



Where do we go from here?

Navigating power inequalities between
development NGOs in the aid system

**NICOLA BANKS
BADRU BUKENYA
WILLEM ELBERS
INNOCENT KAMYA
EMMANUEL KUMI
LAU SCHULPEN
GIJS VAN SELM
MARGIT VAN WESSEL
THOMAS YEBOAH**

POLICY BRIEF

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Where do we go from here? - Navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system

How NNGOs (Northern NGOs) and other stakeholders in the aid chain can shift power to their partners globally is one of the most essential questions dominating the aid sector. These debates are accompanied by clear and loud demands from SNGOs (Southern NGOs) that the time for more equitable systems and relationships is now.

This policy brief provides a base to further these discussions and their practice. It is based on a [Study in the Global North and South](#) that explores what actions are being taken, by whom and to what effect.¹ The brief presents the main findings and ends with five policy implications for NNGOs, SNGOs and the broader field of international co-operation.

A shared understanding and frustration

NNGOs and SNGOs hold shared frustrations around a global aid system founded on colonial legacies of inequality, raising serious questions about whether it is fit for purpose. While most NGOs believe that there is a significant power imbalance between NNGOs and SNGOs, interestingly, on both sides, NGOs report that their own partnerships are performing ‘better’ than the norm in terms of power imbalances. This indicates that, on both sides, organisations see ‘the bigger system’ as problematic.

Funding is the main driver of inequalities

All NGOs see funding and resources as the main driver of inequalities between NGOs. That makes financial relations the most telling indicator of

how power is distributed (Figure 1). The financial power of ‘the North’ means that for SNGOs, partnerships start off on unequal terms.

Colonising the decolonisation agenda?

Most NNGOs report having discussed actions to tackle power imbalances internally (80%) and within their external partnerships (75%). These figures drop to just under 60% for SNGOs in both dimensions. NNGOs saw themselves as the more likely actor to have started these discussions within their partnership (Figure 2). Our survey also reveals that substantially more NNGOs are active in tackling power imbalances (Figure 3). A sense of unease around a process that concerns shifting power but that is being dominated and led by existing Northern power holders is evident.

Box 1 | Methodology

This policy brief draws on a mixed-method study employing a global survey, key stakeholder interviews, document analyses and case studies. This study reflects the input of 458 respondents from across 55 countries, 53 interviews conducted across Western Europe, Uganda and Ghana, and a review of publications on initiatives to shift power between NNGOs and SNGOs. The research has benefitted from the advice and guidance of a Sounding Board of 30 non-academic members representing various organisations and countries.

¹ This summary is based on a research report under the same title: Banks, N., Bukonya, B., Elbers, W., Kanya, I., Kumi, E., Schulpen, L., Van Selm, G., Van Wessel, M. & Yeboah, T. (2024), Where do we go from here? - navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system, Global, Academics Researching Power Imbalances.

Figure 1 | Main sources of power asymmetries between Global North and Global South development organisations, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=342).

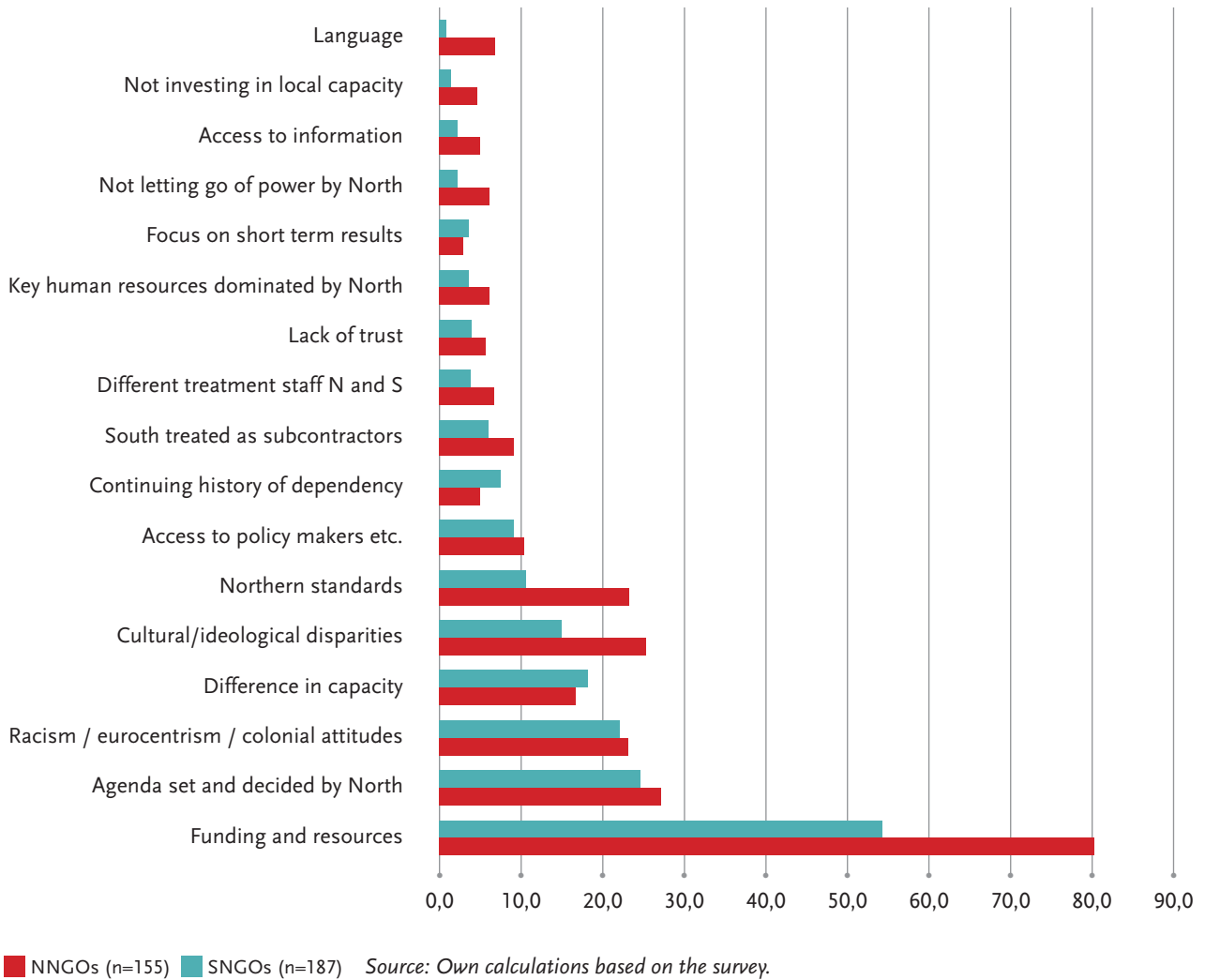


Figure 2 | Who initiated the discussion about actions with NGO partners?, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=226).

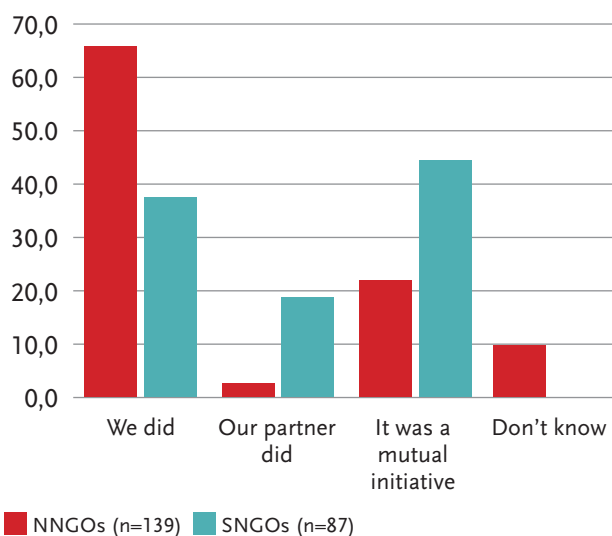
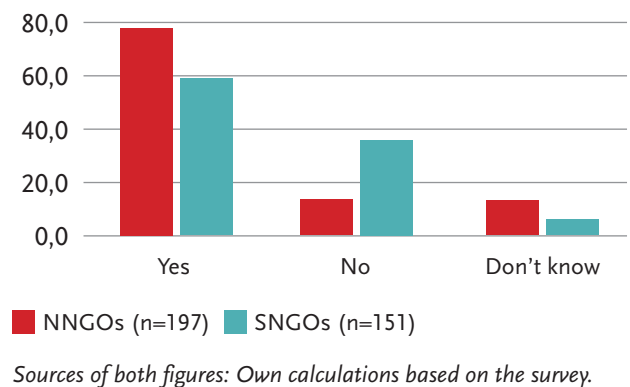


Figure 3 | Undertaken any actions to change power relations, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=348).



Broad and diverse initiatives

Diverse activities are being undertaken across five key areas: policy, programming, internal governance, improved funding and use of language and stereotyping. Funding improvements were the most commonly taken action, with around 80% of SNGOs and 64% of NNGOs reporting activities in this dimension (Figure 4). Unsurprisingly, actions towards improving the use of language and negative stereotyping are more prominent among Northern than Southern NGOs. Otherwise, actions on all fronts are common.

However, if we look more closely at the different actions, the picture changes. For example, as shown in Figure 5, actions around funding rarely address funding distributions or funding conditions.

Programmatic changes abound ... but what about systemic changes?

Also clear when looking deeper into these five key areas is that the actions being undertaken to rectify power imbalances are often no more than the first step towards deeper change. In the area of policy, for example, more NNGOs (27%) reported consulting their partners in policy-making, than going further towards equal decision-making (15%). An even smaller 4% of NNGOs reported that their partners are now in the lead (Figure 6).

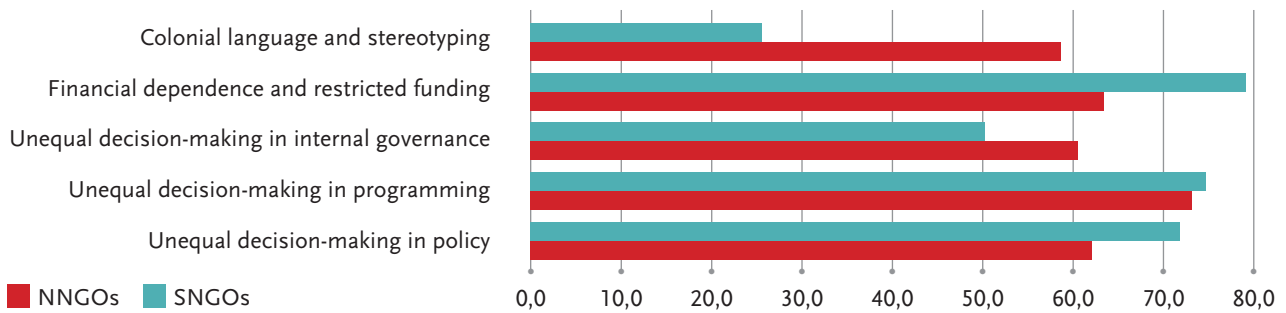
Actions undertaken so far are only a first step towards deeper change

Actions taken within the realm of programming have gone notably further: 44% of NNGOs highlighted that they have moved towards co-creation in programme strategy and design and 12% report partner-led programming (Figure 7).

As programmatic decision-making takes place within the overall framework of the underlying policy framework, these findings show that

SNGOs are becoming more powerful at the programmatic level, yet remain constrained in their ability to influence the overall framework in which programmes take place. Actions undertaken to date are principally geared at mending the worst excesses of an unequal system by focusing on changes within existing individual partnerships.

Figure 4 | Areas which actions touch upon, divided between NNGOs and SNGOs, in %.



Source: Own calculations based on the survey, multiple answers were allowed.

Figure 5 | Actions undertaken in the area of funding, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=122).

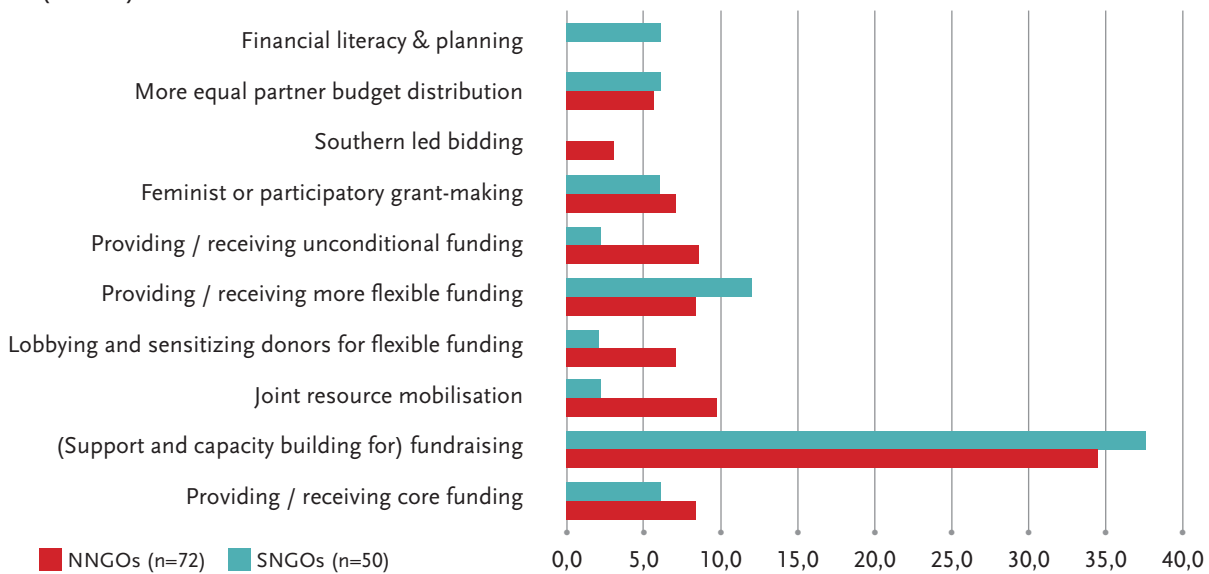
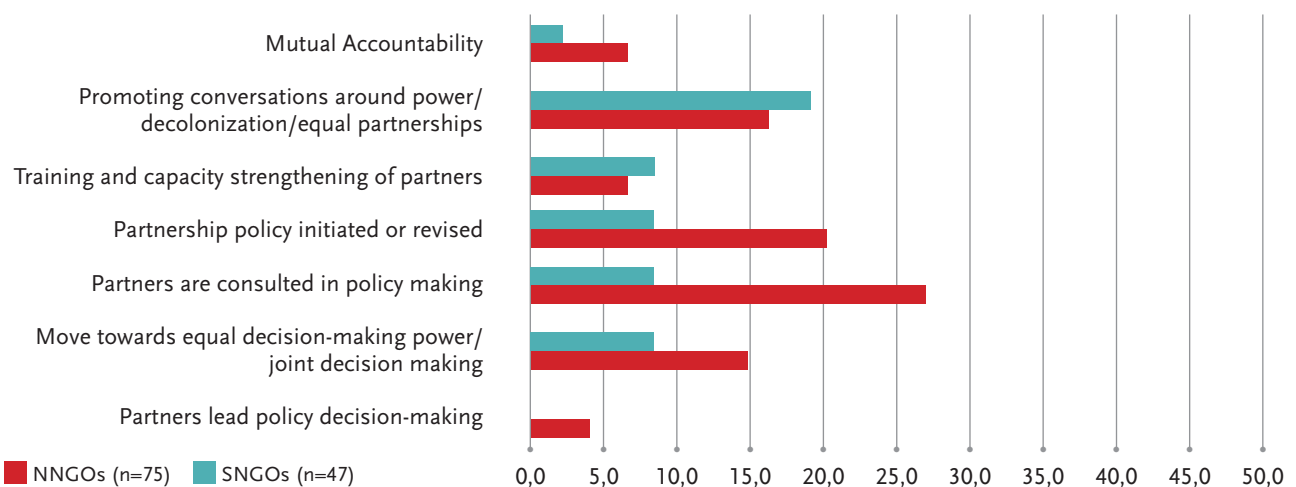


Figure 6 | Actions undertaken in the area of policy, divided between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=122).



Sources figures 5 and 6 Own calculations based on the survey.

Figure 7 | Actions in the programme area, distinguishing between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=129).

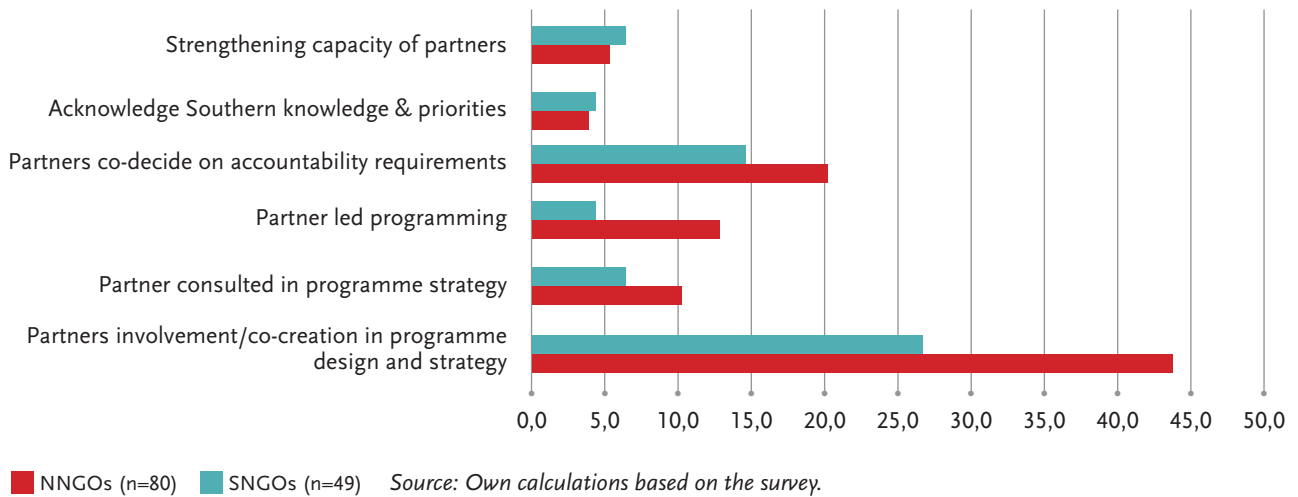
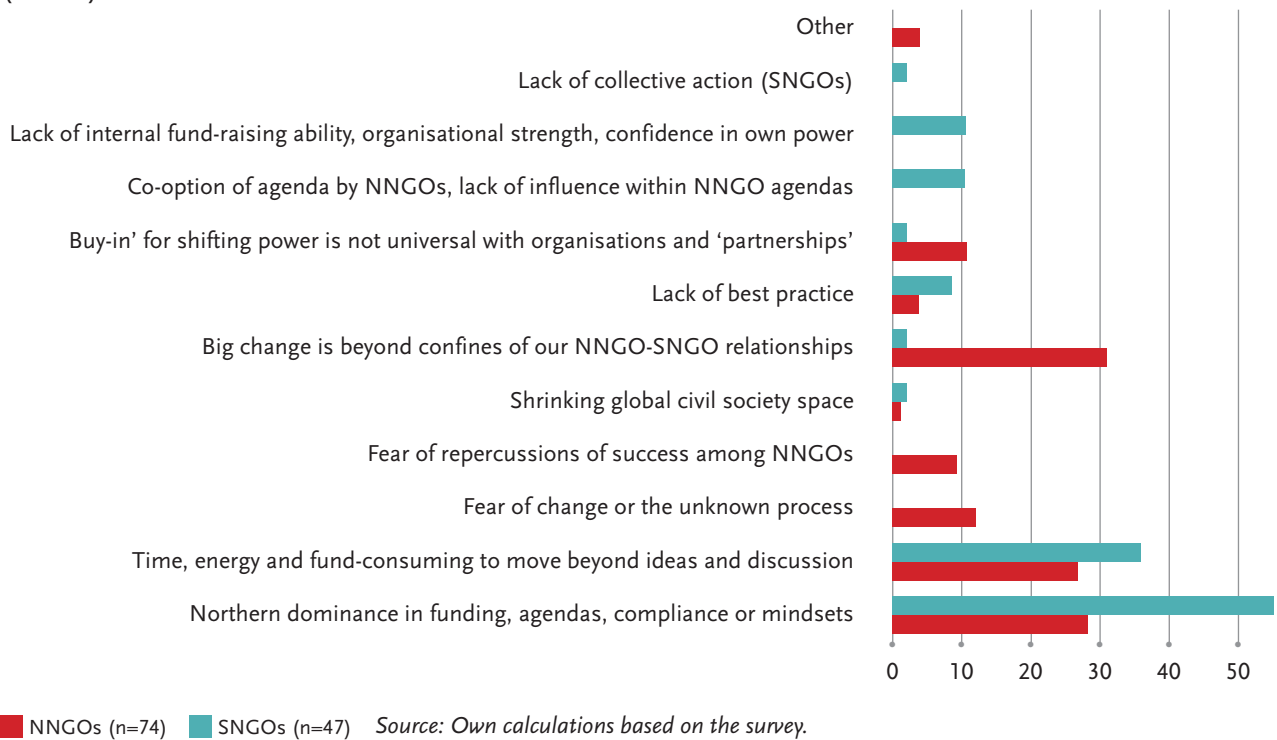


Figure 8 | Primary concern or barrier experienced, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n=121).



What is holding us back?

Taking transformative action is far from easy and NGOs report multiple challenges. NNGOs identify that the biggest obstacle(s) to progress are beyond the confines of their relationships (thus excusing them from a lack of progress). However, responses from SNGOs hold up a mirror to the limits of their willingness and ability to rebalance power inequalities (Figure 8). SNGOs also highlight more frequently than NNGOs, that ‘partners are not listening’, that they hold different interests from their partners, and that their agenda to shift power is likely to be co-opted by their more powerful partners. Moreover, SNGOs often report lacking time, strength and confidence to adequately address power relations that they see as problematic.

Are NNGOs really listening?

Recommendations

The focus on programmatic actions raises the question ‘is it enough to limit actions and activities aimed at addressing power imbalances within individual partnerships?’. The answer to this is clear: no, it is not. Balancing power between NNGOs and SNGOs is not just about ‘giving’ new powers to SNGOs within programmes. It is about Southern organisations being able to take control.

So, where do we go from here? Our findings show that we need to move towards revising the broader framework in which aid actors operate. This relates to questions about who sets agendas and makes key decisions, how resources are distributed, and how actors are held accountable. These changes require a global mindset change accompanied by an aid architecture that centres Southern voices and organisations while channelling a much greater volume of funds directly to SNGOs (rather than intermediated through NNGOs).

Box 2 | Terminology matters

As with many terms used in the field of international cooperation, those used in talking about unequal power relations between Northern and Southern NGOs matter. The four central terms of localisation, locally-led development, Shift the Power and decolonisation have different roots and different meanings.

Localisation – a term that emerged within the domain of humanitarian action – defines individuals and organisations in terms of their unequal relations with outsiders, rather than their own agency and perspectives on their roles. Locally-led development, in turn, refers to Northern actors’ aims and strategies to support recipients of aid taking more control over development agendas and actions. The #Shiftthepower movement questions the centrality of NNGOs in development and argues the need for and feasibility of local actors shaping development more independently. Finally, decolonisation reflects the battle for more fundamental transformation by calling out the discrimination and injustice against people and reclaiming dignity and self-determination.

With highlighting these different perspectives, it is informative that nearly half of the NNGOs and above 30% of SNGOs in our study used the central terms interchangeably. Of those that picked one terminology, the majority of NNGOs were most comfortable with the language of global policy stakeholders, i.e. localisation. In contrast, the majority (one-third) of Southern NGOs were most likely to use the language of locally-led development when they spoke about taking action against power imbalances.

The following points could well guide the way forward to such a systemic change. Reaching more transformative, system-level change requires that we:

1. Own up to the need for SNGOs to be in the lead in tackling power imbalances and at the forefront of their own emancipation. This calls upon NNGOs to move out of the driving seat and into supporting Southern organisations and collectives in taking a leading role.
2. Accept that NGOs not only need to look at what they can do internally to shift power (e.g. in their individual partnerships, governance and policies), but must also challenge the broader aid system that sustains top-down decision-making, resource distribution and agenda-setting. This calls for collective NGO advocacy efforts that centre Southern voices to push in the direction of deeper, more transformative and Southern-led change.
3. Strengthen the idea that systemic change without the active involvement of institutional donors is not possible. This calls upon institutional donors to unite and, as core architects of the aid system, take a lead role in redesigning the system. Like NGOs, they should ask themselves: What dimensions of the system I am part of should be changed to address power relations, and in what way? What am I doing

that promotes such system change? Who else needs to be involved and how must we cooperate in this? Moving beyond service delivery funding to support Southern organisations and collectives with time and resources to come together is one important avenue.

Systemic change without the involvement of institutional donors is impossible

4. Communicate more openly about the barriers and challenges NGOs experience in working towards more balanced power relations. In particular, this means acknowledging the limited room for manoeuvre experienced by SNGOs and the perceived limited room for manoeuvre experienced by NNGOs because of donor restrictions.
5. Address the uneven allocation of financial resources and funding conditionalities that drive inequalities in the aid system.

This research was conducted by ARPI (Academics Researching Power Imbalances), a group of researchers from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Thomas Yeboah) and University of Ghana (Emmanuel Kumi) in Ghana, Makerere University (Badru Bukenya and Innocent Kanya) in Uganda, University of Manchester (Nicola Banks) and London School of Economics and Political Science (Gijs van Selm) in the United Kingdom, and Wageningen University & Research (Margit van Wessel) and Radboud University (Willem Elbers and Lau Schulpen) in the Netherlands.

This research was conducted with the support of and under the Partos 'Shift the Power Lab 2.0'. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. For multiple years Partos has actively supported the 'shift the power' movement pushing for more equal power relationships within development cooperation. In the 'Shift the Power Lab 2.0' more than 150 development professionals are working in 6 working groups on 6 practical solutions for achieving more balanced power relations in international partnerships for development.

For more information about Partos go to www.partos.nl/en

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