

## “Pathways to Power” Podcast Series

### Episode 4: Roles for INGOs and Donors

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**Terry:** Welcome to the ‘Pathways to Power’ Podcast Series, episode four: turning the focus on donors and INGOs. I'm Terry Gibson and I've been linking up with people in twos and threes on Skype and in phone calls. Conversations have spanned continents, linking people working at the front line of development and humanitarian response with others who draw alongside them.

The previous episodes have revealed that localization digs a lot deeper than just transfer of financial resources. At the heart of it is supporting and strengthening local communities and enabling them to unleash their power to achieve sustainable change and progress.

This episode turns the focus on donors and INGOs and asks in what ways they can be part of the solution and in what ways are sometimes part of the problem.

**Sumeera:** That's why I think that the whole capacity analysis of the local level NGOs has always been put into a state that local NGOs and national level NGOs are not taken as a partner but always as a receiver.

**Terry:** For Sumeera, the problem is one of inequality between local and national NGOs on the one hand, and international NGOs and donors on the other. Melvin refers to these large institutions as the ‘Big Brothers.’

**Melvin:** Now the Big Brothers – I will call them that – are controlling huge budgets. They want to be very careful not to give money to an organization which is small and doesn't have ‘capacity.’ So they continue mainly supporting those organizations which they are comfortable with, and they know at least they have assurance that they will deliver results. So they give them the money. So there is a need for the Big Brothers to start programmes which will ‘capacity build’ – other organizations which are working towards supporting programmes at the grassroots level. But their funding tends to be restrictive. If they (organizations) are small they don't have capacity – they don't have this, they don't have that. So the key thing that needs to be addressed is capacity.

**Terry:** There's clearly a need for resourcing the capacity building of communities and local organizations and for Hibak the power inequality between small and large organizations is also to do with access, access to knowledge and funds:

**Hibak:** It's not just capacity – it goes further down to access, and the ability to have access to financing. And the reality is, when we talk about imbalance between local actors and international actors, it's really that access: access to changing policies, access to influencing policies, access to influencing programming and access to financing.

The biggest issue is that lack of access where, you know, I used to work for international organizations and multi-national organizations, and there you have that access. You have a headquarters that's in Washington or in London. They continue to talk with the donors that are physically there, and local actors don't have that benefit.

**Terry:** INGOs may have good access to donors. It seems that communities and local organizations often don't. Maybe it's time for donors to start listening more intently to what's happening locally?

**Sam:** A lot of what I'm hearing as well is about the donor mandates – the donor, the donor, the donor – which makes me think that we should try to get to some of those larger donors to see what it is that they're thinking about in terms of shifting their own practices. (INGOs say) 'We're not doing this because we think we need to do this, we're doing this because it's mandated at a higher financial level', so then how can we shift that? Because if the INGOs continue to point to their donors then we need to be talking to their donors.

**Terry:** Sam is suggesting that the failure of INGOs to build equal partnerships with local organizations and communities is in part due to donor requirements, and those need to change. If so, what kind of things could happen?

**Rachel:** How can we possibly expect an organization with the aspiration to achieve them if you're not giving them some flexible funding or some unrestricted funding, or specific seed funding for growing an income-generating activity, or whatever it might be; and doing that almost as part of the standard way of giving grants. So there are some really interesting things that could be incrementally done, that funders could think about doing.

**Lizz:** There is a momentum that has been started around the Grand Bargain and other initiatives like Charter for Change that will be very hard to stop even if there are people who want to squash it, and as a result actually traditionally direct implementers, you know, big international NGOs that have traditionally worked directly rather than through local partners, are starting to think about how they listen to local organizations more, how they start to think about how they will work in partnership with local organizations.

**Terry:** Changes in funding to support organizational development and changes in partnership arrangements, which Rachel and Lizz talk about, demand a change in the organizations themselves. How will that come about?

**Shane:** Effective partnerships, with local actors in particular, require a different approach. An overhaul of our policies, processes and tools, as well as of our staffing and management structures. This work requires different skillsets, so recognizing the change in skillsets that's required, in our recruitment, in our support to staff, in our performance management. Our leadership tends to be incentivized more by portfolio size rather than impact. And that needs to switch. We need to be defining

success in very different terms: success in terms of the way in which we engage with local government and civil society actors.

**Terry:** Shane, working at a large INGO, IRC, recognizes the need for wholesale change in their organization. What I found particularly interesting was what he said about incentives and about the fact that its portfolio size that tends to drive the organization. This strikes deep to the relationship between core values and actions.

**Rocio:** As organizations we need to go back to our core values. I think that if we start by installing our core values on a day-to-day basis in terms of how we speak, how we relate to others, how we're living these codes of conduct – which, again the code of conduct has become something which is like a checkbox. It's like we have it in place, but we don't really know what's in there. What is it that we are aspiring to do? Core values like solidarity with our team members, you know, these are things that we need to go back to living, and I think that it's not that we have forgotten our core values. It's just that we are so wrapped up in getting the results, and getting the work done, that we just forget some of the things that are more important.

**Shane:** I think we need to broaden our conceptualization of capacities out to consider the full range of capacities that are required for an effective response; to properly value things like contextual experience and understanding local networks, the understanding of the pathways into government, for example. I think that's really critical.

**Terry:** I think it's really striking that Shane and Rocio, as well as others working in INGO contexts, recognize the need to return to core values of partnership and collaboration and to build those into their practice:

**Rocio:** To do all of this I guess the underpinning thing which becomes even more complex is that to be able to do all of this you need to establish a trusting relationship with whoever you're going to start working with on the ground. And that also takes quite a significant amount of time – in different approximations and different ways of engagement – and, again, that just requires flexibility and that's something that we still haven't managed to fully achieve on both ends.

**Moyo:** Trying to evaluate the contribution that the communities made at the end of the project, we decided that it was probably 50/50. So what we are saying now is that we want the donors to value our systems, value our norms and value our people, and view us as equal partners.

**Terry:** For Moyo, working in rural Zimbabwe, 50/50, equal partnerships is the goal. That's the way things should work. That's a similar message to that we've heard from the other contributors to this episode. The real challenge is how to achieve this shift in power and understanding. What I think we've seen in this episode is that mechanisms of funding need to change, the understanding that funders have of local context needs to change, the organization of INGOs and their ability to form partnerships needs to change – and ultimately there needs to be a much greater understanding of the capacity of local communities and local organizations.

You'll find the other episodes and much more information including details on all the contributors by Googling 'Global Fund for Community Foundations Pathways to Power' where you're also very welcome to contribute your own comments and join in the conversations.

And finally my thanks to the contributors to this episode, Sumeera, Melvin, Sam, Hibak, Lizz, Rachel, Shane, Rocio, Stewart and Moyo.