fulfil the listening role at community level.

They also need to further develop their capacities to listen to people who are excluded within communities because of their gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. Although, at national level there may be organizations representing the most marginalized, at grass-roots level the voices of the most marginalized are often muted. This is because they often do not assert themselves, which is related to low levels of self-esteem due to being stigmatized and being discriminated against. Innovative methods to also listen to the voices of these groups need to be developed.

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Southern CSOs are best positioned to fulfil the listening role at community level.

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Systemic change needed

A new system needs to encourage that the voices of the most marginalised, and ideas and solutions formulated in the South should become the main reference point for determining what will be supported with which resources. For that to happen, the time frames for harvesting priorities and ideas need to be determined by local and national dynamics, and not by project-, programme- and policy-cycles of donors in the North. Therefore, it is important that the harvesting of priorities is a continuous process and not limited to the initial stages of a Northern funding programme. Can we think of a policy framework that would make that possible? How to reconcile the demands of the policy cycle in the North with the need to respond flexibly to the demand in many different countries and communities, each with their own specific funding needs in terms of pace, size and terms?

Towards a new division of roles in advocacy

The role of Northern CSOs in advocacy

Northern CSOs need to engage in making community voices from the South heard in the North, and, where applicable, highlight the connections between factors in the North and problems in the South such as unsustainable Northern lifestyles and the extractive economic policies that have created the climate crisis and sustained global inequality.

The role of Southern CSOs in advocacy

Southern CSOs, need to engage in aggregating community voiced priorities and bringing them to the attention at the national level and, in collaboration with Northern CSOs, at and global levels. Southern CSOs should be careful not to replicate the same power asymmetries with local CSOs that now characterize relations between Northern and Southern CSOs. They should refrain from gate-keeping and act as conduits for communities to voice their concerns and needs in the corridors of power, and support them in getting a seat at the tables where their interests are at stake.

Systemic change needed

In communication to Northern audiences, language needs to be purged of colonial legacies, racism, ethnocentrism and elitism. Therefore, CSOs North and South, should engage in developing a new and more respectful lexicon for development cooperation.

While developing this new lexicon it is important to realise that this is more than an exercise in semantics. The metaphors and words used are essential building blocks of a system. A system cannot be changed if terminologies remain the same. For example, continuing the use of the concept of the vertical aid chain makes it very hard to think about a system that is based on cooperation rather than aid, and that is not a vertical chain, but a horizontal platform.

Towards a new division of roles in resource mobilisation and allocation

The role of Northern CSOs in resource mobilisation and allocation

There is a role for Northern CSOs to support Southern CSOs with developing their capacities in:

- Mobilising resources from domestic and directly from foreign sources, without Northern CSOs in between as grant making intermediaries;
- Developing their own grant making capacity;
- Managing financial resources and strengthening financial resilience;
- Learning, and further developing their knowledge and skills in key areas relevant for fulfilling their mission. Developing and maintaining their domestic constituency.

To this end Northern CSOs should support their Southern partners with long term and flexible investments in organisational capacity that is not limited to a programme cycle. Northern CSOs should be transparent and accountable, not only to donors but also to other partners and stakeholders. With regard to knowledge as an important resource,

Northern CSOs should facilitate exchanges between CSOs from the South, focused on learning and innovation, and enabling them to constantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their strategies and approaches

The role of Southern CSOs in resource mobilisation and allocation

There is a role for Southern CSOs to support CBOs with developing their capacities in:

- Mobilising resources from within the communities and from external sources.
- Managing financial resources and strengthening their financial resilience.
- Learning, and further developing their knowledge and skills in key areas relevant for fulfilling their mission
- Developing and maintaining their constituency at community level.

Southern CSOs should be transparent and accountable not only to donors but also to other partners and stakeholders

With regard to knowledge as an important resource, Southern CSOs should take up responsibility as conveners in leading discussions and discourses on regional and global issues that affect the civic sector. These could be done in partnership with CSOs from the North. Furthermore, Southern CSOs should invest in knowledge production, curation, and management and even knowledge export. They should seize available platforms or create new ones for harvesting and sharing/cross fertilizing of ideas between north and south.

Systemic change needed

To change the system, it is crucial that all partners are aware that funding is only one of the resources that is needed to bring about change. Other resources are: knowledge, network relations, a constituency and legitimacy. Therefore, all resources that partners commit to the partnership need to be recognized. This recognition is essential for establishing horizontal relationships

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The metaphors and words used are essential building blocks of a system. A system cannot be changed if terminologies remain the same.

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characterised by equality, respect, mutuality and complementarity. Methods and tools need to be developed that make visible all resources that partners bring to the table.

Furthermore, partners need to make explicit who will be involved in which way when decisions about the allocation of resources are made. A shift in mind-set is needed. Funds don't belong to one partner that allocates it to other partners. Fund allocation is a shared responsibility.



Introduction to the papers

In the CoP – Shift-the-Power, Partos brings together more than 130 development professionals from Dutch development organisations and their partners. In 2020 the CoP embarked on an exploratory journey to explore a new division of roles between CSOs from the Global North and South.

The raw data from this exploratory journey is laid down in six papers.

Chapter 1 – Understanding the system

Chapter 2 – Inventory of corrective measures

Chapter 3 – Dream paper about partnership building

Chapter 4 – Dream paper about agenda setting, strategy development and implementation

Chapter 5 – Dream paper about resource mobilisation and allocation

Chapter 6 – Dream paper about communication and representation

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Rozalina Burkova

Chapter 1: Understanding the system

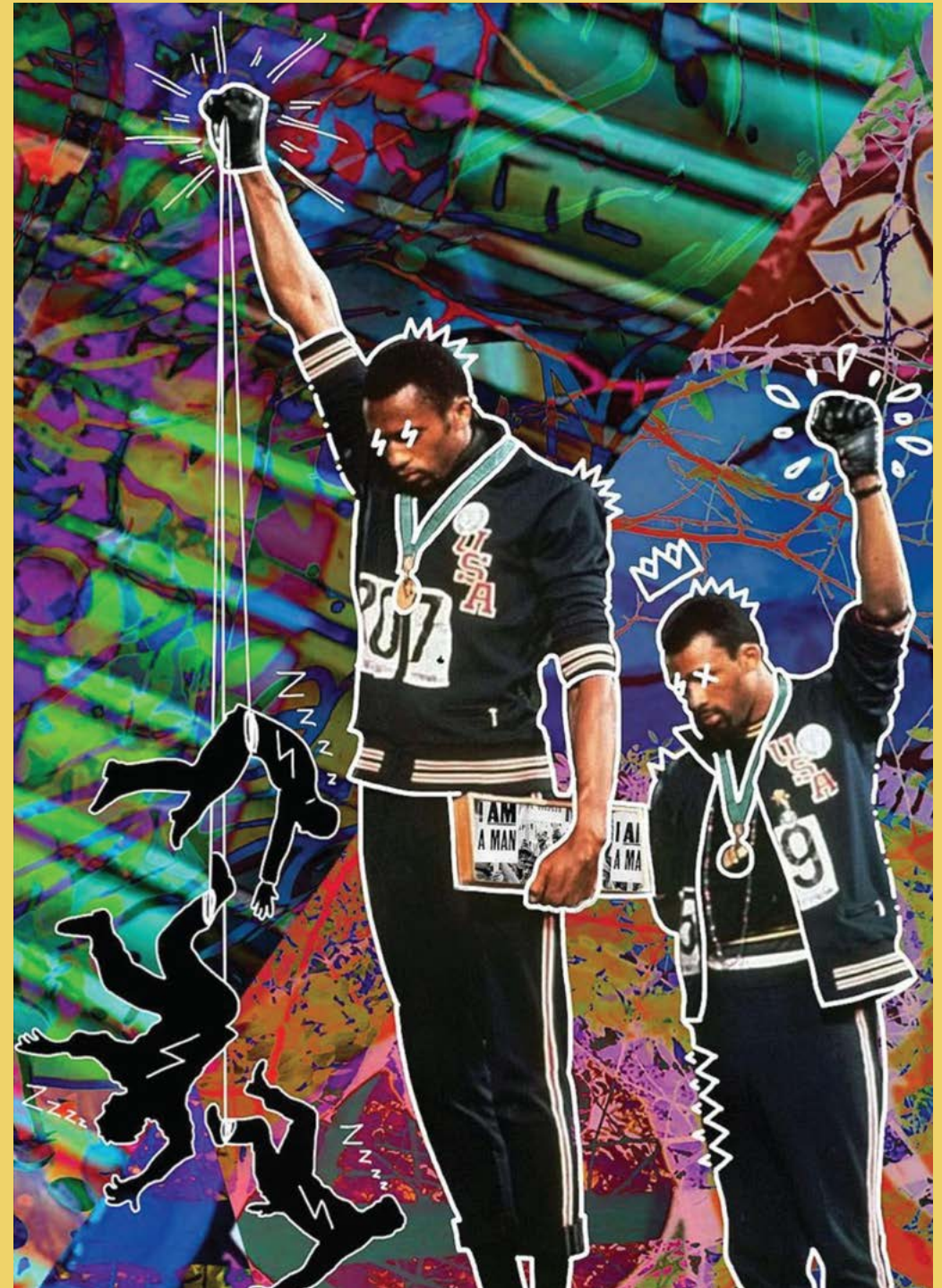


Image:
Nuno Gonzalez

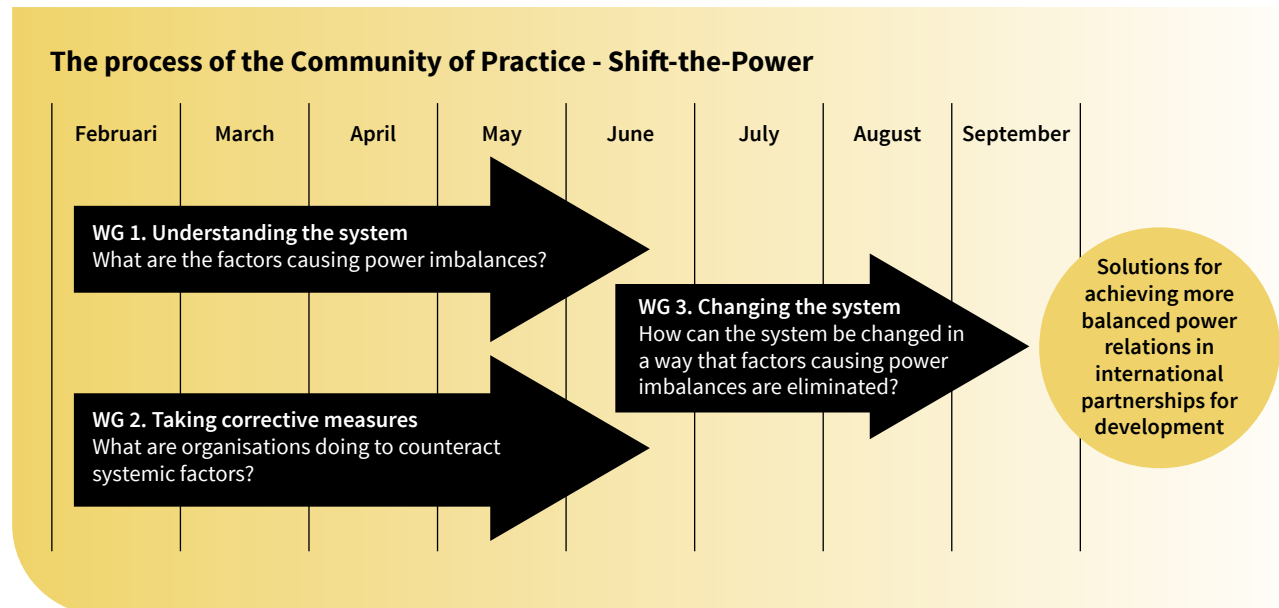
Chapter 1: Understanding the system

A Working Group of the Community of Practice (CoP) - Shift-the-Power sought to understand why, in the current aid system, Northern Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and INGOs end-up being the dominant participant in development partnerships. A conversation addressing this question was held in a Zoom meeting on the 4 February 2021, and this working paper is based on those deliberations. The aim of the meeting was to draft a comprehensive list of factors that contribute to power¹ imbalances in partnerships. A shared understanding of how power relations emerge and work will enable the CoP to identify and develop practical solutions to improve the system.

Scope

The Working Group focused on a specific category of sub-systems of aid chains² within the larger aid system, through which resources are channelled from high-income countries³ to lower-income countries. These sub-systems are often characterized by power imbalances between partners based in the high-income countries, that tend to have more power, and partners in the lower-income countries, that generally have less power. Power imbalances cause friction and affect the effectiveness of development interventions. In this Working Group we focused in particular (but not exclusively) on the strategic partnerships shaped by the Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society: Power of Voices Partnerships (PoV). PoV is the Dutch policy framework strategy for strengthening civil society organisations over the period of 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2025. Many of the CoP participants are involved in the development and implementation of programmes financed by this grant instrument, which is administered by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The analysis below focusses on identifying factors that can explain power imbalances in the PoV strategic



partnerships. Taking these factors into account, consortia implementing PoV programmes have taken corrective measures to counteract the undesirable systemic dynamics and their effects. The PoV policy framework also challenges partnership working to address power imbalances and encourages partnerships where local organisations have ownership and control. In this paper we do not elaborate on these corrective measures. This is the task of a parallel CoP Working Group. Later this year, the CoP will start a third Working Group which will focus on developing solutions for changing the sub-system. The findings of Working Groups 1 and 2 will feed into Working Group 3.

Conversely, insights gained from developing such solutions should lead to an improved understanding of how the sub-system works, and thus to amendments to this paper.

Analytical framework

We use a systems thinking approach⁴. In this approach systems are looked at from three different angles:

- **Inter-relationships** between key actors or components of a system. We will also analyse how the system is linked to other parts of society.
- **Perspectives**, which refers to the way actors observe the system, including themselves and other actors. Perspectives is about the drivers and motivations that energise the system and make actors behave the way they do.
- **The boundaries** of the system which determine which actors are considered within the system, which actors are considered outside the system, and the scope of what can be achieved in the system.

¹ Power is defined as, 'the ability to influence the outcomes of decision-making' (Elbers and Schulpen, 2011).

² Including Humanitarian Aid

³ Lower-income countries in this paper is short for low-income countries, lower-middle income countries and upper-middle income countries

⁴ Bob Williams 2009, Thinking Systematically, Capacity.org issue 37, September 2009

Factors related to inter-relationships

This section consists of an analysis of how, with the launch of a new policy and grant instrument, existing relationships between actors are reset, and how new relationships are established. In this stage, configurations of power relations emerge that influence the way partners participate in decision-making in all succeeding phases of the partnering cycle.

Relations between the government and citizens in the donor country

To understand how the sub-system works it is important to look at how it is embedded within larger society. In a parliamentary democracy like the Netherlands, government funding, including ODA funding, has to be accounted for to the citizens' representatives. So, in the end it is a critical mass of Dutch people, in their capacities as voters and taxpayers, that need to be convinced that supporting CSOs is a worthwhile cause. CSOs in the Netherlands involved in development cooperation have a large and stable constituency of people who are members or sponsors, and they form a strong lobby to influence members of parliament and the government. Therefore, support of CSOs has always been part of Dutch development cooperation.

In May 2018, the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (FTDC) informed parliament how the government aims to respond to a set of international challenges and opportunities⁵ in the interests of the Netherlands. In the policy document [Investing in Global Prospects: For the World, For the Netherlands](#), one of the many measures announced was the development of a policy framework for strengthening civil society, as a follow up to, and building on the experiences with the Dialogue and Dissent Policy 2015-2020. Support to CSOs is considered important as they can help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality⁶. The SDGs are the international guiding principles for Dutch Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation policy.

The new Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society was developed in 2019. In the document the Ministry presents decisions about which type of funding will be channelled for which type of interventions, implemented by which type of partners, etc. For example, decisions include ensuring that funding is limited to strengthening CSOs in their role of lobbying and advocacy⁷, within a list of seven selected thematic areas, in a selection of 31 countries in the focus regions West-Africa/Sahel, Horn of Africa, Middle East and North Africa.

It is important to note that at this stage, priorities are based on Dutch and international agenda setting, and not on agenda setting in the Global South, or in consultation with actors in the Global South. The policy framework does not take into account the existing relationships or networks, because funds had to be allocated through a competitive tendering process. In a way, the new policy starts with a clean slate and a fresh focus. In order to be eligible for funding, existing partnerships and Southern agendas are expected to be aligned, or to realign with the new PoV policy framework.

Relations between the Ministry and Dutch CSOs

After the policy framework for strengthening civil society was approved, an open tender process was launched. The purpose of the tender was to select consortia with

whom the Ministry would engage in a strategic partnership to implement the policy. The call for applications was published in December 2019 and the closing date for submitting applications was March 2020. On the basis of certain threshold criteria and a qualitative check, potential strategic partners were selected and given time between the end of May and October to design their comprehensive programme proposals. Twenty PoV alliances were selected, only two having a lead party that is not Dutch.

This is in line with the general pattern of how such partnerships emerge. Because Dutch CSOs maintain close relationships with the Ministry, they are usually better informed about when funding opportunities arise, and about what type of procedures and criteria will be used in the selection of programmes for funding. Because of this informational advantage and connections, Dutch NGOs are in a better position to acquire and maintain an influential role in partnerships. They are involved to various degrees in setting the parameters for new policy, drawing up new policies and rolling them out, and therefore are in a privileged position to make decisions that shape consortia. They are more likely to be the initiators of a partnership. Even when they are not the lead party, Dutch CSOs have an important role in developing the programme. Because of the systemic asymmetry in knowledge and 'intelligence' they are much better informed about what content and language the Dutch ministry is looking for in a proposal. Furthermore, because of social proximity with policy makers they are in a better position to influence grant decisions.

Relationships between Dutch CSOs and CSOs in the South

As timelines are often short, the grant application process is a pressure cooker in which the initiators, usually Dutch NGOs, engage in building consortia that are in competition with each other for selection as a strategic partner by the Ministry in order to get their programme proposals funded. Important decisions are taken at this stage, such

⁵ Including "growing conflict and instability, large flows of refugees and migrants, the continued existence of extreme poverty in developing countries, high levels of population growth in certain regions, climate change, inequality of opportunity, rapid technological developments and digitalisation, rising protectionism, steep international competition and a looming trade war."

⁶ In different ways:

- By implementing poverty reduction programmes, both in fragile states and in more stable environments. They play an important role because of their expertise, their innovations and their capacity to reach the most marginalised groups, including people with disabilities.
- By lobbying and influencing governments so that they take responsibility when it comes to implementing the SDGs in a sustainable and inclusive way. Strategic partnerships with civil society organisations improve the quality and effectiveness of policy.

⁷ Service delivery activities are not eligible for grants under this instrument.

as the initiators agreeing on who will act as the lead party. In this competitive tendering process Dutch CSO select international, national, and local partners based on their own preferences, previous experiences with organisations, and taking into account the criteria laid down in the policy framework as well as the type of partner profiles that they know will resonate with the decision-makers in the Ministry. The selection of Southern actors and initiatives is often undertaken in the final stages of the process. Actors who are invited to the system last, become decision-takers. They have to adjust to decisions that have been taken before they joined the partnership. The type of decisions that are usually taken in the early stages of a partnership cycle include decisions about:

- Who to approach as potential partners and the selection of partners.
- Terms to be included in the partnership agreement.
- The content of the technical component of a funding proposal to the donor.
- The financial component of a funding proposal to the donor.
- Governance structures.

Upward accountability from South to North

Control over funding is an important, if not the key, source of power. Details about who controls the funds is laid down in contracts stipulating who is accountable to whom, and on which terms and conditions funds will be released. Southern partners tend to comply because this type of funding is very important for their survival as an organisation. Their priority is being selected in this, and in future rounds of funding.

In the case of the PoV programme, the donor expects the lead party of a consortium to be accountable on behalf of all consortium partners. The terms and conditions concerning the grant have been laid down in a contract between the Ministry and the lead party. The consortium partners are expected to draw up a partnership agreement with partners which stipulates how consortium partners

will ensure that the lead party fulfils the obligations towards the Minister in respect of the grant. As partnerships tend to evolve from North to South, the aid chain becomes like a cascade of contractor-client-relationships, in which the contractors have to account for their performance to the clients. Consequently, along the aid chain, more attention is given to establishing mechanisms for vertical upward accountability, while other forms of downward, horizontal or mutual accountability are optional, or not as narrowly defined.

It is important to note that the way lead parties fulfil this obligation to draw up partnership agreements with the other partners is not entirely dictated by the policy. The evaluation⁸ of the predecessor of the PoV programme by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry (IOB) concluded: *“The long-term commitment and flexibility that MFA provides to N-CSOs is not always transferred to S-CSOs, many of which are still bound to annual contracts, activity-based budgets and strict reporting requirements”*.

Factors related to perspectives

Participation in decision-making is influenced by how actors observe the system, including themselves and other actors.

Money more valued than other resources

Money is considered an important resource that is needed to bring about change. Control over the money is a source of power and it makes Northern CSO more influential in decision-making and thus more powerful. Other resources

that are needed to generate impact are valued less. For example, presence where the action takes place, as well as legitimacy and knowledge about the context are extremely important. Although these resources reside mainly with Southern actors, including CSOs, these assets are only converted to influence in decision-making to a limited extent. This may seem odd because without Southern partners there would be no intervention at all. Without Northern CSOs there would still be a civil society in the South with activists working with little to no budget.

So why don't Southern actors flex their muscle more to negotiate better terms? Southern CSOs are largely dependent on donor funding, putting them in a weakened negotiating position. The reason why legitimacy and contextual knowledge is undervalued may be related to the fact that in a tendering process there is limited time for developing a proposal. Partner selection based on eligibility criteria and budget allocation tends to take priority over conducting a thorough analysis of the context in which partners want to achieve results.

Ethnocentrism⁹

While looking at systems, it's also important to consider the cultures that help maintain power configurations within said system. Colonial legacies, racism, ethnocentrism and elitism are still important factors resulting in more influence in decision-making by Northern CSOs and individuals representing them. 'Western knowledge' is given a higher status. This then translates into actions such as 'capacity building' as 'Western knowledge' being transferred to Southern actors referred to as 'target groups' or 'beneficiaries'. Northern CSOs tend to think in terms of interventions they own and implement, and less in terms of interventions they support.

In a similar way, specialists based in headquarters often have more social capital and influence in decision-making and expats in country offices get higher salaries as compared to experts based in the South. Elitism is also reflected in relational asymmetry. Senior people in

⁸ Strategies for partners: balancing complementarity and autonomy: *Evaluation of the functioning of strategic partnerships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and civil society organisations, IOB 2019*

⁹ See also the report of an online dialogue held on 3 September 2020. The dialogue was co-hosted by Partos and The Broker for Dutch development practitioners about racial biases and blind spots within the Dutch development sector.

Southern NGOs often having to deal with junior programme officers from the North. The former typically have more experience, are longer in position and must deal with significant differences in decision-rights that are not in their favour.

Interests

Despite the often-heard rhetoric about the aim of ‘*making ourselves redundant*’, Northern CSOs do care about their survival as organisations, and they act accordingly in their negotiations while building partnerships or sharing certain budget/costs. There may be nothing wrong with surviving as an organization. After all, there is a case to be made in favor of civil society strongholds in the North that can connect with partners elsewhere for a more inclusive, just and sustainable world. However, *the making-ourselves-redundant phrase* can work as a smoke screen concealing the power that Northern CSOs have and seek. It would be better to be more explicit about their (self) interests, and to define positive roles that justify why these interests are worth fighting for¹⁰. More clarity about the division of roles would also imply a shift of power towards a situation in which partners share power. Power sharing would not necessarily mean that everyone has an equal say about everything, but that depending on the type of decisions that need to be taken, partners participate in decision-making at a level that is in alignment with their roles, responsibilities, obligations and capacities.

Boundary related factors

The boundaries of the sub-system demarcate which actors are considered to be within the system and which actors are outside the system. Those within can claim a say in decision-making. For those outside the system that is much more difficult. The boundaries have an effect on the scope of what can be achieved in the system.

¹⁰ In the policy framework it is suggested that Dutch organisations focus more on roles related to innovation, linkages and lobbying at international level.

Eligibility criteria

In the PoV subsystem, the boundaries of the consortia with whom the Ministry engages in a strategic partnership are limited to a selection of CSOs that is determined by eligibility criteria laid down in the policy.

The PoV selection process uses threshold criteria and track records against which proposals are vetted. In the PoV programme, CSOs from the South can only be consortium partners if they can demonstrate “proven quality and an established track record on capacity strengthening of CSOs in the area of lobbying and advocacy”. All consortium partners need to have a positively assessed Organisational Risk and Integrity Assessment (ORIA) which is used to assess the organisational capacity of an organisation in terms of legal status, organisational structure, governance, financial resources, financial and administrative management capacity, capacity to monitor and evaluate, and the capacity to generate reports in accordance with IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative) standards. Only well-established CSOs qualify.

The eligibility criteria are restrictive and may exclude organisations in the South that have promising potential to influence decision-making based on their authoritative knowledge of the local situation. Most CSOs selected are relatively moderate, seeking dialogue rather than confrontation. Social movements, for example, are excluded as partners, where they are often very important in bringing about change, or stopping negative changes from happening.

The sub-system is not limited to the strategic partnerships. Consortium partners establish relationships with local partners. Local partners are defined as actors working at the local or national level within a country, that receive financial support from the consortium but that are not part of the consortium. The policy framework encourages strategic partners to innovate and invest in new types of partnership and funding, new relationships with

companies, or more informal groups, movements and organisations. At the moment, it is not yet clear to what extent consortia reach out to these “new” actors.

Risk aversion by Dutch CSO dominates the selection of partners

The boundaries of the sub-system are also determined by the way lead parties and other initiators of an alliance apply the eligibility criteria in their own selection process. Dutch CSOs select their partners applying two different perspectives. There is often tension between the perspective of audit/compliance teams on the one hand, and programme teams on the other. They each have a different set of priorities. Audit/compliance teams tend to be preoccupied with donor compliance and minimising the risk that donor regulations cannot be met. Programme teams focus more on mutual capacity strengthening and building genuine partnerships. However, in partnership building the influence of the audit/compliance teams often tends to be given more weight. When conducting capacity assessments as part of the partner selection process, there is heavy emphasis on assessing the risks of engaging in a partnership with specific Southern CSOs and CBOs. This is often a one-way processes with the Dutch CSOs in a more powerful role. Usually, it is Northern CSOs assessing Southern CSOs, rarely the other way around. This is not conducive for building equitable partnerships.

Summary

In Working Group 1 we have come to a better understanding of how power configurations are coalescing around the PoV policy framework. The PoV policy emphasizes local ownership and more balanced power relations in consortia, and this is reflected in the criteria for funding. However, the policy itself can trigger dynamics that are not conducive to balanced power relations.

As the sub-system evolves, patterns of decision-making emerge that are captured in formal governance structures and processes to a limited extent. Factors that influence

this process include the way the policy is formulated, the way CSOs are invited to participate in the implementation (competitive tender), and the way Dutch CSOs subsequently take the lead in the formation of consortia. Based on the mix of financial muscle, culture and interests, a practice of decision-making evolves in which the roles Dutch CSOs play are biased towards decision-making, and the roles of Southern CSOs are biased towards decision-taking. In the early stages of the policy cycle, power relations take shape that determine how decisions are likely to be taken throughout the programmes.

Factors causing power imbalances in the Power-of-Voices partnerships

Three different angles for analysing the PoV sub-system	Factors identified by Working Group 1	
	Categories of factors	Factors
Relations	Relations between the Dutch government and its citizens	1 Government accountable to parliament 2 Policy priorities based on Dutch and international agenda setting.
	Relations between the Ministry and Dutch CSOs	3 Strategic partnerships based on a competitive tendering process. 4 Dutch CSOs best positioned to be in the lead of building consortia and applying for a strategic partnership.
	Relations between Dutch CSOs and Southern CSOs	5 In competitive tendering process Dutch CSO become the dominant actor in building alliances. 6 Dutch CSO select partners in South (not the other way around). 7 Southern CSOs become partners after important decisions have been taken already
	The chain of relations facilitating upward accountability from South to North	8 The aid chain becomes like a cascade of South-North oriented contractor-client-relationships, in which the contractors must account for their performance to the clients.
Perspectives	Money is more valued than other resources	9 Sources of power of Northern CSOs (mainly control over money) provide more influence than sources of power of Southern CSOs (knowledge and legitimacy) 10 Southern CSOs are too dependent on external funding
	Ethnocentrism	11 Western knowledge is given a higher status
	Interests	12 Organisational interests are often not made explicit
Boundaries	Eligibility criteria	13 Eligibility criteria in favour of well-established CSOs, not necessarily most effective change agents
	Risk aversion	14 Risk aversion by Dutch CSO dominates the selection of partners

Chapter 2: Corrective measures

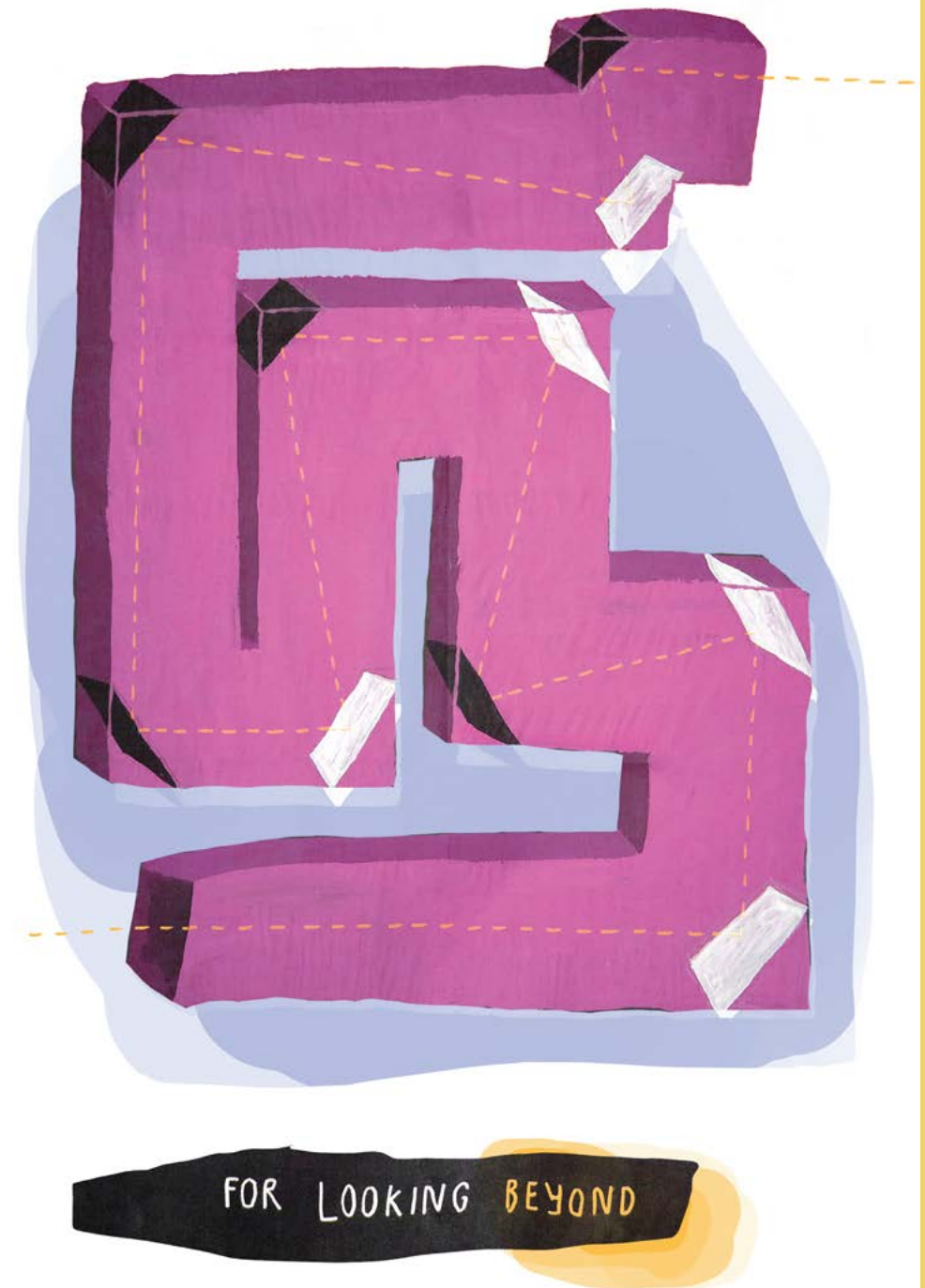


Image:
Laura Mayer

Chapter 2: Corrective measures

Most aid chains that involve the transfer of resources from the North to the South have a partnership power imbalance in common. Actors in the North tend to be more influential than actors in the South. These power imbalances cause friction and affect the effectiveness of development interventions. To address this problem the CoP - Shift-the-Power has started two working groups. Working Group 1 (see Chapter 1 of this publication) focuses on understanding the system. The group is in the process of making a comprehensive list of factors that can explain the power imbalances.

Working Group 2 was founded to explore measures to counteract systemic factors causing power imbalances. To this end, they made an inventory of corrective measures that could be implemented within the current system. This Working Paper, which is based on discussions during a Zoom meeting held on the 3 February 2021, is a first draft of this inventory.

Later this year, the CoP will start Working Group 3 to develop solutions for changing the system.

Co-creating proposals and plans

It is recognized that Dutch CSOs have a more influential role in proposal writing. In several partnerships deliberate measures have been taken to co-create proposals and plans. A positive consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the increased use of digital meeting platforms, such as Zoom and MS-Teams. Their use is becoming common practice worldwide which has made it a lot easier to collaborate across borders. The experience has shown that:

- Hiring external facilitators can add to the quality of the co-creation process, but that the PoV programme funding for proposal writing is far too limited.
- Expertise to write proposals in accordance with donor requirements resides mainly with Dutch CSOs/INGOs.

Although this has been an important improvement, much more needs to be done. Country nationals are the real experts. There is no substitute for their knowledge, networks, and understanding of what works and what doesn't in their society. Funding genuine local initiatives and agendas that can bring about change is a huge challenge and requires considerable analytical skills, time, and resources. Time and resources are in short supply when proposals and plans are being written in response to a call for proposals. In the current situation Dutch CSOs/INGOs still perform too much of a go-between role. It was suggested that co-creation might be followed-up with co-presentation of proposals to donors.

Systematically assessing and monitoring power imbalances

Several INGOs/Dutch CSOs who use the Partos Power Awareness Tool to analyse power relations in their partnerships, found that power imbalances were more skewed than they had expected. They adopted the Partos Power Awareness Tool as a mechanism to systematically reflect on power imbalances, and to monitor progress in addressing this problem. It was suggested they also use the Power Awareness Tool for assessing power relations between Southern partners and other actors that are supported by the partnership including, for example communities, community leaders etc.

Changing the governance of a programme

Being the lead party in a consortium puts the organisation in a position of increased responsibility. The PoV policy framework does allow for Southern organisations to lead consortia, but in practice this does not happen in most cases. As a result, lead parties are usually Dutch CSOs who consequently become the most influential partner from the start.

To counteract this, partners can, in the course of the programme, take measures to change governance structures and processes, and to divide power, tasks

and responsibilities in a different way. In one case it was decided that task and responsibilities related to compliance remain with the Northern CSO, that is the lead party in the consortium, and that Southern partners are responsible for taking decisions on the thematic focus of local and national lobbying activities.

A similar trend can be seen in how INGOs experiment with changing their governance structures and processes. Representatives of Southern partners, communities or groups can be given a seat in board or advisory committees at national or international level. This way, priorities set in the South can be brought to the table in early stages of decision-making.

Add lines of accountability, reporting and feedback

Donor requirements, including those in the PoV policy framework, expect the lead party of a consortium to be accountable on behalf of all consortium partners. In order to live up to these accountability obligations, lead partners replicate similar requirements in their partnership agreements with the other consortium partners. As partnerships evolve, usually from North to South, and from top to bottom of the aid chain, the chain becomes like a cascade of contractor-client-relationships, in which the 'contractors' must account for their performance to the 'clients'. In fact, solid mechanisms for vertical upward accountability become mandatory, while other forms of downward, horizontal or mutual accountability are optional, or not as narrowly defined.

To address this, several partnerships have installed additional lines of accountability, reporting and feedback. All partners are accountable to each other, report to each other and give feedback to each other.

Measures concerning the (re-)allocation of resources

More influence in decision-making, particularly regarding the allocation of resources, puts Dutch CSOs/INGOs in a position to obtain a larger share of the funding available. To counteract this effect several organisations have adopted guidelines and mechanisms for reallocating resources². These include:

- A distribution key for sharing unrestricted funds with partners (for example 30/70 meaning 30% for the Northern partner(s) and 70% for the Southern partner(s).
- Tracking funding streams in a partnership to see where the money is going.
- Allocation of a certain percentage of the Northern NGOs overhead to Southern partners.

In practice, INGOs/Dutch CSOs are still more influential in taking decisions about the allocation of funds to countries. Southern partners are more involved in taking decisions about allocation within their own countries.

The importance of unrestricted funds, including overhead or core-support, was emphasized by several participants, and it resonates with the findings of a recent survey carried out by the RINGO project among 609 CSOs in the South. It is argued that in the current situation, Southern CSO are constrained in developing their capacity because of having to meet bureaucratic requirements of both donors and of the Dutch CSOs/INGOs³ through which funds are channelled to them. They are being micro-managed. Formal approval is required for relatively small changes. As a result there is a shift from a focus on outcomes to a focus on procedures, and it becomes harder for Southern CSOs to develop their own outcome and impact oriented strategies. While it is acknowledged that structure and procedures will always be needed, currently they are given far too much emphasis. It was suggested to explore the possibilities of outcome-based funding as an alternative.

Visibility

It was observed that INGOs and Dutch CSOs often have professional communication departments, working to make their achievements visible. Too often achievements are claimed without mentioning the role of the Southern partners. Participants in Working Group 2 shared the view that at the least, INGOs and Dutch CSO must acknowledge contributions by Southern partners on all platforms. But much more can be done, for example by making it possible for Southern partners to present results, insights gained from practice and research findings at international fora, and to present project and programme proposals to donors. This way they can raise their profile, expand their networks, and build a track record, which contributes to their capacity to raise funds on their own.

Long term MoUs

All the above measures do not necessarily have to be limited to the scope or duration of one programme. Partners can consider Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) in which they agree on power balancing measures in all collaborations, and not limited to funding programmes. INGOs can become more effective partners for local organisations by developing long-term funding strategies.

The corrective measures from a systems perspective

In this section we will analyse which systemic factors causing power imbalances that were identified by Working Group 1 have been addressed by the corrective measures identified by Working Group 2, and which systemic factors remained untouched.

Working Group 1 analysed the sub-system from three different angles:

- Inter-relationships between key actors or components of sub-system.
- Perspectives, which refers to the way the actors observe the system, including themselves and other actors.

- The boundaries of the system which determine which actors are considered within the system, which actors are considered outside the system, and the scope of what can be achieved in the system.

Inter-relationships

In Working Group 1 the following dynamics, relevant for understanding power in the aid sub-systems we are focussing on, were identified:

- Relations between the Dutch government and its citizens.
- Relations between the Ministry and Dutch CSOs.
- Relations between Dutch CSOs and other CSOs.
- The chain of relations facilitating upward accountability from South to North

The corrective measures provided by Working Group 2 in terms of relationships focused primarily on the last two types of relations.

Perspectives

Working Group 1 identified three types of perspectives that contribute to power imbalances:

- Money is more highly valued than other resources.
- White supremacy.
- Interests.

Corrective measures related to the above perspectives include the re-allocation of unrestricted funds, which provides Southern CSOs with more opportunities to develop their own strategies and priorities. Furthermore, there are measures aimed at making the knowledge and work of Southern partners more visible. White supremacy and being more explicit and open about organizational interests have not been addressed in this list of measures.

Boundaries

Working Group 1 observed that the experience and threshold criteria applied in assessing the applications for strategic partnerships are restrictive. The selection process is biased in favour of well-established CSOs.

Less-well established organisations and social movements are overlooked or excluded, despite their often pivotal role in bringing about change, or stopping negative changes from happening.

At the same time, the policy framework encourages experimenting with new types of relationships⁴. It is not yet clear to what extent consortia have included such innovations in their plans and proposals and how these innovative proposals have been evaluated by the Ministry in the selection process.

Conclusion

In Working Group 2 we have seen that consortia are trying to counteract the systemic forces that make us drift away from Southern ownership and leadership. There is still substantive bandwidth for additional corrective measures that help move towards more balanced power relations. Concurrently we see that several important factors at the root of power imbalances, are not yet addressed by corrective measures listed in this inventory, including: relations between the Dutch Government and its citizens, relations between the Ministry and Dutch CSOs, white supremacy and increased frankness about organisational interests.

Chapter 3: Dreaming about partnership building



Image:
Steve McCarthy

TOGETHER WE CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS

Chapter 3: Dreaming about partnership building

The foundational proposition of this paper is that true partnership is primed on a relationship of equals, anchored in trust. It's a relationship of shared results and outcomes (both negative and positive). Such a relationship is purposively nurtured, and any downfalls quickly attended to so as to restore the relationship. By highlighting key values, roles, and pathways for change for a new development system, this paper aims to provide opportunities for reflection, inspiration and motivation to 'do development differently'. We invite you to embark on this journey together and dream of a different future. This dream paper seeks to stimulate and strengthen the "demand-side" of systems change and articulate a collective vision of a "re-imagined Southern civil society" towards "the civil society we want."

Background

On the 10 September 2021, a group of development practitioners (see below) came together to envisage what partnership building could look like in a new system. The group did this while exercising caution, and awareness of the fact that even while imagining the building of this ideal scenario we should be mindful of the approach taken in humanitarian planning, where "a disaster actively imagined is a disaster mitigated".

Our dream is intended to mitigate unequal power relations and encourage partnership building based on equity.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, aid partnerships are built around Northern initiated policy frameworks which constitute the main source of funding. Strategic priorities are primarily based on Northern and international agenda setting, and far less on agenda setting in the South, or in consultation with actors in the South. Strategies for proposal development and programme implementation

have been largely and consistently determined before Southern CSOs arrive at the negotiating table. The North are the "decision-makers" while their Southern counterparts ("partners") are relegated to "decision-takers". Furthermore, Southern CSOs depend too much on donor funding which puts them in a weak negotiating position. Strategic priorities, legitimacy and knowledge of Southern partners are subordinate to the strategic priorities of Northern donors and CSOs. In essence what is supposed to be a partnership is often limited to a funding relationship with money being the blood in the veins and arteries of this relationship.

This chapter aims to provide an opportunity to rethink and reshape civil society through disruption, innovation and systematic thinking that will contribute to a better and healthier partnership between partners in the North and the South. In particular, it will elaborate on what this means when it comes to new roles in development partnerships based on the following elements:

- Partner selection.
- Risk assessment.
- Governance mechanisms.

Initial agenda setting at various levels and other aspects of partnership building.

Core values a new system

The group defined a number of values that a new system should be built upon. The first is the need to adhere to the subsidiarity principle: "Those closest to the problem are the ones that have the solution". A new system should therefore create space for ownership and leadership of local actors, so that they are in the driver's seat when it comes to partnership building. This would also encourage legitimacy and downward accountability in development partnerships.

The nature of civil society as a key sector of the modern state raises pressing questions with regard to the "legitimacy" of CSOs since they often mobilise people and

resources through commitment to social values for the sake of a greater cause. Accordingly, the reputation of these organisations and the extent of their earned legitimacy could be at stake as a result of being key players in social missions and values. This matter is considered especially critical owing to their ability to attract and appoint cadres and mobilise allies and supporters to their various causes.

Should new partnerships therefore adopt an approach towards "legitimacy strengthening" as opposed to "capacity building"?

When it comes to partnership building, partnerships should move beyond consultation to representation and participation whereby a conscious effort is made to amplify the voices of partners in the South.

We need to urgently search for new and innovative ways of effective participation in a world shaped by COVID-19. The transition to virtual platforms has laid bare a hierarchy of participants' rights that favours businesses, industry groups, and those in the North, often to the exclusion of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. As planners design and implement virtual-only or hybrid meetings, they must rethink how to design meaningful public participation in the future, to ensure principles of equity and examine the impact of technical decisions on different stakeholders. ***For too long the North has occupied the space of decision-making and the South, the space of decision-taking. How can this be reversed in the virtual world?***

Listening to partners and creating safe spaces for discussion are crucial when it comes to creating equitable partnerships - creating platforms where partners can share their visions and ideas. This requires transparency and openness in communication between partners - values and practices that need to be based on trust. This includes being honest about when something in the partnership is not working or when certain expectations cannot be met or should be adjusted.

There is consequently also a need for flexibility in partnerships and programmes, giving space to different ideas, timelines and planning approaches. Giving space for local agency and respecting autonomy of partners is crucial when it comes to building partnerships and programmes.

Finally, partnership building is a process that is always evolving. Allowing space for growth within development partnerships is therefore key.

Roles in partnership building

In this chapter we address two core questions: *When it comes to partnership building, what are the roles we need to shift in order to change power dynamics? And what additional roles do we need in the system?*

Shifting the power in partnerships requires a concerted effort both to change what we do now and concurrently to build something new. When it comes to the new roles we need in partnership building there are quick wins and long-term investments. Here we examine this dichotomy of roles: the power shifting roles which are largely intended to change the current system, and the second cluster of roles which are long term investments for moulding a new system – the one we desire.

Quick wins to change the current system

There is currently an appetite for change, evidenced by the multiple conversations taking place on the subject of shifting the power (#ShiftThePower), and our partnership building vision is riding the #ShiftThePower wave. Whether the shift the power debate is occasioned by an existential threat to the Northern NGOs or a push from their Southern counterparts, it lends credence to a re-imagining of partnership.

On the one hand, there are quick wins to be had – low hanging fruit like Northern NGOs letting go of some of the roles which their Southern counterparts are able to

perform, building on the programmatic capacities and contextual competence of Southern partners and allowing Southern partners to take a lead in decision-making processes. Northern partners can be responsible for shaping funding policies in the North, and sharing learning-given their closeness to places where theories and policies are generated. These shifting roles and responsibilities can be agreed upon by civil society among themselves, before tackling the larger question of donor architecture.

The North can shape funding policies and modalities in the West.

Taking inspiration from organisations like ActionAid International in the UK, who are shifting the narrative around funding from a negative portrayal of African people to stating Africa's poverty problem as being systemic; they can be a convenor of learning by harnessing development theories from some of the top institutions in the West. The South on the other hand should be the repository of contextual knowledge, programmatic capacity and course correction. To be a primary actor and fulcrum in the crafting of sustainable (long-term and comprehensive) funding models that go beyond short-lived projects.

Creation of learning and linkage loops:

The anticipated role here is that there should be a connecting thread linking the knowledge in the North to the residual knowledge in the South. Civil society in the South should contribute to the conceptualization of grant making and intermediary donor models, facilitating networking, partnership development and engagements with community actors (activists, movements and organisations).

On the side of programmatic choices and governance structures, CSOs in the South should have the opportunity to lead, coordinate and nurture the co-construction and co-implementation of global civil society interventions, programmes and initiatives. Implementing these changes to shift the power in the

current system will take time and concerted effort from both sides. Shifting the power is not just an end-goal but a process that requires navigating and negotiating power, based on collaboration and confrontation simultaneously. As a partnership facilitator put it:

“As a global partnership facilitator my role is to ensure equal participation of all partners in partnership development and programmatic choices. Also, my role (representing the lead organisation) is to educate our donor – the Ministry – to become even more flexible, and less demanding so as to allow for a change in power relations. Also, my role is to actively seek dissenting views – in particular from local partners. I create a safe space for dialogue and dissent in the partnership, and always accept different views and feedback in a constructive and non-violent way.”

Long-term investments to build a new system

In building a new system, we desire partnerships that seek to transform global civil society to respond to today's challenges. This involves being disruptors and innovators in equal measure. This disruption and innovation should be engineered by those who occupy the current international non-governmental organisation (INGO) industrial complex (including some Southern partners, donors and INGO leaders domiciled in the North) to rapidly develop prototypes (alternative operational models) for reimagined partnerships. The anticipated roles are inter alia, questioning the purpose, structures, power and positioning of INGOs on which current partnerships are anchored.

The new partnership system requires disruptive innovation. The nature of change has evolved drastically. These ‘disruptive changes’ are characterised by their speed, scale and abruptness (ICSC, 2013). The rise in political, technological and planetary disruptions threatened CSOs: the model for change is different and if organisations are to remain, they too must change (ICSC, 2015).

There is a need to facilitate learning and the adoption of new operational models within the global civil society ecosystem, as well as to support the resilience and sustainability of new ways of working within said ecosystem.

There is a distinct need for knowledge brokers, to bridge epistemic diversity between the North and South. These knowledge brokers will support the documentation, adoption and adaptation of alternative operational models, community philanthropy infrastructure and community-led development approaches.

In the envisioned partnership, a key role will be that of disruptor of the status quo – the disruption involves envisioning what a “re-imagined development ecosystem” might look like from the perspective of Southern civil societies and the communities they serve, and perhaps offering recommendations and practical pathways for transformational change.

The new and imagined partnership system will contain arbiters and mediators, requiring mediative institutions that offer peer moderation, skills development and arbitration in cases of disagreements between Northern and Southern partners.

Envisioning a new future: pathways for change and reflection

1. Acknowledging and embracing diversity of partners ***“We all live in one village and have the same goals and dreams. To realise those dreams we need each other.”***

In development partnerships, Northern NGOs tend to look at the capacities of the Global South from a deficit perspective - there being a lack of capacity with Southern partners that needs to be built. But there are many valuable and unique capacities that organisations from the Global South have and can offer to development

partnerships and these should be recognised and acknowledged. Partnership building should therefore be about complementarity - building mutuality while also respecting the autonomy of different partners and respecting divergent views and ideas, rather than steering towards a consensus. This includes the need to build on local values and cultural systems and not trying to ‘Westernise’ approaches when it comes to partnership building.

We have already seen a shift in awareness of the different approaches and realities of partners in the North and the South; partners in the North are increasingly aware of the needs, challenges and aspirations of those in the South while those in the South have become more aware and appreciate the dynamics in the North.

A concrete way of building partnership could be to do away with tight donor deadlines that do not allow for proper consultation with partners as well as instigating co-creation sessions to come up with programme proposals and strategies. There is a need for shared results and outcomes and a departure from the traditional logframes which are only fit for the traditional service delivery NGOs.

To enable this, we need to make a conscious and deliberate departure from these traditional logframes as this has led to the birth of the foreign-funded, proposal writing NGOs, which are almost exclusively run by careerists. This has a debilitating effect on the rooted, authentic, and interest-based fraternity of civil society formations in the South which successfully championed workers’ rights, land rights, negotiated agricultural produce prices, and ultimately won independence through citizen-led struggles and causes.

2. Deconstructing knowledge: building on local knowledge systems and expertise

A second important facet of partnership building is the deconstruction of power and knowledge in development.

Development partnerships are currently built on a Eurocentric idea of what knowledge and expertise is, whereby the knowledge of Northern NGOs is generally valued more than that of their Southern counterparts. As one participant rhetorically asked: ***“When it comes to development, whose expertise counts and whose expertise is paid for?”***

A new system would need to address the current epistemic injustice - the silencing or ignoring of alternative knowledge systems - in the development discourse. This requires a fundamental shift in our thinking of what knowledge is and which evidence counts. As one participant succinctly put it: “We need to move away from an ivory tower of research towards an ebony tower of knowledge.”

To do this, partnerships should create space for alternative knowledge systems such as the Ubuntu philosophy in (South) Africa or other relevant knowledge systems in Asia and South America. This requires conversations between partners in the South and the North on their perspectives when it comes to knowledge and evidence creation in development programmes.

Fundamentally, it also requires a shift in our education system to address issues like identity and the relation with culture and language and re-examine the concept of “de-colonisation”.

There is a need for education that challenges colonial stereotypes; this education cannot be limited to formal education, but also include informal education. University degrees in the South and the nature of learning need to be reviewed. The education system needs to introduce more questioning and a critical reading of Western texts. A critical examination of their context, who the author is, the intention of the author and its relevance or irrelevance to students. Critical thinking should be made an essential element of any discipline.

3. Building on existing civil society networks in the South

There is an urgent need for honest dialogue with development partners (bilateral donors, multilateral donors and INGOs). Southern NGOs are sometimes involved in what could pass as a kick-boxing game in which both civil society organisations and donors have serious doubts about the other but prefer to remain silent and not voice these doubts.

Another key pathway for change is the need to rethink partner selection in the partnership building process. Rather than engaging in what has been called “the mating dance of NGOs” whereby Northern NGOs go on a mission to select Southern partners that fit their programme proposals, Southern partners should be able to choose those partners that are most suited to address the needs of the communities they are working in. Building on local civil society networks that are strongly embedded in the communities which they serve and supporting Southern alliance building, local leadership and ownership of programmes should be built into a new partnering system. This requires more flexible funding systems and tendering processes that allow for Southern leadership. Consequently, instead of hampering Southern ownership with stringent funding criteria, donors need to encourage Southern alliance building and make it easier for Southern partners to become the lead in strategic partnerships.

An innovative idea could be to organise NGO market places, where civil society actors from the North and the South can present/showcase what they have to offer and what they need and partners can subsequently find each other and negotiate on a more equal footing. Another concrete suggestion was for Northern NGOs to use the self-assessment tool developed by the Global Fund for Community Foundations and Global Giving that is designed to help non-profits and other change agents reflect on the extent to which their organisation is working

for, with, or led by the people they intend to serve in the selection of partners.

There are several examples of effective CSOs that draw a vivid picture of the concept of relying on the CSO’s “legitimacy” within its local environment rather than on its institutional capacities which is often the main attention of the Northern partners. Legitimacy is linked to accountability, for “whomever is not held accountable would not have legitimacy,” or in other words, “legitimacy is established so long as accountability is established.”

4. Creating lasting connections through dialogue and inclusive language

Another strong aspect of partnership building is the need for a space for open dialogue between partners about ambitions and expectations that go beyond the funding aspects of a partnership. In order to build partnerships, it is essential to also build a personal connection with partners. This entails listening to partners’ needs and concerns and being open about challenges and dilemmas. There is need for joint ownership of outcomes – both the positive and negative.

One concrete way of doing this would be to establish inclusive partnering agreements that include organisations’ expectations and responsibilities. This can help to build organisations’ commitment to the partnership and can help to go beyond personal interests to a common goal and shared vision. Having regular meetings between partners to share current work and how you can work together can help this effort.

5. Learning from the past while planning for the future ***“We need to be the morticians of the development sector: seeing what went wrong and why certain partnerships die and what we can learn from that.”***

The final point to take into consideration concerns learning from the past in order to plan for the future. This entails

learning from what went wrong and sharing best practices and inspiring examples. Learning, unlearning and re-learning should be the new mantra.

In order to avoid reinventing the wheel and a duplication, or even a clash, of efforts we need to connect with and build on what is already happening; movements like #ShiftThePower that started in 2016 and the more recent RINGO initiative could provide new thinking and help strengthen our efforts when it comes to thinking about partnership building in a new system.

Conclusion

“Everyone has a role to play when it comes to shifting the power and we better get started.”

We need to start walking the talk in relation to partnership building. We therefore invite everyone working in the development sector to be part of this journey of reimagining partnerships and shifting the power so that future partnerships are anchored in trust and built on local ownership and leadership to make change.

Resources Partnership building

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Chapter 4:
Dream paper: Agenda
setting, strategy
development and
implementation



Image:
Linoca Souza

Chapter 4: Dream paper: Agenda setting, strategy development and implementation

How can power between INGOs, CSOs in the North and CSOs in the South be divided and shared in relation to agenda setting, strategy development and implementation?

Values

Values are central to the division of roles. A core value is that communities¹¹ need to be at the centre of defining their own needs and priorities. Issues prioritised by communities, need to be heard, amplified and aggregated at higher (national and international) levels. Issues should not be confined by thematic or sectoral silos. We as a sector have to foster trust at local, national, and international levels so that community voices take primacy. At the same time, we also need to be aware of the impact of the larger global economic system on development at community level.

There is a need for a renewed belief in local ideas, methods, and processes and how these can be harnessed and further developed for global consumption and use.

Roles

Three types of roles performed by both CSOs in the South and CSOs in the North are important.

The role of listener

Southern and Northern CSOs and INGOs should engage in harvesting priorities, ideas and solutions from the global South, including from the most marginalised at community level, community based organisations (CBOs) and CSOs acting at higher levels. This needs to be done through dialogue and in a careful, bottom up and participatory way, not protocol driven or limited to checking boxes.

Participation should not be limited to actors who are within the boundaries of a specific partnership. Time frames for harvesting priorities and ideas need to be determined by local and national dynamics, and not by the project-, programme- and/or policy- cycles of donors in the North.

To be a listener requires intimate knowledge of the social fabric at community level. Such knowledge cannot be acquired from distance or through occasional short visits. Therefore, Southern CSOs are best positioned to fulfil the listening role at community level. Southern CSOs should be careful not to replicate the same power asymmetries with local CBOs that have been built at the international level. They also need to further develop their capacities to listen to people who are excluded within communities because of their gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. Although, at national level there may be organisations representing the most marginalised, at grass-roots level the voices of the most marginalised are often muted. This is because they often do not assert themselves, which is related to low levels of self-esteem due to being stigmatized and discriminated against. Innovative methods to listen to the voices of these groups need to be developed.

The primary role of Northern CSOs/INGOs should be to safeguard the integrity of these processes. They need to advise donors on how to organise funding in a way that the voices of the most marginalized, as well as ideas and solutions formulated in the South, can become a main reference point for determining what will be financed. To this end, Northern CSOs need to develop the capacity to

listen and understand SDG related issues from various perspectives including from a Southern CSO perspective and from a community level perspective.

Southern NGOs/CSOs that act as conduits for mass mobilisation and aggregation of citizen voices need to grant the subaltern/communities direct access to the corridors of power. As things stand, there is an issue of 'gatekeeping' on the part of national NGOs, which sometimes inhibits or limits community action and activism. The intermediary role of these 'gatekeepers' needs to be checked.

The role of amplifier of the voices of the most marginalised

Southern CSOs, Northern CSOs and INGOs need to engage in aggregating community priorities and bringing them to the attention of those at the national and global levels.

CSOs in the South are best positioned to amplify community voices at the national level in the South.

CSOs in the North need to amplify community voices in the North and, where applicable, highlight the connections between factors in the North and problems in the South such as unsustainable Northern lifestyles and the extractive economic policies that have created the climate crisis and sustained global inequality.

Both, CSOs in the North and CSOs in the South have a joint responsibility to make the voices of communities heard at international levels.

Both Northern and Southern CSOs need to co-create and co-invest. CSOs from the South will need a seat at the discussion table, from the thinking/design phase of programmes and or projects right through to the conceptualisation, planning, implementation, and monitoring/measuring of outcomes.

¹¹ In our discussions communities were sometimes referred to as local communities, which suggests that a community is only geographically defined. But in the contributions to the discussion, references were also made to communities and social movements that are not tied to a specific geographic location such as for example the Black Lives Matter movement or LGBT communities.

The role of providers of capacity development support

Both, Southern and Northern CSOs have a role as providers of capacity development support.

- Southern CSOs should engage in coaching, providing technical support and capacity building services to CBOs (including the capacity to raise and manage funds).
- Southern NGOs and actors should be more assertive in taking up responsibility as conveners in leading discussions and discourses on regional and global issues that affect the civic sector. These could be done in partnership with INGOs from the North.
- As far knowledge production is concerned, southern CSOs should begin to invest in knowledge production, curation, and management and even knowledge export. They should seize available platforms or create new ones for harvesting and sharing/cross fertilising of ideas between North and South.
- In terms of community empowerment, there's a need for renewed belief in local methods and solutions, that are not pegged to international aid standards but can withstand global scrutiny and/or have global applicability.
- Northern CSOs and INGOs should engage in supporting Southern CSOs by:
 - Facilitating exchanges between CSOs from the South, focused on learning and innovation, and enabling them to constantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their strategies and approaches
 - Supporting CSOs from the South in developing their own capacity to raise and manage funds and advocating for an enabling legal and policy environment for raising funds in the South
 - INGOs operate within geopolitical systems, whose priorities, interests and foreign policy goals may be at variance with the priorities and needs of recipient countries/communities. INGOs therefore need to find ways of either navigating national

interest or better still devise means of strategically influencing/shaping the long-term foreign policy goals/plans of their countries. INGOs are advantageously positioned to be able assert this role

- Northern CSOs should support Southern CSOs with sustainability grants that are linked to organisational development deliverables. These grants could be in the form of an “accompaniment” when the CSO receives project funding. This would help strengthen organisational resilience and help organisations diversify resourcing and strengthen accountability.

Resources: Agenda setting, strategy development and implementation

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Chapter 5: Dream paper: Resource mobilisation and allocation

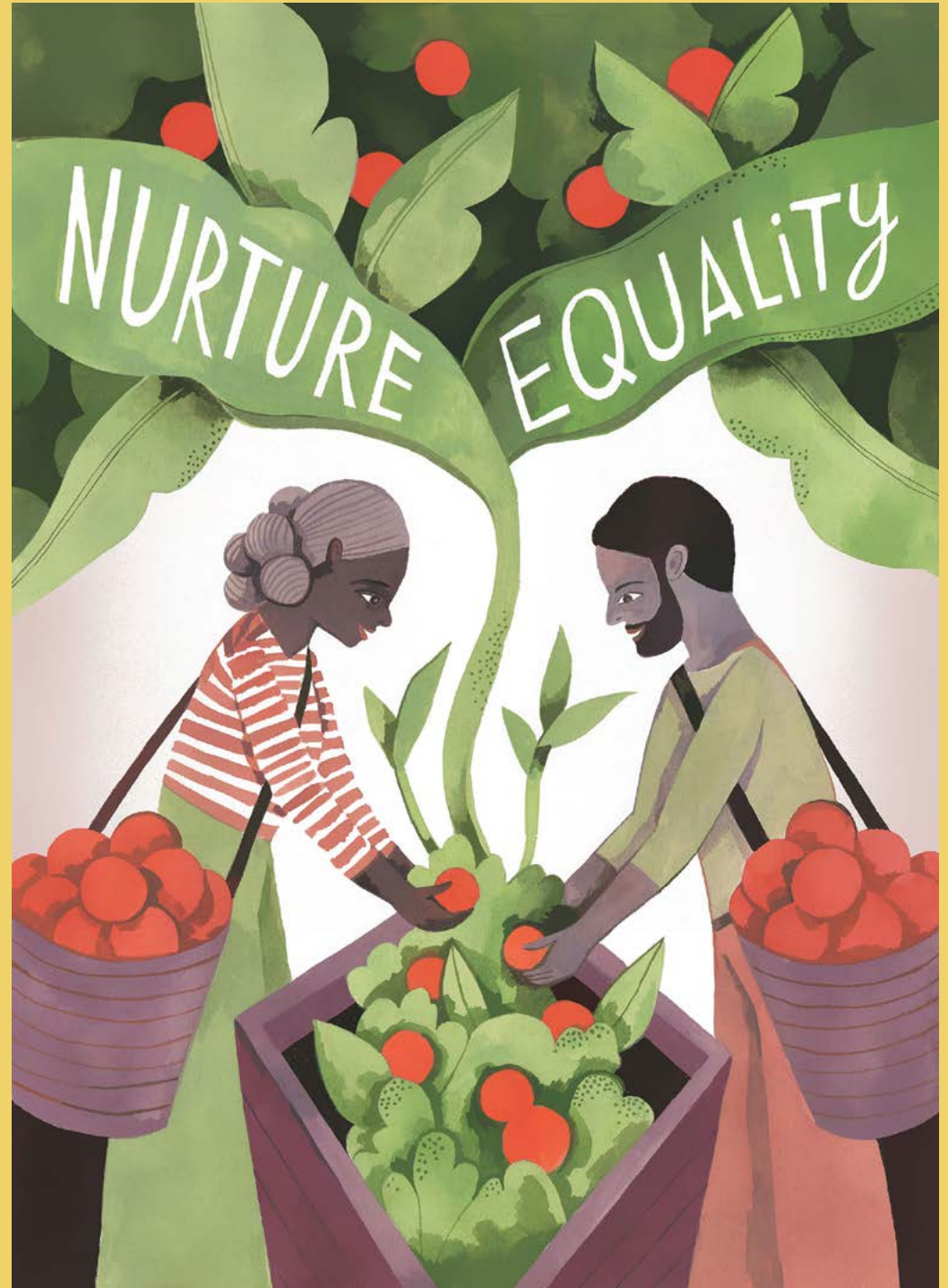


Image:
Luisa Rivera

Chapter 5: Dream paper: Resource mobilisation and allocation

What is the ideal division of roles between Northern and Southern CSOs in relation to:

- Raising funds
- Allocating funds
- Financial control
- Accounting for funds received
- Contracting
- Other financing-related issues, such as community-led funding and valuing non-financial resources such as contextual knowledge, relations, legitimacy?

Talk about resources rather than funds

All resources contribute to change. This includes financing, but also contextual knowledge, relations, networks, access to local governments, legitimacy and many more. These are assets that are largely available in communities, and they are as important or even more important than money to achieving social change.

While funds are mostly more available to INGOs and large institutions, many of the other resources are present in communities and CBOs, who themselves know best their realities, relations and the ways to make positive change happen. Changing mindsets within development, to value resources rather than funds as the dominant factor for change allows for a much more equal relationship between partners and acknowledgement of communities' roles. It will do justice to communities and CBOs, lead to better and more relevant development outcomes and empower them in partnerships with INGOs and large institutions.

Support community resource mobilisation

Shifting the Power requires a people-first and community-led approach. This means listening to the voice of the community, which is important for the quality of the change process. In addition, it leads to more focus on

mobilising and valuing resources, including but not just limited to funding, within the community. Experience shows that community philanthropy, where community resources are actively mobilised for social change, leads to trust-building, confidence, changing accountability dynamics and constituency building. It also increases a sense of ownership, the currency of legitimacy and dignity as well as promoting mutual accountability through the process of how people come together, how they are engaged, treated, and made to feel.

CBOs and Southern CSOs play an important role in these processes, since they originate from and are in direct touch with their communities. They should be enabled to invest in their capacity to raise resources within their own context.

Invest in civil society, not just projects

Social change is not the result of projects. It demands strong organisations of people and resources, a strong civil society that knows their context, is able to react to developments, is pro-active and takes initiative. A strong, thriving and sustainable Southern civil society is crucial for social change. In order to play their roles, CSOs require long term flexible investment in organisational capacity beyond just programme implementation.

Partnership and accountability

Following a community-led approach implies starting to appreciate and mobilise community resources, where external parties add complementary resources as partners in the process of social change. All actors in the chain matter as contributors to community-led social change processes, and should work together in partnership. It is a process where people and organisations at all levels are committed to the same cause. Partnership implies that all parties bring something to the table that contributes to what the partnership wants to achieve: it is based on complementarity. All partners define what resources they can bring to the table, jointly agree on roles and then each partner lays out what it needs to perform the agreed role.

This approach leads to a shift in mindset about funds: the funds do not belong to a donor in the partnership that allocates them to partners, but to all actors in the partnership. The division of funds is a shared responsibility and a joint decision-making process, based on the identified needs at community level and the complementary contributions that partners can make.

In such a partnership, partners will not only share responsibility in applying resources, but also in accounting for them. Partners will be mutually accountable for their contributions to the partnership. This includes accountability of each contributing partner to the community they intend to serve, as well as to the other partners. A mutual accountability system looks both at how the resources (financial and non-financial) have been applied and what can be learned in order for each partner to strengthen their work.

Roles

Applying these perspectives to the roles of the actors, related to resourcing, leads us to the following roles:

Southern Community Based Organisations

CBOs are closest to the community. This is where it all starts. CBOs know their context and what resources are available in the community. They also know what they need in terms of co-operation with others in order to achieve their goals. CBOs determine their processes of change with the community and then determine what is needed.

With regard to resourcing they fulfil the following roles:

- Determining and planning what change they wish to achieve, which resources are needed and which are available, in terms of finance, contextual knowledge, relations, legitimacy, and others.
- Resource-raising in the community. Community-led funding.
- Deciding what progress is and assessing progress made

- and how far resources have been applied successfully.
- Fund management.

CBOs are crucial members of partnerships with bigger CSOs and INGOs. CBOs invest their own resources and define the support they need from partners, which may include long term and flexible investment in organisational capacity in order to meaningfully execute their crucial roles in the community.

Southern CSOs

Southern CSOs play an important role in supporting CBOs and civil society as a whole by performing the following roles:

- Contributing to the conceptualisation of grant making and intermediary donor models, and implementing models where strong CSOs respected by civil society undertake grant making instead of foreign donors.
- Facilitating networking, partnership development and engagements with community actors (activists, movements and organisations).
- Supporting the documentation, adoption and adaptation of community giving infrastructure and domestic resource mobilisation.
- Facilitating learning, skills building and adoption of alternative financial models.
- Strengthening the financial resilience of CBOs, self-help groups, movements and activists
- Supporting CBOs, self-help groups, movements and activists to access funding. Opening doors for them at national level, so that they have a seat at the table where their interests are discussed.
- Supporting the formation of MoUs and other cooperation mechanisms with CBOs, local governments, national and international partners.

Northern CSOs and INGOs

Northern CSOs/INGOs should partner with Southern actors in their processes of development. They should not identify projects but contribute to development processes that

are going on in the South. They should listen, appreciate and be curious about local conditions and context, and appreciate that resources can be both financial and non-financial.

Though this varies in each partnership, their added value could include roles such as:

- Facilitating partnerships by creating spaces for learning and reflection.
- Facilitating the documentation of alternative models, e.g., on governance, accountability, funding models.
- Facilitating partner access to the most recent developments and innovations (e.g., ICT/technology, scientific insights) in Northern countries.
- Influencing stakeholders in their own societies: their governments and other actors. Facilitating Southern partners to have their voices heard in these institutions.
- Informing and influencing the public in their own countries about global issues, inequality, etc.
- If they are funder NGOs, providing funding to partnerships based on jointly identified needs in the partnerships. Making this funding flexible and long-term, answering to the needs of the organisations in the partnerships.

We wish to achieve a situation where Southern partners can directly access funding. In order to achieve that, Northern CSOs/INGOs will:

- Use their powers and resources to create direct access for Southern partners to funding that is currently accessed exclusively by Northern organisations.
- Influence 'the system' including funders to make their funding practice more accessible, flexible, long-term and adapted to the needs and realities of Southern partners.

Funders

- Invest more in the development of the local giving infrastructure. It is much more powerful if in a community a thousand people contribute 10 Euro

to a cause, than one donor providing 10,000 euro, since the 1,000 givers are 1,000 people that feel committed to the cause they are giving to.

- Acknowledge the value of resources brought in by Southern civil society organisations such as CBOs, self-help groups, informal organisations. Adapt funding requirements to the context and strengths of these partners.
- Fund organisations instead of projects. Invest in their capacity and sustainability so as to enable the growth of a strong and vibrant civil society.
- Provide funding that is less rigid, flexible and long-term. For example, provide ten year funding.
- Work with knowledgeable and respected CSOs, to act as intermediaries between communities and international partners.
- Support mutual accountability of all partners in the partnership, focus on learning and impact and how financial and non-financial resources have been applied to achieve learning and impact. This means not focussing on details and limiting rules and regulations, so as to encourage as much learning, creativity and adaptability as possible.
- Make funding arrangements that avoid competition between Southern and Northern organisations. Provide funding to Southern organisations that may hire Northern organisations that can add value to their strategy instead of the other way round, or fund partnerships based on complementary contributions of partners that are led by Southern partners. Provide funding to Southern leads in such partnerships. Or contract Southern CSOs that are well respected by civil society to do grant making instead of foreign donors.
- Funders should take a role as partner instead of just funder. Not in the sense of influencing, but in being involved, committed, listening, understanding and flexible in applying funds and resources to changing realities as faced by Southern partners.

Collectively

- Make sure there is mutual accountability. In partnerships all partners are accountable for their roles in the partnership. Create systems where all partners update each other and focus on learning and impact, and provide accountability towards each other on the use of financial and non-financial resources. Apply, for example, peer-review and assessment systems, and encourage as much learning, creativity, adaptability as possible. Let Southern partners lead these mutual assessments.

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- [Rethinking the Funding Landscape: Adapting and thriving post COVID | Actions Beyond the Hashtags](#)
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Chapter 6:

Dream paper:

Communication and

representation

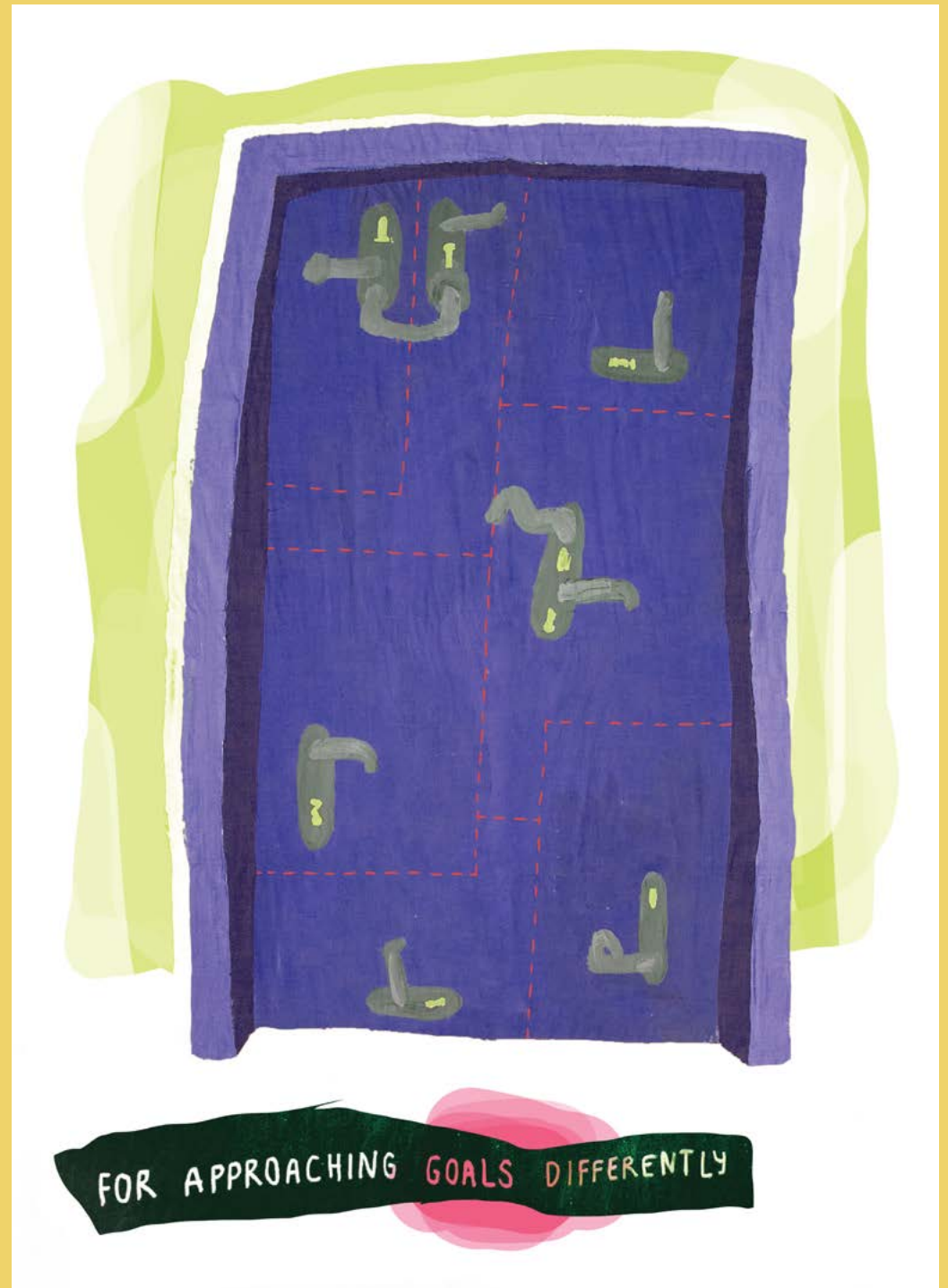


Image:
Laura Mayer

Chapter 6: Dream paper: Communication and representation

Alan Fowler ¹²

How do partners represent each other in their relationships and have a say or exercise control of communications about their roles, work and collaboration?

We recognise and appreciate that international efforts to change asymmetries of power underpinning the dominant narrative are already receiving active attention¹³. Language, labels and vocabulary; representativeness; horizontality; and time fluidity are lenses through which we approach issues of representation and communication.

Language, labels and vocabulary in communications

Language is the human basis of belonging, thinking and communicating. It sets the terms of relational engagement. The aid-related dominance of English or French or Spanish means translation into indigenous languages. This can empower those doing the translating, but with the paradox that their own language matters less while inculcating a post-colonial inferiority complex¹⁴. Typically the burden of translation fall on the weaker, dependent party. This situation creates educational and class barriers to inclusive representation in communication and whose voice counts. As a result, without meaningful language change, systems change is likely to remain superficial.

The passion, vibrancy, tone and energy of communications by the less powerful is constrained by the legalistic, bureaucratic 'soulless' style of written agreements, reflecting the dominance of a linear type of logic and argumentation. In a new era, communication within and about relationships, lives and practices should reflect a kaleidoscope of colours and tones.

Aid system terminology is predominantly technocratic as well as relying on colonial tongues, mindsets, power dynamics and frameworks for action. This situation and its labelling impose a foreign normative agenda, creating problems of shared understanding¹⁵. The following quotation illustrates the issue.

*“Charitable portrayals of “helping” often conjure up victimhood and passivity in order to validate the assistance being given. There is a growing awareness that these portrayals uphold, rather than counteract, historical and politicized notions of “the other.” This leads to reinforced narrative frames and deepened ignorance among the general public in rich countries, and perpetuate distorted and powerless stereotypes among people who are poor in formerly-colonized countries. But how can we rather inspire wider collective action without eliciting guilt, pity, or shame?”*¹⁶

The system requires a value shift towards greater respect for diverse linguistic life worlds and the making of meanings. This transformation will bring many obligations as well as shifting ways of how existing roles are played as well as altering the roles themselves.

¹² To draft this paper, I am very grateful for active input from Rasha Sansur, a Palestinian communications adviser.

¹³ <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/dialogue-series-considers-how-communicationsstrategies-framing-and-tactics-can-support-efforts-to-shiftthepower/>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/aljazeera/posts/10160327256708690>

¹⁵ Moncrieffe, J. and Eyben, R., 2007, The Power of Labelling: how people are categorized and why it matters, Earthscan, London.

¹⁶ <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/dialogue-series-considers-how-communicationsstrategies-framing-and-tactics-can-support-efforts-to-shiftthepower/>

¹⁷ <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/jargon-hurts-poor>; <https://brightthemag.com/the-good-the-bad-and-the-jargonlanguage-ngo-social-issues-journalism-b34953c9300b>

¹⁸ <https://brightthemag.com/17-development-clih%C3%A9s-ill-beavoiding-in-2017-46c2345a507f>

This should not be an ‘add-on’ to initiatives. A consequent dream is the ‘abolition’ of jargon¹⁷, in addition to ‘banning’ the use of neo-colonial clichés¹⁸.

Narrative ownership

This type of value shift requires a dedicated process to change the locus of narrative ownership towards those with the knowledge and presence at sites of action.

- As a dynamic process, communications between organisations and in the public domain are ruled by jointly establishing and consistently applying an acceptable polyglot lexicon and supporting glossary. In addition to cleaning out jargon and clichés, polyglot also means an inclusion of words or idioms from other languages that express an idea or condition better than English.
 - A lexicon includes a list of ‘banned’ words, phases or idioms, e.g., beneficiaries; funders; terms associated with sexism, racism, etc.
 - A lexicon contains preferred expressions for currently common and distorted terms, e.g., use resources instead of funds; recognize knowledges rather than knowledge; refer to counterparts, not partners; use engagement instead of participation.
- Retooling communication infrastructures to fully exploit e-translation technologies, exhibited through social media, such as the #metoo and #blacklivesmatter movements.

Representativeness

Respect and apply the principle: nothing about us without us.

This area concerns values associated with identity, legitimacy and mandate of the people who take part in relations between organisations associated with the aid system.

- Identity of the representative is a meaningful affiliation with the stakeholder(s) voice they bring to the table.

- Legitimacy of a representative is understood as a valid, demonstrable right to speak, negotiate, etc.
- Mandate, of a representative is understood as the degree of authority and decision-rights the person carries and can exercise, including transparency about the (limits) to the commitments that they can make.

The roles played by individuals should reflect these values and attributes. Actors with power should:

- Be transparent about how selection of people with these attributes is undertaken.
- Have a clear system or processes that give confidence in the fairness of the decision-making that employees are part of.
- Make job descriptions that define their mandate available.

Actors with less power should:

- Ensure that those negotiating and fulfilling relational functions can express views and take positions that are accountable to those legitimizing the organisation's existence.
- Provide open access to information that confirms representational affinity and mandate.

The less powerful party should periodically evaluate the representational behaviour of those more powerful in the relationship. There should be less churning and more continuity of those spanning the boundaries of the more powerful, allied to less 'poaching' of personnel in those that are less so.

Horizontality: From chains to platforms

*"The hand that gives is always on top."*¹⁹

Chains work when they are under stress. Vertical aid chains have a natural tension because of the 'weight' in resources that are transferred. This built-in tension is not just about money. It includes division of responsibilities, reporting

obligations, delivering on pre-agreed performance measures and the like. Links forming the aid chain are typically contracts and agreements, both written and verbal. This design is systemically tensioned by power differences between the parties involved with coercive effects²⁰.

Currently, in the aid system those with greater capacity and power can pull the hardest, unless they chose not to do so. Systemic obstacles to foregoing relational power seldom make this choice an option, hence #shiftthepower.

An ideal future is where relational 'horizontalism' prevails. This power shift implies creating shared platforms. In terms of communication it is where extraction of information upwards is replaced by dialogue. It is where rules of mutuality ensure that those in whose name messages are created have a say in what is communicated.

In terms of representations it is where forums and processes ensure adult-to-adult exchanges - rather than the psychology of giver-receiver, parent-child relations.

The values on which relational and developmental horizontality depend and commonly are lacking in practice are integrity, mutuality and complementarity. Translating these values onto roles associated with representation and communication implies the following.

- Those representing their entity are accorded equal weight irrespective of the position they hold in the relational system.
- Relational communications and public messages are treated as types of 'voices' where those with less power have preferential discretion. That is, by seeking their

approval, the role of the more powerful is to respect the dignity of the less powerful in whatever is portrayed about them.

Time fluidity

Relations in aid systems typically rely on time-bound units where resource providers' time frames, cycles and durations dominate. Examples are deadlines for competitive bidding; pre-determined funding and reporting cycles; pre-planned assessments of performance; timing of financial accounting and payments. This design imposes a form of discipline and pressure that can work against relational fairness, sensitivity to context and effectiveness of development efforts.

Time mismatches between seasons that different parties live in are common. Such differences can affect gender-sensitive labour availability, productivity and local processes calling for a much more fluid approach to time, both as a resource and as a constraint. Such a situation calls for flexibility in the application of time to relationships and processes; that is a systems design based on values of agility and adaptability rather than assumptions of linear predictability.

Priority should be given to the speed and time of those who must 'carry' change into the future. While what this means is case specific, it frequently implies communities and their members.

The 'role' in terms of representation is one of ensuring the availability of those people described above on their timing terms. To allow for the common likelihood of things not going as envisaged or as planned, this requirement usually means working with the principle of contingency. COVID-19 teaches a lot about the merits of NGO contingency preparedness and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

In multi-context arrangements, an ideal practice of

¹⁹ Annetta Miller, 2011, *Strange Gifts: Reflections on Aid in Africa*, self-published. ISBN 9781466206724

²⁰ Wallace, T., Bornstein, L. and Chapman, J., 2006, *The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs*, Intermediate Technology Development Group, Rugby.

communication is not to impose messaging moments and periods which create time stress on those who are the source(s) of information. Satisfying such demand can involve:

- Ensuring (human) capacity which is adequate to satisfy informational rules and agreements.
- Creating a ‘buffer’ of stories and capitalising on technologies that align the timing of communications within relationships and towards the public and third parties.

Timing of representation should be determined by the party whose voice is the most significant. Typically, this means synchronization with and from the site(s) of action.

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Alan Fowler is a pracademic. For some forty years has been working with, advising, training, teaching, researching and writing about civil society organisations involved in international aid and development. The geography of work and study has been mainly in Africa, South and East Asia and Europe. Most recent is practical involvement with reform of the aid system and academic contributions to advancing philanthropy and community foundations. A current appointment is as honorary professor in African Philanthropy and Social Investment at the Wits Business School. Previously, civic service has been as a co-founded the International NGO Training and Research Centre located in Oxford, England, as vice-President of the International Society for Third Sector Research an elected board member of CIVICUS, the Global Alliance for Citizen Participation.

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Marijke Priester

Marijke Priester was educated as a feminist anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam. She started her career in the mid-eighties in academic research, followed by a period of policy influencing and public campaigning on international development cooperation at the Dutch Labour Party, before becoming a dedicated development practitioner in international CSOs (a.o. OxfamNovib and Rutgers). For more than 25 years she took on managerial, partnership building and advisory positions operating from the Global North. Over the years her uneasiness and sincere doubts about the aid system increased. In 2021 she took a step back to reflect, share and write. Currently Marijke's focus is on co-creating forms of new international cooperation, in which genuine dialogues are key. She also mentors some young professionals from different countries.

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Pascal Richard is a peacebuilding, governance and human rights activist who wants to ensure people concerned are at the centre of socio-cultural, economic and political changes. He has more than twenty years of experience working with social movements, local NGO's, INGO's and governmental agencies. He coordinated various locally led national, regional and global networks. Pascal currently holds the position of Expert Adviser on Localisation and Local Leadership at the Dutch INGO Cordaid. In this role he

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Born and raised in Palestine. Rasha Sansur holds a Master's degree in Communications and Development from Ohio University, with a background in Journalism and sociology. She has extensive experience in communications and resource mobilization. She believes in the values of the #ShiftThePower movement. As a communication expert, she advocates for a shift in developmental priorities and demands that people have a say in their development. Her work includes dissecting the language of the sector, to become more accurate, and representative.

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Gerrit de Vries

Gerrit de Vries recently founded Joint Purpose with the goal of providing advice to organisations on processes of inter-organisational collaboration, shift the power and localisation. He has lived and worked in Zambia, Malawi, South Africa and The Netherlands, and led change

processes on decentralisation and alliance building. Gerrit believes that true partnerships that integrate shift the power start with moving beyond us and them. In such partnerships all partners contribute to joint ambitions based on trust-building and the combined powers, strengths and added value of each actor. His long management experience in organisations like ICCO and NLR allows him to move beyond concepts only, and make it practical and implementable.



Image:
Elsa Martino

Glossary

This glossary is an adaptation of the list of terms in annex 1 of the [Policy framework for Strengthening Civil Society](#)

Civil Society Organisation (CSO)

A CSO is a non-profit organisation, neither established by a government body nor linked to a government body either de facto or under its constitution, which is a legal person under civil law and serves a public interest. CSOs can include community-based organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Community Based Organisation (CBO)

CBOs are groups made up of local residents. They are non-profit organisations working at local level to improve living conditions for local people, whose rights they represent.

International Non-governmental organisation (INGO)

An INGO is an NGO operating internationally with locations in various parts of the world, including offices in high-income countries. INGOs focus on a whole variety of themes in multiple countries.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

An NGO is a non-state, non-commercial organisation, which pursues a political or social goal.