



Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation

A practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries

Extract: practical recommendations for philanthropists, funders, bilateral donors, and their local partners



Practice / Funding

JOINT PRACTICES

- Regularly share updates on your fundraising efforts, to build a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that both parties face.

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- **Challenge the ‘Global North funding dependency’ mindset and explore how this mindset may have influenced your strategy and plans.**
 - Take a look at the African Visionary Fund and Thousand Currents.
- **Identify funding and in-kind contributions from your own communities and constituents.**
 - Take a look at the resources on community philanthropy from the Global Fund for Community Foundations.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- **Analyse how your funding may have created dependency among your partners and develop a strategy to counter this.**
 - Read: ‘Breaking the starvation cycle – How international funders can stop trapping their grantees in the starvation cycle and start building their resilience’ from humentum.
- **Provide unrestricted funding, and at the least ensure that flexibility is built into restricted funding.**
 - Take a look at the ‘trust-based philanthropy project’.
- **Support your partner to access funding opportunities directly.**
- **Begin with an assumption that you should provide multi-year funding for project activities, unless there is a compelling reason not to.**
- **Explore funding models that help strengthen the ecosystem of actors in the Global South.**
 - Take a look at Thousand Currents.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- **Resist the urge to control how partners use unrestricted funding.**
- **Share information on your donors and encourage ways to facilitate funding directly to your Global South partner.**

Funding as a proxy for power and trust

Throughout the consultation, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of flexible funding when rethinking partnerships between Global North and Global South entities. Rather than focusing on the size or value of grants, participants talked about the quality of funding as being much more important; ‘highly valued’ funding instead of ‘high value’ funding.

While funding is only one dimension of partnership, it is the most visible and most contentious manifestation of most partnerships. Participants highlighted how funding to local actors in the Global South is used by the Global North as an instrument of control and power. But they also described how funding modalities often reflect a lack of trust in local actors:

“Inflexible funding agendas and programs that limit the role of local actors as service and data providers prevent meaningful partnerships between local and external partners”

Ghida Krisht

“race, gender, age, education, all massively impact [on] who can access funding and the knowledge, tools and relationships that deliver funding”

Craig Pollard

Furthermore, the pursuit of funding by Global North INGOs entrenches power imbalances that are difficult to untangle. As Aditi Gupta remarked, the relationship between Global North and Global South actors is:

“often based on the need to access funding – from both sides – resulting in civil society having to ‘professionalise’ to western standards in order to gain access to funding streams, and international organisations gain legitimacy with funders by bringing in local partners. The resulting power dynamic is inherently unequal and colonial, perpetuating rigid systems and less opportunity for small organisations without connections.”

If funding is such a potent symbol of the health of a partnership, what can be done to change the status quo? Below is a list of ten key recommendations for Global North funders made by participants in the global consultation:

1. Fund directly, and not through Global North intermediaries.
2. Provide unrestricted funding as a true demonstration of your trust in the partnership.
3. If unrestricted funding is not possible, provide flexible funding to enable your partner to adapt to changes in the context.
4. Provide multi-year funding, thereby helping your partner to avoid ‘feast or famine’ funding cycles and enabling them to plan long-term.
5. Co-design programmes with your partners and be prepared to change your assumptions and plans if they don’t align with your partners’ needs.
6. Modify your risk appetite to enable you to experiment with different funding mechanisms for local actors.
7. Work with other donors to establish country-based pooled funds earmarked for local actors, thereby coordinating efforts and sharing risk.

8. Change your reporting requirements and formats so that local actors can report in their language and in different ways, such as video, oral reporting or WhatsApp recorded messages.
9. Provide non-financial support through convening, networking, and advocacy opportunities.
10. Support local organisations to generate their own income.

Using this list, Peace Direct launched a public survey on social media to gauge practitioner views on how to prioritise funding to local CSOs in the Global South. Nearly 325 practitioners responded, with the top four recommendations highlighted here:

Priority 1: Fund local CSOs directly instead of relying on intermediaries from the Global North to disburse grants in partnerships.

Priority 2: Provide unrestricted funding that allows local actors to utilise funds according to their specific needs and priorities.

Priority 3: Provide multi-year funding to provide stability for local actors and enable them to implement long-term initiatives that are more sustainable.

Priority 4: Provide more flexible funding for local actors.

Survey respondents provided additional valuable insights regarding the importance of the funding selection process. They emphasised the importance of involving local actors directly in decision-making. By including local voices, they argued that funding design can be community-led, ensuring that grants address the actual needs and priorities of the communities they serve. To achieve this, respondents proposed adopting more participatory grant-making approaches that allow for greater community engagement. Additionally, respondents suggested that donors should adopt more flexible eligibility criteria for local organisations to access funds, including removing the requirement for a large annual income and lowering the threshold for organisational and financial management capacity.

Respondents also advocated for diversifying the pool of grantees and providing financial support to new and innovative ideas. Instead of solely funding more established organisations, there should be spaces created for new grantees in order to foster creativity and encourage fresh perspectives. Furthermore, taking an intersectional lens to grant-making is crucial to ensure that funding is distributed equitably and addresses various social issues. Respondents further emphasised the need to avoid disproportionate amounts of funding being earmarked for specific causes, and called for more rapid response mechanisms to reduce delivery time and enable timely support during crises.

Sustainability was another critical aspect highlighted by respondents. Many suggested that up to 20% of grants be earmarked for organisational development, allowing CSOs to focus strengthening their internal capacity while implementing programmes. Additionally, earmarking funds to assist organisations in raising additional funds, such as through fundraising trips or activities, could help local actors create a more sustainable financial base. Many respondents also saw the need to support social enterprise models as a way to enhance the financial resilience and independence of local CSOs in the Global South.

Practice / Accountability

JOINT PRACTICES

- Agree jointly how you intend to be accountable to each other, including behaviours and values.

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- Develop mechanisms to ensure that your organisation is accountable to the communities and constituents you serve. Not only is this vital to ensure the best outcomes for communities; it also addresses a common criticism by Global North organisations (sometimes used to avoid shifting power) of local CSOs that they lack ‘downward accountability’.
- Read: *Dynamic Accountability: Changing approaches to CSO accountability* from the Global Standard for CSO Accountability and Accountable Now.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- Examine how neo-colonial practices have shifted accountability from communities towards donors. Make accountability towards communities and your constituents a central part of programming.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- Unlearn harmful established approaches that place reporting to you and your donors as the most important measure of accountability.
- Read: *Dynamic Accountability: Changing approaches to CSO accountability* from the Global Standard for CSO Accountability and Accountable Now.
- Consider regular reporting to your Global South partner(s) on the work you have done as part of the partnership, and more generally on your work.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- Examine the extent to which your work may be guided by neo-colonialism and White Saviourism. Take steps to unlearn and dismantle White Saviourism in your organisation and work.

Operationalising the recommendations

Some of the recommendations were discussed by participants in our consultation and focus group discussions, offering insights into how organisations have tried to implement them.

One example of how to talk about power was shared by Karen Karnicki, a Program Officer for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's peacebuilding programme, during the consultations. She explained how she leads with vulnerability to confront her positionality. Karen explained how she shared her weaknesses, recognised her faults and was self-reflective when talking to partners. Although this did not build trust straight away, in time and through continuously leading with vulnerability, her local partners were encouraged to do the same. Ultimately, this process allowed both parties to speak up and share thoughts and feelings about the partnership that would not have traditionally been discussed. She said:

"One thing that I think has been helpful has been sharing what I am learning or going through with partners [...] and] creating space for people to just be people. So, I think maybe both of those things [...] being vulnerable and having that emotional connection [is fundamental to] the learning the process, the emotion, the humanity underlying all the work that we do."

Building trust in a relationship is fundamental to a partnership. Initially it requires a leap of faith and can take time to be solidified. But through open, honest and transparent communication, it can underpin and form the basis of any partnership.

One of the most challenging recommendations for Global North actors is to decentre themselves and their role. Shifting decision-making to local actors requires funding partners, donors and intermediaries to change their own behaviours and adapt existing policies, guidelines and partnership agreements to hold themselves accountable.

Sarah Mueller, a Project Manager at Robert Bosch-Stiftung, explained how, in her role, she is able to centre decision-making with local actors. By doing so, she can act in solidarity with her local partners, recognising and prioritising the local community's interest and the responsibility to address the issues at hand. She said:

"I would see the developing of a project and its ideas, as the role of our partners. We are not so much involved, unless they need our partnership, in that because I don't think we have the expertise. I think that is mostly with our partners."

Regarding the need to be more flexible in reporting, Corie Walsh from Humanity United noted that:

"It's really important that partners be able to report in their native languages. We're dealing with incredibly sensitive personal traumatic issues that our partners should not have to translate into English."

Introducing oral or visual reporting formats that complement or can be used as alternatives to written narratives can ensure the effective transfer of information but also move beyond the colonial misconception that oral tradition is inadequate, unobjective and lacking in rigour.⁹

⁹ Myra Khan, 'The role of oral traditions within marginalised societies and their validity within archives' (April 2021). Available at: <https://lib.asu.edu/news/role-oral-traditions-within-marginalized-societies-and-their-validity-within-archives-myra>

Case study

Adapting funding approaches towards local actors: The Innovative Peace Fund¹⁰

Women and Peace Studies Organization (WPSO) is a local peacebuilding organisation that has been active in Afghanistan since 2012. Since 2018, we at WPSO have received financial support through the International Civil Society Action Network's (ICAN) 'Innovative Peace Fund'.

At the beginning of this partnership, we proposed starting a network of local women peacebuilders that would be active throughout the country. ICAN recognised that we are the best placed to understand the solutions for our own context and gave us the financial and technical support needed to turn our idea into a sustainable programme. With this support, the network grew to over 200 members in all.

The funding we received through this fund initially focused on supporting us to build out our focal points network. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across Afghanistan in 2020, we informed ICAN that the local peacebuilders were not able to mobilise their local communities as we had originally planned. ICAN was able to provide us with additional rapid response funding that enabled us to integrate COVID-related safety guidance and create opportunities for local women peacebuilders to continue their peacebuilding work. This funding was directly based on the community needs identified by the members of the local focal points network.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, the Taliban offensive in August 2021 made it impossible for many peacebuilders to continue their community mobilisation work. ICAN was understanding and responsive, working with us not only to shift funding to meet new needs on the ground but also helping us relocate and evacuate our staff and members of the local women peacebuilders' network. Through a rigorous communication process – over WhatsApp, Signal, and via email and phone calls – ICAN supported us to provide internal relocation and security emergency support to the peacebuilders and move them to a safer place.

During late 2022, Afghanistan's south-eastern region was hit by a strong earthquake that affected over 10,000 homes. We turned to ICAN and flagged the immediate needs of female-headed households, which were being side-lined because most of the aid workers were male and could not enter their homes. ICAN responded by mobilising additional funds that enabled us to support these marginalised families. ICAN trusted that women peacebuilders on the ground were in the best position to assess the risk and determine the best approach to addressing it.

Most recently, in December 2022, the Taliban decree banning women from working in NGOs put WPSO in a compromised position. Instead of halting their support to Afghan women like many other international organisations, ICAN immediately started consulting with us and other Afghan partners to determine how to continue sustaining WPSO. After many consultations, we shifted our strategy and together developed an approach that would allow us to continue operations and maintain our female staff and our focal points network.

The relationship between WPSO and ICAN has not been that of a typical donor and grantee, but rather an equal partnership that has flourished over the years. Despite many difficult days in Afghanistan, WPSO and ICAN have remained in constant communication, sharing needs and realities from the context, and proposing solutions. ICAN is always by our side – valuing our expertise in Afghanistan and trusting our approach, while offering the institutional support, strategic guidance, and solidarity we need to sustain our organisation.

Wazhma Frogh

Founder of WPSO; Afghan human rights activist

Twitter: @WPSOAfghanistan @FroghWazhma

¹⁰ This case study is adapted from a version previously published in ICAN's 2022 Annual Report: <https://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ICAN-Annual-Report-2022-Mobile-Version.pdf>.

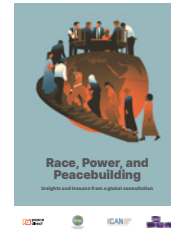
Decolonising the Sector

This is the third report in our series on decolonising the sector.



The first report, *Time to Decolonise Aid*, was published in May 2021 and can be downloaded here:

peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/



The second report, *Race, Power and Peacebuilding*, was published in April 2022 and can be downloaded here:

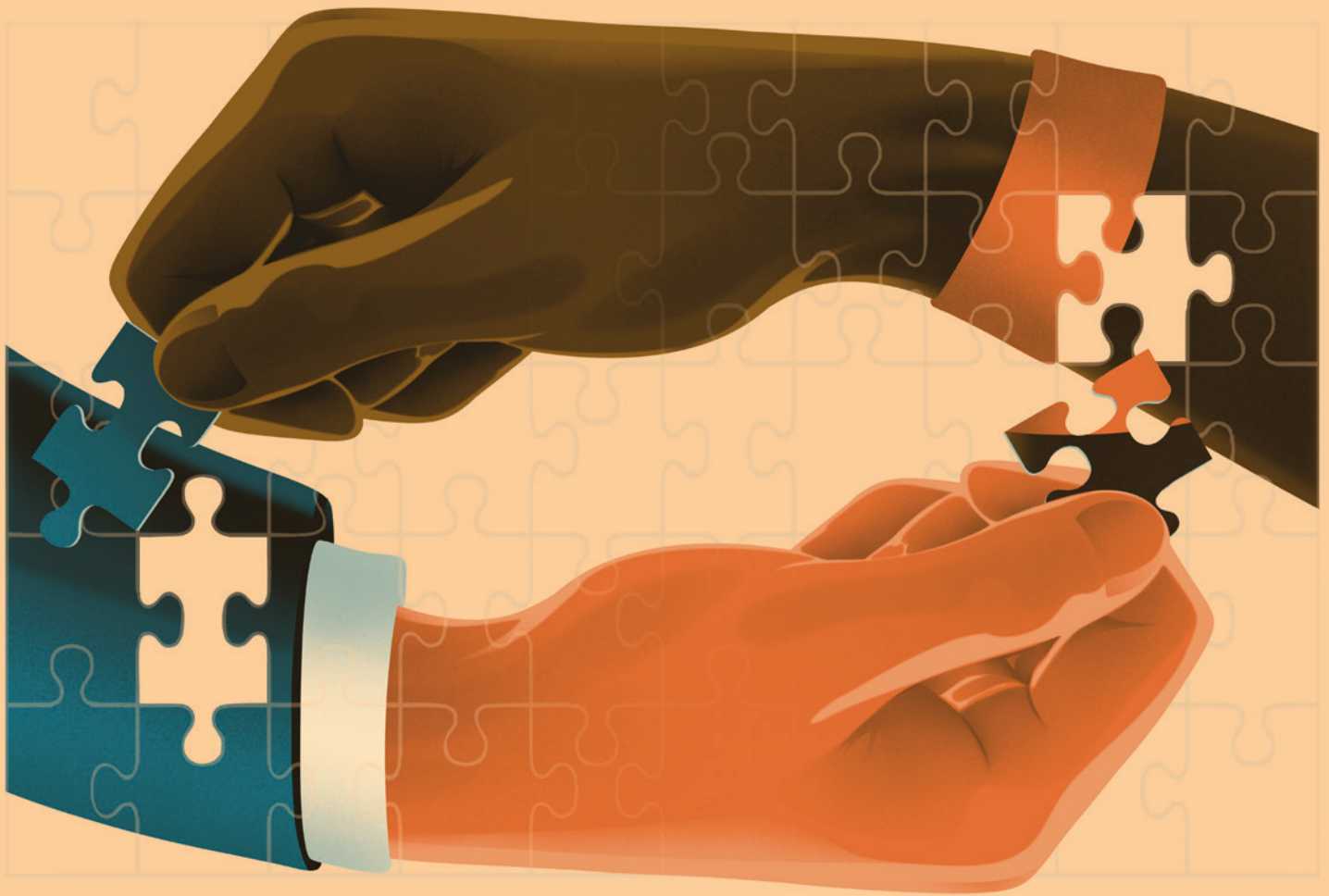
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