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Power and its discontents: The long road to systemic change in the aid sector

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ABSTRACT

Power inequalities between Northern and Southern NGOs have historically plagued development cooperation. A growing momentum towards localisation, locally-led development, and shift the power is indicative of widespread efforts to respond to these inequalities. Drawing upon new survey data, we explore the nature of specific actions taken by a sample of NNGOs and SNGOs to address these power inequalities and analyse the extent to which these equalize power. We find that organisations in our sample are taking important steps toward reconfiguring traditional power dynamics and fostering more collaborative and accountable relationships between Northern and Southern actors. Yet a deeper analysis of these raises questions around whether actions are deep enough to rebalance or upturn unequal relationships and contribute to broader systems change. We find that innovations within the aid system are making incremental improvements without fundamentally shifting where decision-making power and financial power lie. Significant to scholars and practitioners alike, these findings underscore the need for more substantive and systemic changes to achieve genuine equity in development cooperation.

1. Introduction

Spanning more than four decades, a long history of academic research critiques the multiplicity of challenges that NGOs face in supporting transformative change in a system of development cooperation designed in the direction of Northern donors and powerholders (e.g. Chambers 1983; Edwards & Hulme 1996). These range from the design and implementation of projects led by Northern donor interests, to the systems of accountability that lead upwards to Northern powerholders rather than the communities that development projects serve (Banks et al. 2015). They include the dominance of managerial imperatives over practical wisdom (Aagaard & Trykker 2019; Eagleton-Pierce 2020) and the lack of space for input from communities that development projects

purport to support in a professionalised project cycle that prioritises technical expertise over lived experience (Scott 2023).

The role of NGOs in development cooperation was originally justified for offering a genuine ‘development alternative’ to state- and market-led development (Drabek 1987). Yet nearly four decades later, research highlights that the colonial underpinnings of a system designed and controlled from the North have left this goal unrealised. Instead, Northern NGOs have upheld and reproduced hierarchies that concentrate power over and resources for development in the Global North, leading them to become ‘ideological foot soldiers in the broader project of arrested development’ (Sakue-Collins 2021: 976).

These conversations have taken centre-stage across the sector in the past decade (Willig & Mitchell 2023: 20). Against the backdrop of the

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European migrant crisis and a widening aid funding gap, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was convened to reinvigorate the humanitarian sector and call for further reform. The Summit stood out for its broad inclusion of Southern civil society actors – often not represented at high-level meetings – through eight regional consultations (World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat 2015). This resulted in a pivotal moment where an open discussion of power relations and a loud demand for the inclusion of Southern NGOs were pushed to the top of humanitarian reform (Roepstorff 2020; Kelly et al. 2023). The Summit culminated in 2016's *Grand Bargain*, through which the largest donors and major humanitarian actors committed to close the humanitarian finance gap and to strengthen local and national responders through 'localisation' (Kelly et al. 2023). Central to its 11 core commitments, is the (still unmet) goal of ensuring 25 % of global humanitarian funds reach local and national responders directly.¹

In the same year that the Grand Bargain emerged, a coalition of Southern NGOs came together through the coordinating power of the Global Fund for Community Foundations to launch #ShiftthePower. This movement argued for a 'move away from top-down and bureaucratic aid chains, towards aid chains in which national and local organisations have local ownership over development agendas – and the power and resources to tackle these' (Banks & Bukenya 2022: 112). Alongside localisation in the humanitarian sector, 'locally-led development' has emerged as a central focus of development NGOs and remains one of the biggest conversations in the sector. Northern NGOs are asking internally how they can support their partners more equitably. Northern NGO umbrella organisations like BOND (UK), Partos (Netherlands) and 11.11.11 (Belgium), amongst others, have active working groups centring these conversations to support their in-country NGOs to move towards better practice. Global social labs like Re-imagining the International NGO (RINGO) have brought donors and NGO professionals from the North and South together to identify obstacles to locally-led development and design innovations to reconfigure inequalities in the aid chain (Doane & Fomunjong 2025).

Whether we take the terminology of 'localisation', 'locally-led development', 'decolonisation' or 'shift the power', it is power inequalities that are at the heart of these processes: the current concentration of power and resources among Northern actors and the need to ensure decision-making power and more and better terms of funding are extended to the organisations most proximate to the communities they support. All carrying different roots and meanings (van Wessel et al. 2023; Hodgson 2020), we can see these different terminologies as a spectrum of political action when it comes to rectifying power inequalities. At the top of this political spectrum is the end goal of 'decolonisation' and the need to dismantle unequal systems and structures within and beyond the aid system (Matthews 2022). This perspective recognises power inequalities in aid as a form of structural racism that marginalises people and organisations in the Global South through assumptions about who and what knowledge and skills are more or less worthy and through the practices of language and behaviour that reproduce these (Champion 2023; Kothari & Klein 2023).

Yet despite these conversations dominating the sector we have surprisingly little evidence on how these conversations are translating into tangible activities and outcomes. There is clear agreement on the need to tackle, mitigate or reverse power inequalities that exist between NGOs, but literature on the actions that have followed remains scattered. In Syria, Khoury and Scott (2024) find that the actions taken to localise humanitarian assistance have fallen short of producing a locally-led response: project implementation has been subcontracted to Southern NGOs while Northern NGOs maintain control over programme funding, coordination and strategic decision-making. In the Maghreb, Hamamouche et al. (2023) note that an increase in funding diversification has

created space for Southern NGOs to increase their autonomy – including by partnering with NNGOs – but that they continue to be considered implementers rather than catalytic agents in development cooperation. Craney and Hudson (2020) find that locally-led development efforts in the Pacific are disrupted when local leadership conflicts with Northern NGO and donor imperatives of short-term results, value-for-money and predetermined priorities. While these studies provide a snapshot of the actions taken, there has yet to be any systematic research globally that assesses the nature, extent and impact of specific actions taken by Northern NGOs² (NNGOs) and Southern NGOs³ (SNGOs) to address power inequalities in their collaborations.

These are the issues we examine here, alongside the challenges NGOs globally are encountering in moving towards more equitable relationships. In doing so, we move away from an existing focus on the much-explored *consequences* of unequal power relations in North-South NGO dynamics and away from individual case studies of changing partnerships. Instead, we draw upon survey mapping to deepen our understanding of changes occurring in the sector globally and to critically analyse the power (re)configurations that are occurring (or not) through these. While broad in geographic coverage, our convenience-based sample does not allow claims to statistical generalizability.

The following section sets the stage by positioning our research more firmly in the literature discussing power imbalances within the aid system (Section 2). We draw upon this historic literature to identify five core areas of power imbalance. Section 3 briefly explains our methodology, before we introduce our survey findings. We explore first the perspectives of Southern and Northern NGOs on the sources of power inequalities in their relationships (Section 4). We then analyse the actions undertaken within each of five core areas identified, comparing these actions across the Global North and South (Section 5), and the primary barriers that NNGOs and SNGOs perceive when trying to address power imbalances (Section 6). Section 7 explores the impact of a selection of actions being taken across three common frameworks for understanding power. This sheds deeper insight into some of the discomforts emerging from survey findings, around whether the depth of these actions is sufficient to rebalance or upturn unequal relationships between NGOs in ways that contribute to broader systems change. Section 8 concludes with some final reflections on and for the aid sector and on the role of academic research in understanding, analysing and supporting systems change in complex and political systems.

2. Power inequalities: A literature review

Recent discussions in the sector build upon a long history of empirical research on unequal North-South NGO relations dating from the early 1980s. Most of this literature has focussed on understanding unequal relations through a power lens and examining their undesirable effects. Studies often adopt a relational perspective of power, emphasising resource dependence as underpinning power inequalities. The central premise is that because resources like funding, knowledge, and technical expertise are distributed asymmetrically, Northern NGOs have a distinct power advantage over Southern NGOs. Research by Banks et al. (2015), Elbers and Arts (2011), and Lister (2000) shows that this advantage allows Northern NGOs to control decision-making and set the agenda, thus reducing the autonomy of Southern NGOs. Brass (2012) illustrates that Northern NGOs' control over resources limits the agency of Southern NGOs, creating a dependency culture. Similarly, Ebrahim (2005) points out that resource power dictates the priorities for Southern NGOs, forcing them to align with Northern-driven agendas. Ashman (2001) shows that Northern NGO funding conditions prioritise their managerial imperatives, often undermining Southern NGOs' needs in project planning, implementation, and financial sustainability, and

¹ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/40190>. There are now 68 signatories to the Grand Bargain. By 2019 only seven signatories had reported meeting or exceeding this 25% target (ODI 2019).

² Defined as an NGO headquartered in the Global North.

³ Defined as an NGO headquartered in the Global South.

shifting risk onto Southern NGOs.

Much literature has focused on decision-making power (Lukes 2005). Elbers & Schulpen (2011) demonstrate that Northern NGOs unilaterally set the rules for decision-making, leaving Southern NGOs with little room to challenge them. This reflects non-decision-making power, which involves control over what gets to be on the decision-making agenda in the first place (Lukes 2005). Overall, resource dependence compels Southern NGOs to be more reserved in their interactions with Northern NGOs, fearing that open criticism could endanger their financial support.

Numerous studies have explored North-South inequalities through a discursive power lens, examining how language, ideas, and narratives influence power relations in NGO contexts (Kelly et al. 2023; Kumi et al. 2023; Cooke & Kothari 2001). This is ideological power, which supports and legitimizes power inequalities (Lukes 2005). Language and framing are central to this perspective, as they can both reflect and perpetuate power inequalities. When Northern NGOs frame themselves as 'saviours' or 'experts', they portray Southern NGOs and communities as passive aid recipients in need of 'capacity-building', undermining their agency and expertise (c.f. Khan et al.'s (2023) excellent edited collection). This framing reinforces existing power dynamics, marginalises Southern voices, and lends a colonial undertone to North-South relations. A lack of cultural sensitivity in language use can lead to misunderstandings, reinforce stereotypes, and deepen power imbalances.

Elbers et al. (2014) focus on institutional logics, the guiding principles and beliefs that shape NGO behaviour in the international aid system. They show that these logics are rooted in managerialist concepts emphasising rational planning, control, and prediction. While resulting in marked efficiency gains, its overemphasis reinforces the top-down nature of North-South NGO relations and deepens the aid sector's power imbalance.

Looking across the literature we can identify three frequently cited effects of unequal North-South NGO relations on Southern NGOs. The most frequently cited effect is that they undermine Southern NGOs' ability to pursue local priorities. The key argument is that power asymmetries allow resource holders from the Global North to prioritise their own interests and priorities over local needs (Gulrajani 2017). This has the additional side effect of pushing Southern NGOs toward service delivery rather than advocacy efforts (Markowitz & Tice 2002). The top-down approach that characterises development cooperation results in mission drift and weakens local ownership of agendas. Organisations must fit programme requests into funding priorities that do not meet their needs. For example, in Uganda, NGOs identified critical needs like food and water shortages, yet donors focused on paralegal training (Dicklitch & Lwanga 2003). Razavi et al. (2019) find that donors are principal contributors to setting priorities at the district level in Uganda. This is partly attributed to their possession of financial and technical resources. In Sri Lanka, local NGOs faced threats of closure unless they shifted focus to protecting indigenous knowledge rights, a donor-imposed priority (Fernando 2003). The problem is compounded by the project-based funding model used by most donors, which prioritises short-term goals, narrows scope for NGOs to engage in long term social change agendas and forces Southern NGOs to juggle multiple projects to secure funding (Kumi et al. 2017; Girei 2016; Nabacwa 2005; Freeman & Schuller 2020). The significant efforts invested in fundraising could be invested in other operational areas (Schöneberg 2017).

A second often-cited undesirable effect of unequal North-South NGO relations is that it significantly undermines Southern NGOs' organisational capacity and sustainability. Many Northern NGOs only fund project costs, negatively impacting the sustainability of Southern NGOs, including their ability to maintain their organisational infrastructure and retain staff. Humentum's (2022) influential report '*Breaking the Starvation Cycle*' highlighted how existing funding practices contradict development cooperation's ultimate goal to promote long-term development outcomes. Without core and long-term funding, Southern NGOs rely on short-term contracts and volunteers to meet their staffing needs. This leads to 'human resource fatigue', with staff working longer hours without additional compensation (Pousadela & Cruz 2016). A reliance on volunteers and temporary staff can decrease operational efficiency and stability, further

limiting the capacity of Southern NGOs to pursue their goals. Viewed historically, these challenges of ongoing financial vulnerability make Southern NGOs more susceptible to threats of closure, reduce their ability to engage in long-term planning, and influence their overall performance (Bornstein 2003; Wallace et al. 2007; Gregory & Howard 2009; Lacey & Searing 2015).

A third effect revolves around the detrimental impact of unequal power relations on the legitimacy of SNGOs and their critical 'grassroots' linkages. Referring back to the original theoretical work on what makes NGOs a genuine development alternative, it is these downwards links of empowerment and accountability to communities that underpins their legitimacy as development actors (Drabek 1987). Yet systems of development cooperation have pushed SNGOs towards very different priorities. Suárez & Gugerty (2016) conclude that donors are more inclined to confer legitimacy on Cambodian NGOs that have adopted managerial practices than NGOs that emphasise their local embeddedness (see also Wallace et al. 2007). Incentivised by the need for organisational survival, donor demands for rationalisation also lead to the need for greater 'professionalisation', processes that lead SNGOs to adopt the shape, form and practices valued by donors over those that respond primarily to their grassroots constituents (Wehbi 2011; Kamstra & Schulpen 2015; Elbers et al. 2022).

While these academic critiques span over four decades, their political salience fuelling action among development actors in the North has been much more recent. Against such a radical change in narrative within the sector, research exploring whether and how this is translating into actions to reach these goals is critical. We now turn to our methodology to illustrate how we have achieved this.

3. Methodology

We came together as nine academics, spanning four countries, who all recognised the role that academic research could play in filling in critical knowledge gaps to support the many policy discussions around what must be done to reduce inequalities across NGO partnerships globally. Looking at what we saw as a glaring knowledge gap in the sector, we asked, 'What is the nature of specific actions taken by NNGOs and SNGOs to address power inequalities in NNGO-SNGO collaborations and to what extent do these actions equalize power?'.

This two-fold question required ambition. It required a methodology that could 'map' the depth and diversity of actions being taken to rectify power imbalances between Northern and Southern NGOs and could explore different perspectives, actions and barriers to progress across geographies. We developed an online survey comprising four substantive sections, making this available online in English, French, and Spanish. Section 1 collected background data, ensuring that respondents had direct experience of the power inequalities under investigation. Section 2 gathered respondents' views on power imbalances, while Section 3 dived into the actions respondents were undertaking or experiencing against five core areas of unequal decision-making and examined the pace at which these actions were discussed, adopted, and implemented. Section 4 looked more deeply into these actions, exploring their effects and impacts and identifying barriers to greater progress in addressing power imbalances.

Over four weeks (November-December 2022) the survey was circulated widely, principally through the mailing lists of key NGO platforms and organisations in the Global North and South and through social media.⁴ Over 830 respondents started the survey, though not all completed it. All respondents completing Section 2 were included in the analysis, providing crucial preliminary insights into power relations and what respondents perceived as the primary sources of power inequalities. This resulted in 458 respondents, of which 267 reached the survey's final section (see Box 1 for some background data on respondents).

⁴ These included WACSI in Ghana, Partos in the Netherlands, the Uganda National NGO Forum, and Bond and the Small International Development Charities Network in the UK.

Box 1**Background of survey respondents.**

Our 211 SNGOs are headquartered in 36 countries (see Table 3.1 below), with a concentration in Ghana and Uganda (where two of the Southern NGO networks are headquartered). Likewise, more than half of our 247 NNGO respondents are from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (where three of the Northern NGO networks are headquartered). Nearly all NNGOs work internationally, but this only holds for 21 % of the SNGOs). In both groups, just above or below half, (also) operate at local, district and national levels. Many NGOs combine sectors. Most NGOs are in the broader sector of 'development'; the humanitarian sector comes second and peacebuilding third. Differences between SNGOs and NNGOs are negligible. The latter also holds when looking at fields with many combining activities in advocacy, service delivery and capacity strengthening. Finally, and unsurprisingly, NNGOs tend to have larger budgets than SNGOs. Over 57 % of NNGOs have an annual budget above US\$5 million, while only 16 % of SNGOs reach that amount.

Table 3.1

Responses per country.

Country	#	%	Country	#	%	Country	#	%
Afghanistan	1	0.2 %	Finland	2	0.5 %	Qatar	1	0.2 %
Australia	2	0.5 %	France	7	1.6 %	Rwanda	1	0.2 %
Austria	1	0.2 %	Germany	5	1.2 %	Senegal	1	0.2 %
Bangladesh	1	0.2 %	Ghana	69	16.2 %	South Africa	6	1.4 %
Belgium	4	0.9 %	India	5	1.2 %	South Sudan	1	0.2 %
Benin	1	0.2 %	Ireland	1	0.2 %	Sweden	3	0.7 %
Bosnia & Herzegovina	1	0.2 %	Israel	1	0.2 %	Switzerland	6	1.4 %
Burkina Faso	1	0.2 %	Italy	4	0.9 %	Syria	1	0.2 %
Burundi	2	0.5 %	Ivory Coast	2	0.5 %	Tanzania	1	0.2 %
Cameroon	4	0.9 %	Kenya	17	4.0 %	Thailand	1	0.2 %
Canada	6	1.4 %	Latvia	1	0.2 %	Trinidad & Tobago	1	0.2 %
Chad	1	0.2 %	Lebanon	2	0.5 %	Turkey	4	0.9 %
Chile	1	0.2 %	Malawi	2	0.5 %	Uganda	46	10.8 %
Congo	2	0.5 %	Mexico	1	0.2 %	UK	62	14.6 %
Czech Rep.	1	0.2 %	Nepal	2	0.5 %	US	25	5.9 %
Denmark	13	3.1 %	Netherlands	80	18.8 %	Yemen	1	0.2 %
DR Congo	7	1.6 %	Nigeria	8	1.9 %	Zambia	1	0.2 %
Egypt	1	0.2 %	Palestine	1	0.2 %			
Ethiopia	3	0.7 %	Peru	1	0.2 %			

Our research question sought to understand (1) the nature of actions being taken by NNGOs and SNGOs and (2) the extent to which these actions did, in fact, equalize power. The survey itself addresses the first part of the question and we present in the following section the results from this, using descriptive statistics, t-tests and thematic analysis to analyse our completed dataset.⁵ We felt the explorative nature of our research justified a survey based upon self-selection and convenience sampling, though of course, this requires us to be careful in interpreting the results or making any claims of generalisability of findings. Nevertheless, we assume that by using NGO networks as our main means of reaching out ensures that respondents are well-versed in the broader discussion on power dynamics between North and South and that groups do not substantially differ in this discussion. Next to descriptive statistics we report on the basis of t-tests in those areas we expect NNGOs and SNGOs to differ significantly.

To move beyond these (descriptive) statistics and make a deeper conceptual contribution with this empirical research, Section 7 moves on to evaluate the actions that are taking place through three core theoretical frameworks for understanding power relations: Dahl's (1957) assessment of power shifts in terms of redistributing decision-making power, Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) assessment of power shifts as reducing external dependency and Scott's (2001) assessment of power shifts as establishing lasting institutional change. We use these perspectives to analyse specific actions under the five core areas. To illustrate our analysis and keep it readable we focus on actions reported

by at least 10 % of organisations in the sample, leading to an analysis of 14 actions. This allows us to answer the second part of our question about the extent to which these actions equalize power between NNGOs and SNGOs.

4. Understanding and discussing power inequalities between NNGOs and SNGOs

There is no doubt among survey respondents that power imbalances between NNGOs and SNGOs exist and are problematic (Fig. 1a). Speaking *in general* within the broader aid system the vast majority among respondents of NNGOs (77.2 %) and SNGOs (71.4 %) see these relationships firmly on the side of unequal (we categorise scores 1 to 3 as 'very' unequal). It is interesting, however, that these perceptions change when NGOs refer to their own partnerships (Fig. 1b). Both NNGOs and SNGOs tend to be more optimistic about their personal relationships, compared to their views on power relations in general. Notably, NNGOs are significantly more likely than SNGOs to believe that their own relationships are more equitable ($t(335) = 2.161, p = 0.031$). Perhaps in a sector where actions under the banner of such terms as 'localisation' and 'locally-led development' are relatively recent and sparse, and where respondents are thinking, talking about and taking action upon these inequalities, they see themselves as ahead of the curve.

The concentration of funding and resources in the North is clearly identified by both groups of respondents as the main driver for perceived power imbalances. Fig. 2 clearly shows a vast and diverse set of drivers of power imbalances, but the question of finance stands out. Money is clearly power in these relationships.

Questions of finance are mentioned near-universally by respondents in both North and South. This is not just in terms of the volume of

⁵ Post-data collection, the data was cleaned for inconsistencies and incomplete responses were filtered out. Results were cross-checked for reliability and coded to identify recurring patterns in responses.

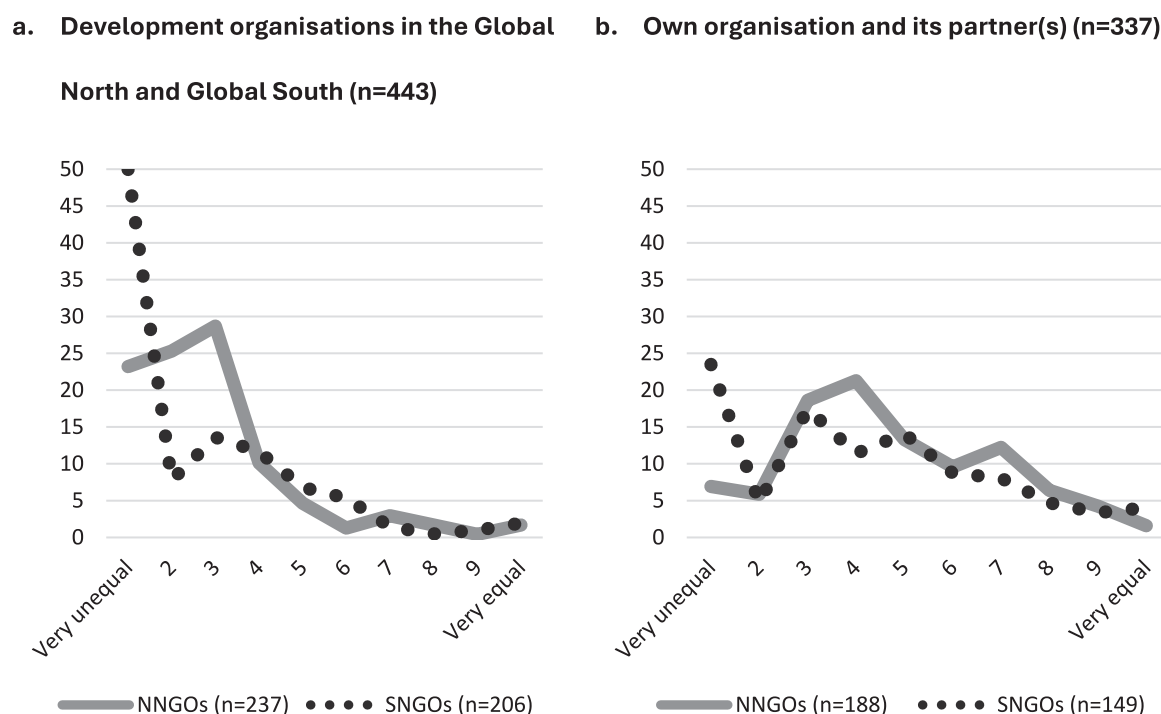


Fig. 1. Perceived (in)equality of power relations between NGOs and SNGOs a) generally and b) within own partnerships, with division between NGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 443 and n = 337).

Source: own calculations based on the survey. Respondents were asked to judge how unequal relationships between NGOs and SNGOs are on a scale of 1 to 10.

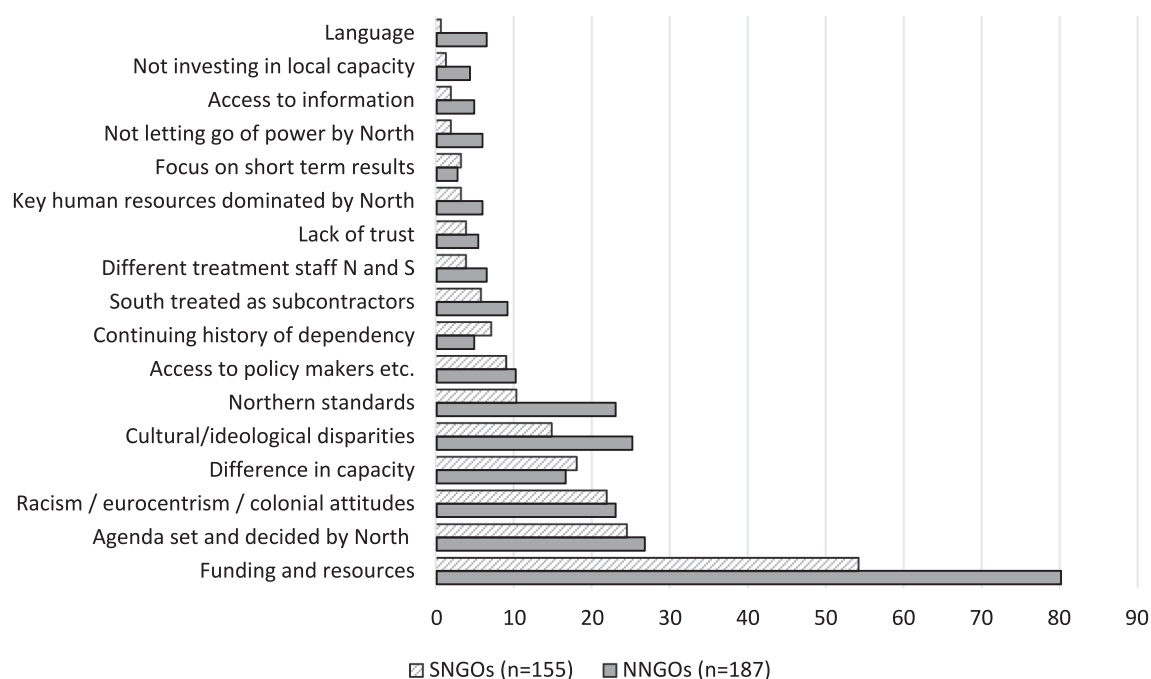


Fig. 2. Main sources of power inequalities, with division between NGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 342). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

financial resources, but also the terms of access to them for SNGOs. This financial power is maintained through conditionalities on how funds are spent, a lack of direct funding for SNGOs and an unwillingness among NGOs to share the overhead costs of Southern counterparts (also see [Humentum 2022](#)). Financial control also fosters other forms of power to be concentrated in the Global North. We see access to policymakers and information are also significant sources of power imbalances. Perceived limitations of SNGOs capacity and ability to take the lead influences power dynamics, closely linked to questions of cultural and ideological

disparities and a lack of trust. Around 22 % of NGOs and SNGOs see power inequalities as symbolic of and part of the continuing history of (neo)colonialism, structural racism and Eurocentrism. Lastly, the reluctance of Northern actors – including donors and NGOs – to share power is also highlighted as prolonging power inequalities. New mind-sets are required.

Overall, we see significant convergence in how NGOs and SNGOs understand power inequalities – and their roots – in the sector. Beyond a common understanding of the sector's 'problem', however, this changes

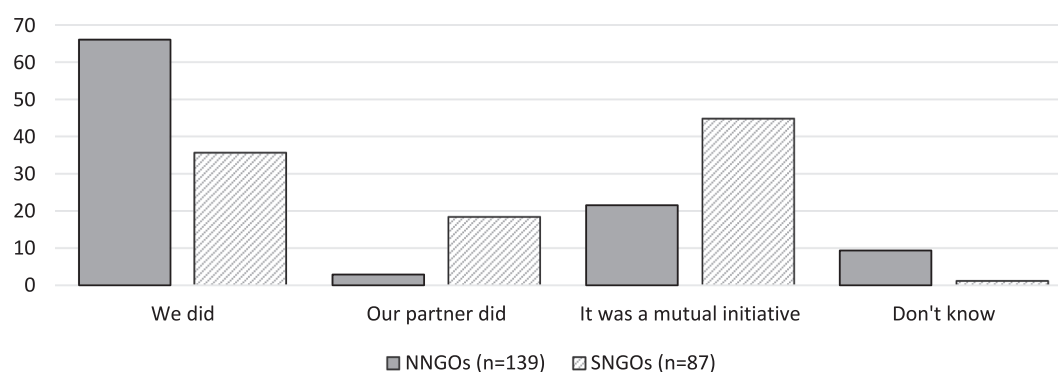


Fig. 3. Who initiated the discussion about actions with NGO partners?, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 226). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

as we move to discussions and actions to rectify these, with Northern NGOs more likely to discuss inequalities and Southern NGOs less likely to have taken action to tackle these. Among NNGOs and SNGOs, the majority of respondents have discussed actions to tackle inequalities: internally, within their own organisations, *and* externally, with their counterparts in the North or South. However, NNGOs have more frequently discussed such actions internally ($t(225) = -5.404, p = 0.000$) and externally ($t(250) = -4.125, p = 0.000$) compared to SNGOs.

Nearly 70 % of NNGOs reported that they had been in the driving seat of initiating discussions about such actions with their SNGO partners, sowing initial discomfort around who is driving the locally-led development agenda (Fig. 3). In contrast, only one-third of SNGOs reported that they had initiated these discussions and nearly 45 % reported that it had been a mutual initiative.

5. NGOs undertake actions

Most organisations move from discussions around power inequalities to take some form of action to tackle these, though SNGOs are less likely to move to action. Around one in ten NNGOs report they have *not* taken action towards changing power relations within their partners, increasing to around one-third of SNGOs.

Respondents reported on actions against five core areas of action: (1) policy, (2) programming, (3) internal governance, (4) funding, and (5) language and stereotyping (Table 5.1). These five areas draw upon a typology created by Elbers and Schulpen (2011), highlighting the

Table 5.1
Core areas of action.

Area	Explanation
1 Unequal decision-making in policy	This involves actions that address guiding (policy) principles that shape decisions and recurring activities, for instance, how NGOs collaborate (partnership policy) and report (accountability policy).
2 Unequal decision-making in programming	This encompasses actions focused on revising how (specific, time-limited) interventions are designed who is involved in the process.
3 Unequal decision-making in internal governance	This includes actions aimed at reshaping governance structures affecting internal decision-making and participation, such as revising board compositions and adopting hiring policies fostering a diverse workforce.
4 Financial dependence and restricted funding	This relates to actions that influence funding sources and conditions, such as initiatives to diversify income streams and enhance fundraising capabilities.
5 Colonial language and stereotyping	This refers to actions promoting the use of a vocabulary and images that depicts partners in an equal light, for example, awareness raising about the impact of language and imagery.

dimensions through which power dynamics within NGO-SNGO partnerships materialise.

Within most areas (well) over half of SNGOs and NNGOs are taking action to tackle power imbalances (Fig. 4).⁶ Across many areas, there is convergence across NNGOs and SNGOs in the actions being taken, though in most areas it is NNGOs who are most likely to act. Respondents also specified qualitatively the activities that they were undertaking within each area. The survey team analysed these open-ended answers to arrive at a categorisation. We present key findings next, before further elaborating on these in Section 7.

5.1. From consultation to co-creation for SNGOs in programming...but less so for policies

Of the open-ended answers, it is actions within the area of **programmes and programming** (Fig. 5) that are most prevalent. Six types of actions were distinguished in this area, representing a spectrum of action from shallow (in which SNGOs are consulted in programming) through to deep action (in which SNGOs are supported to take the lead).

Programming is one area in which NNGOs have moved away from 'partner consultation' towards deeper engagement from Southern counterparts: only 10 % of NNGOs report that they 'consulted' their Southern counterparts on programming and programme development. In contrast, 44 % of NNGOs reported that they 'co-created' programme strategy and design. At the other end of the spectrum is partner-led strategy and design in which agendas are set, programmes are designed and monitoring and reporting activities aligned with SNGOs playing a key role. 12.5 % of NNGOs and 4.1 % of SNGOs reported partner-led programming initiatives. Notable, here, is that more NNGOs reported partner-led programming than they did consultation alone.

The movement towards 'deeper' action is not seen in the area of policy, where the survey identified seven types of actions (see Fig. 6). Here, NNGOs report that 'consulting' Southern partners in their policy-making is the most common action (27 %). Fewer (15 %) went one step further to move towards equal decision-making. An even smaller group of NNGOs (4 %) stated that partners *lead* in policy decision-making. For SNGOs, promoting policy-level conversations around power and (equal) partnerships was the most frequently engaged with action (19 %). Developing new partnership policies was reported by roughly 20 % of NNGOs and 9 % of SNGOs.

⁶ The only real exception to this rule concerns the actions of SNGOs in 'colonial language and stereotyping', which is a vital action area for NNGOs but less so for SNGOs, among whom only 26% of respondents reported taking action. This is unsurprising because while SNGOs might see the need to 'demand' action from their Northern counterparts in terms of how NNGOs represent their Southern counterparts to Northern audiences, it is likely that they have less 'work' to do in this realm themselves.

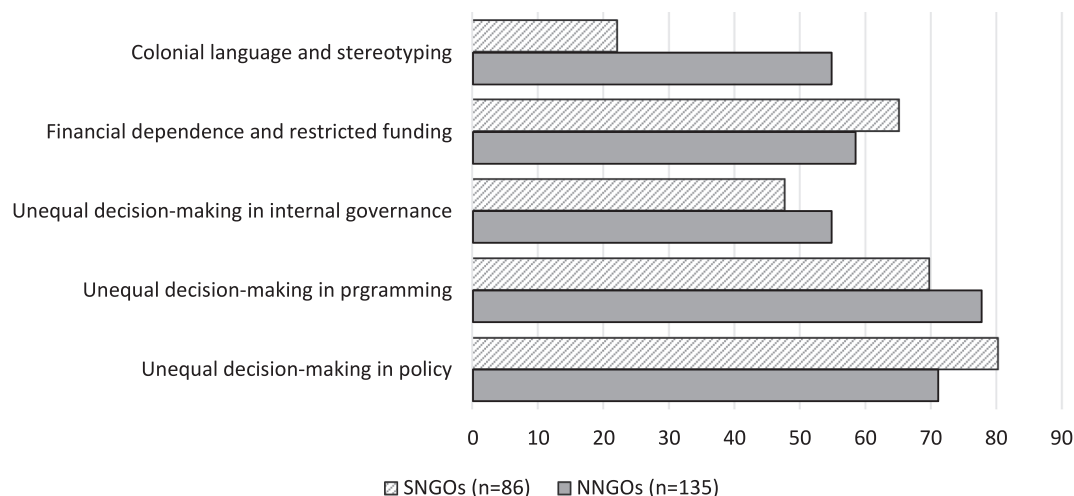


Fig. 4. Areas which actions touch upon, distinguishing between NGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 221). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

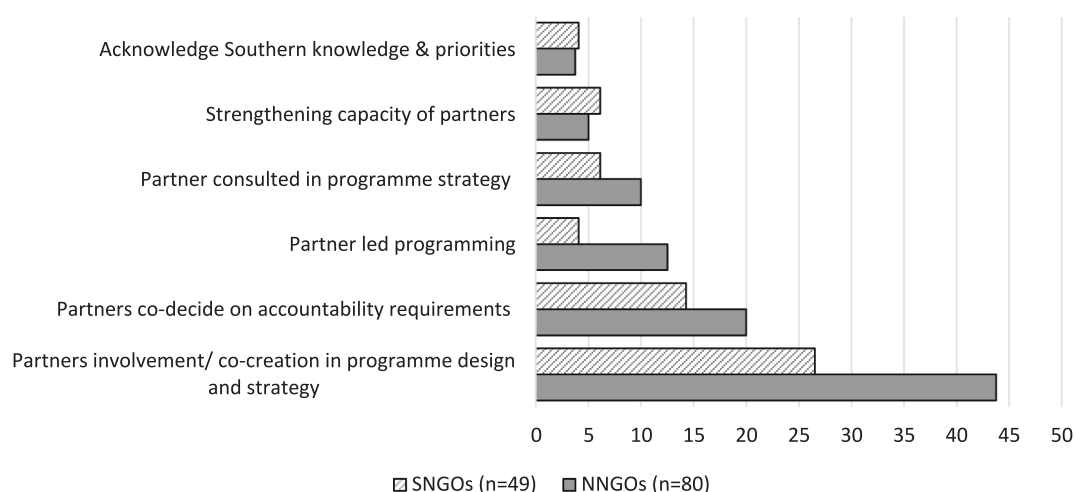


Fig. 5. Actions in the programme area, distinguishing between NGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 129). Source: own calculations based on the survey.



Fig. 6. Actions undertaken in the area of policy, divided between NGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 122). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

5.2. Improving staff diversity, equity and inclusion

Six main actions were identified in the area of **governance** (Fig. 7). Actions aimed at improving staff diversity within governance structures and at the programme level were most frequently mentioned, especially

by NGOs. Respondents indicated that their organisations had initiated policies to employ more staff from the Global South.

Another set of actions that stands out concerns adopting internal policies to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion in the organisation, including specific policies for safeguarding. Many respondents

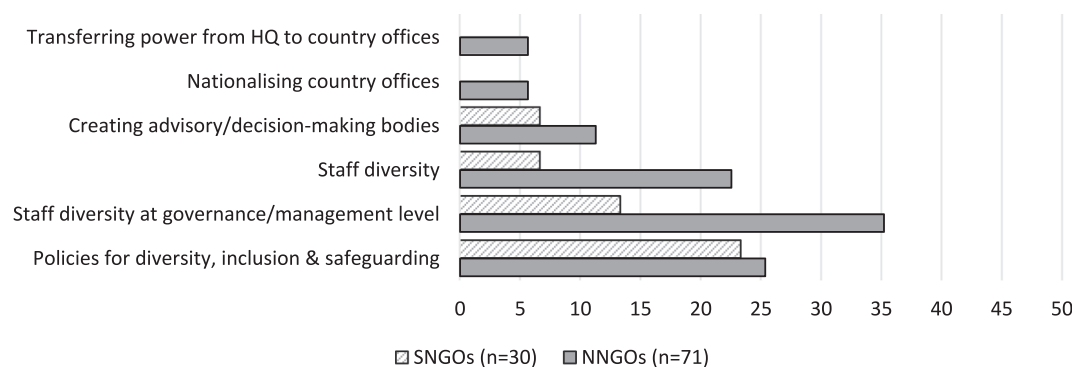


Fig. 7. Actions undertaken in the area of *governance*, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 101). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

noted that their organisations had installed specific working groups (anti-racism-groups, diversity and inclusion groups, etc.) for this purpose. Roughly 12 % of the activities mentioned by NNGOs (7 % by SNGOs) were about installing advisory and/or decision-making bodies to promote Southern perspectives and priorities.

Six NGO respondents mentioned nationalising country offices and/or transferring headquarters from Northern to Southern countries in the survey. We return to these issues in [Section 8](#).

5.3. Building local fundraising capacity.... Rather than increasing the volume of or improving the terms of funding flows

With funding identified to be at the root of power inequalities across Northern and Southern NGOs, perhaps it is no surprise to see the breadth of action around **funding** (Fig. 8).

The survey yielded ten specific activities to tackle power inequalities, though there was less diversity of action across these. One stands out for SNGOs (35 %) and NNGOs (38 %): support and capacity building for fundraising. This relates to SNGOs taking action to diversify funding sources and NNGOs offering support in this process (mainly through training). Enhancing access to funds that SNGOs have greater autonomy over is central to these efforts. Open-ended survey responses gave examples of Southern organisations extending their fundraising activities to apply locally to bigger sources of funds like local embassies (still classed as local fundraising) or internationally to Northern NGO funding opportunities. NGO respondents, in particular, stressed providing general capacity building for fundraising that can support diverse funding channels. As a NNGO respondent noted, ‘We always help the local partners to broaden their donor base, to diversify their income sources and to be trained in (local) fund raising and proposal writing. We

hope this will make them less dependent on us. In practice this remains very difficult’.

Taken together, providing or receiving more flexible, unconditional and/or core funding is the second most frequent initiative. Nearly 30 % and 20 % of NNGOs and SNGOs mention such actions, respectively. We might add participatory grant-making here (a further 7 % and 6 % of NNGOs and SNGOs, respectively), as this also offers recipients a bigger say in funding decisions. One respondent made it clear that this requires sensitising donors towards more flexible funding to ‘deepen their understanding of structural violence and other barriers that Global South organisations might face when trying to access resources, particularly from the Global North’.

5.4. Decolonising internal and external language and communications

Finally, in the area of **language**, Fig. 9 shows that many organisations from the Global South (44 %) and North (42 %) have taken actions aimed at raising awareness and dialogue about North-South stereotyping, power relations and language. A relatively large number of NNGOs (39 %) go further by stating that they have decolonised their external communication. Around 20 % of SNGOs and NNGOs refrain from using specific terms and phrases such as ‘beneficiaries’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘field office’ and ‘capacity-building’, amongst others.

5.5. Priorities for action: Addressing inequalities in funding, policy, programming and more

Do these initiatives match NNGOs’ and SNGOs’ priorities for action? Respondents also identified their top three priorities for addressing power inequalities across these five areas discussed and given the

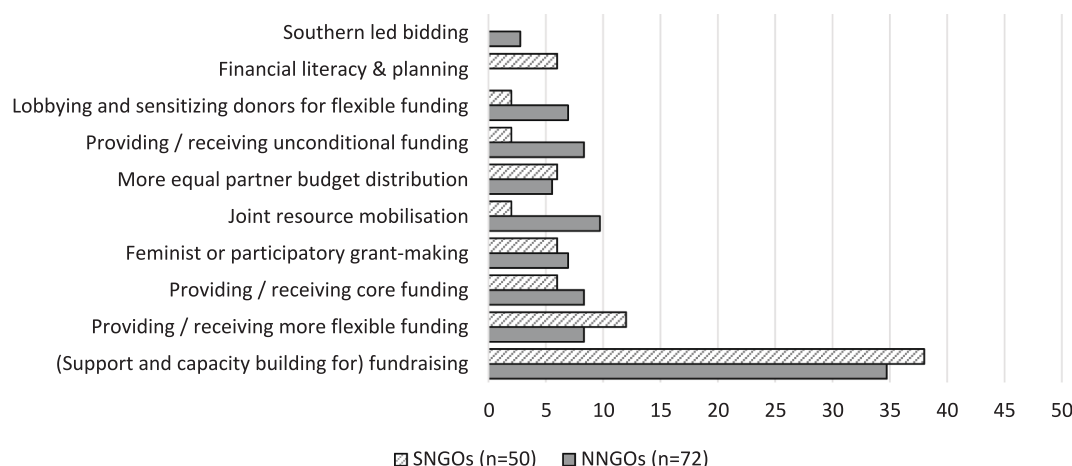


Fig. 8. Actions undertaken in the area of *funding*, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 122). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

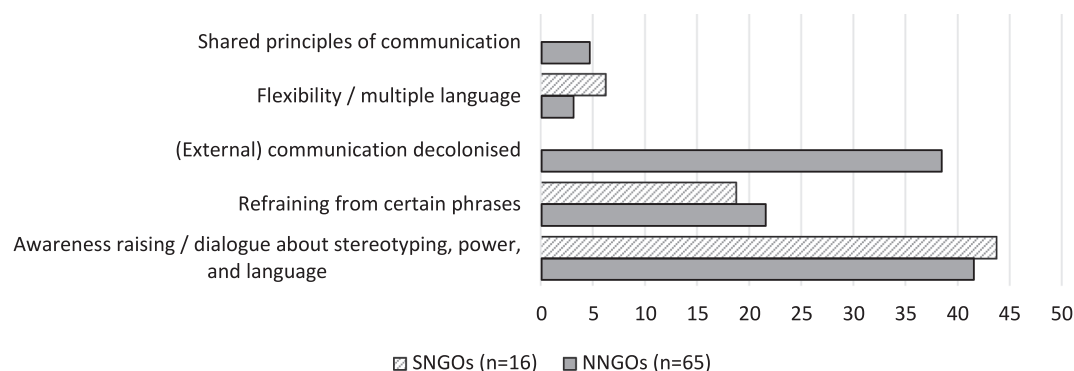


Fig. 9. Actions undertaken in the area of *language*, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 81). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

opportunity to describe, in their own words, what changes they want to see in the future. SNGOs and NNGOs are strongly aligned in the clear preferences they expressed for addressing inequalities in *funding*, followed close behind by *policy* and *programming*.

Responses to people's thoughts on this future prioritisation were rich, detailed and enlightening. We categorised these into 13 overarching themes, indicative of the fact there is no broad agreement on actions for the future (Fig. 10); the number of types of preferred priorities gives the impression that searching for the 'best ways' to address power inequalities remains ongoing. While the data strengthen the importance of funding, programming, and policy areas, they also show that tackling power inequalities is about more than that – and here there are fundamental differences between SNGOs and NNGOs.

Some priorities display a level of convergence. Comparable numbers of Northern and Southern organisations (around 15 % of both), for example, call for being 'good partners' by providing broad-based support founded on listening, understanding and appreciating local knowledge. Likewise, comparable numbers of NNGOs and SNGOs see

the local determination of development as a future priority. This is strongly linked to the issue of 'decolonising' partnerships and narratives (e.g. highlighting partner voices and perspectives), a priority which is mentioned with greater frequency by NNGOs.

Yet, Fig. 10 also highlights important divergence in the priorities of Northern and Southern organisations when it comes to prioritising the partnership level or the broader, systemic foundations of the sector that underpin these inequalities. A clear distinction between partnership and systemic levels can be witnessed in two areas: i) greater priority and participation of SNGOs and ii) funding.

Nearly one in three Northern NGOs prioritise that Southern NGOs are more deeply involved in decision-making, strategy and programming. This can be seen as a priority that plays out *within* the scope of existing partnerships and activities: that these should be improved to rectify power imbalances. A smaller proportion of – one in four – SNGOs reported this same priority.

SNGOs were more likely to prioritise a more foundational rebalancing of power and influence outside of the arena of their partnerships

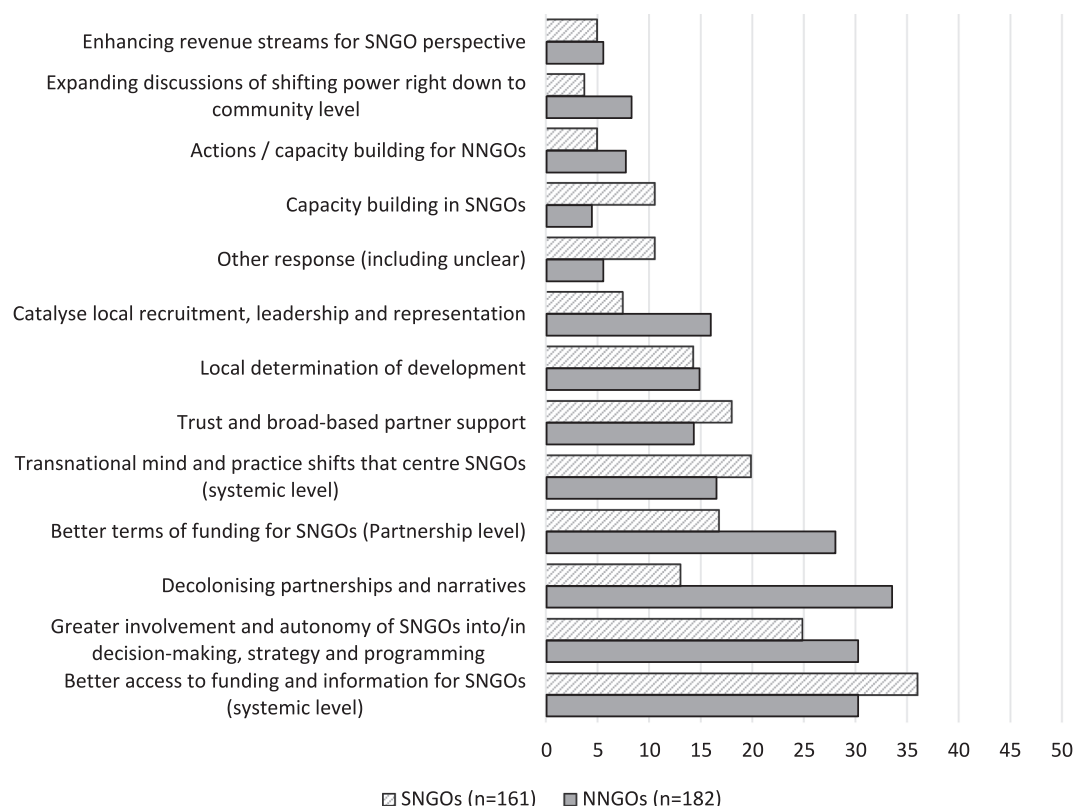


Fig. 10. Preferred priorities for tackling power inequalities, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 343). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

and programmes. 20 % of SNGOs highlighted the need for a 'trans-national mind and practice shift that centres Southern NGOs'. This refers to the need for a systemic change at the global level, including Southern leadership, South-South exchanges and horizontal collaborations. Just under 17 % of Northern NGOs similarly prioritised this systemic level.

The second area where a clear distinction can be made between the partnership and the systemic level, is funding. Northern organisations (28 %) stress the importance of improving their own funding practices within existing partnerships, emphasising unrestricted funding alongside fewer conditions, less bureaucracy, more flexibility and more long-term funding to their Southern partners.

In contrast, Southern organisations (36 %) prioritised a deeper reconfiguration of funding processes at the systemic level, arguing for better and direct access to and information about funding – not intermediated by NNGOs – for Southern NGOs. This priority received stronger backing than any other among one group. A further 30 % of Northern NGOs also spoke to this systemic priority, highlighting their recognition that change within their own partnerships must be accompanied by broader structural change.

6. Barriers: Things are moving...but there is also resistance

Changing deep-rooted power relations is not easy. The survey revealed a broad range of barriers to tackling power imbalances between NNGOs and SNGOs. Respondents were asked to describe their *primary* concern experienced when it comes to shifting power (Fig. 11); this open-ended question revealed the divergence of opinions between Southern and Northern organisations.

The systemic inequalities underpinning power inequalities were by far the most commonly identified. 55 % of SNGOs and 28 % of NNGOs highlighted the Northern dominance of funding, agenda and compliance as the most significant barrier, reflecting the colonial roots of the aid system that continue to hold progress back.

For NNGOs, this creates an internal barrier through generating a mindset that 'change isn't possible' given factors outside their control.

Nearly one-third of NNGOs emphasised that 'big change is beyond the confines of their own relationship' as the core obstacle to them, in comparison with only 2 % of SNGOs. Within the confines of relationships with their own donors, for example, NNGOs also find themselves in dependent relationships and thus cannot move at their own pace. 'He who pays the piper, calls the tune' as the saying goes, and this is as applicable for the relationship between institutional donors and NNGOs as it is between NNGOs and SNGOs.

SNGOs express their concerns that these underpinning system inequalities have also shaped NNGOs' approach to shifting power. Nearly 11 % of SNGOs highlight the co-option of the shift the power agenda by NNGOs as the primary barrier, giving them little influence within NGO agendas and processes.

The second biggest barrier for SNGOs (36 %) was the time and financial costs of investing in this social transformation work alongside their ongoing operational priorities. This is first, in getting started and second, in turning ideas into action. NNGOs also highlighted the barrier of time. Not just in terms of learning what to *do*, but the process of *unlearning* decades of ways of dominance and ways of working. This is particularly the case in organisations where the appetite for new ways of doing things is not spread evenly. Nearly 11 % of NNGOs highlighted how differences *within* organisations held things back: younger staff are more eager to push for changing power relations, though some departments – especially finance – remain risk-averse.

For NNGOs, several of the categories represented in Fig. 11 can be couched under the broader category of 'fear'. Over 12 % of NNGOs highlighted a fear of change in unknown and uncharted waters. Some highlighted their fears about the time and effort that must be invested to move from an interest and willingness to reduce power inequalities, towards the concrete steps and actions necessary to realise this. Any time or resources invested here must be taken from elsewhere, making it hard for NNGOs to move beyond good intentions. 9 % of NNGOs reported the long-term fear of 'success'. What does it mean for them, their roles, contributions and survival if they are successful in their goal of rectifying power inequalities and supporting more resources and decision-

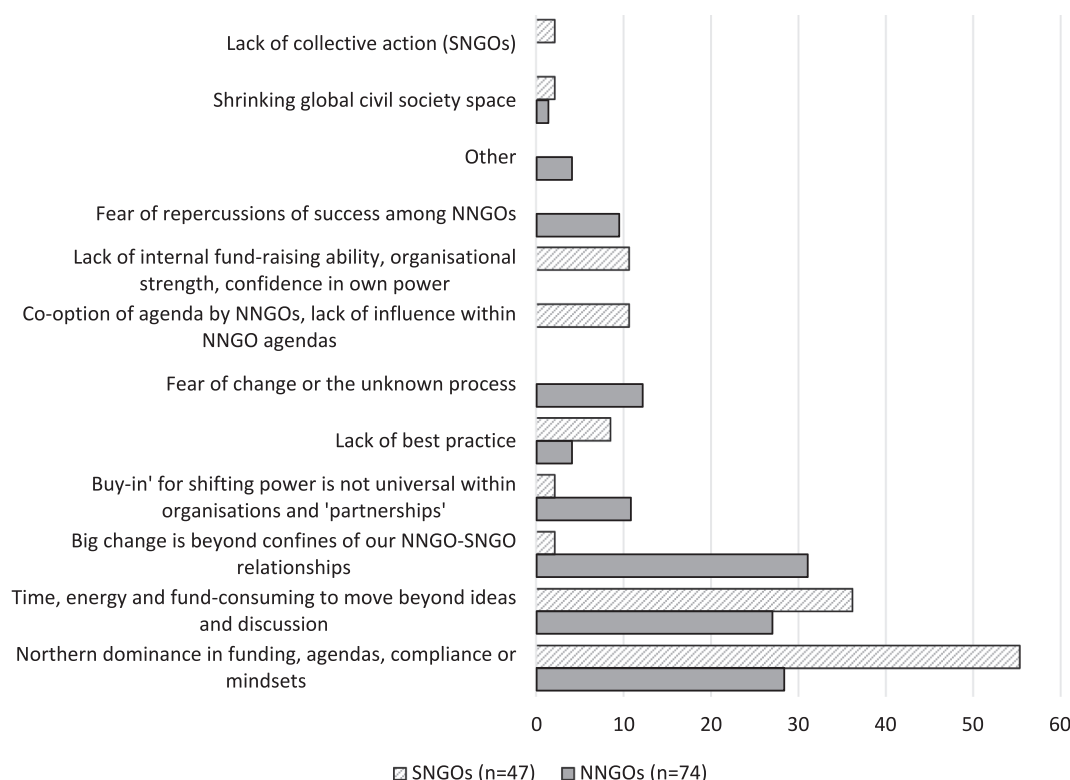


Fig. 11. Primary concern or barrier experienced, with division between NNGOs and SNGOs, in % (n = 121). Source: own calculations based on the survey.

Table 7.1
Evaluating power-shifting actions.

Category	Action	Dahl (1957) – To what extent does this action shift decision-making power?	Pfeffer & Salancik (1978) – Does this action reduce external control?	Scott (2001) – Does this action lead to lasting institutional change?
Policy	Promoting conversations about power in policy-making	Raises awareness of decision-making power structures but does not transfer authority.	No	Can shift normative perceptions, but sustainable impact requires formal integration into governance structures.
	Partners are consulted in policy-making	SNGOs are consulted before decisions but do not have control over outcomes.	No	Can be part of formal consultation processes, but sustainable impact requires enforceable commitments and accountability mechanisms.
	Move towards equal decision-making in policy	Establishes joint decision-making structures, partially redistributing authority. Falls under 'Partnership' but depends on enforceability.	No	Can be embedded in agreements, but sustainable impact requires enforceable mechanisms to ensure shared decision-making authority.
	Revising partnership policy	Creates guidelines for equitable relationships but does not necessarily transfer control. Outcomes depend on whether binding mechanisms are present.	No	Can be institutionalized through policies, but sustainable impact requires compliance monitoring and legal backing.
Programming	Partner involvement in programme design and strategy	Expands SNGO influence in shaping programmes but does not guarantee final decision-making authority. Falls between 'Consulting' and 'Partnership.'	Indirect impact—allows more autonomy in programme design but does not alter funding sources.	Can be embedded in programme structures, but sustainable impact requires shifting authority over final decision-making.
	Partner-led programming	Grants SNGOs leadership in programme execution and decision-making. Moves toward 'Partnership' but sustainability depends on financial autonomy.	Indirect impact—may support financial resilience, but long-term independence requires diversified funding.	Can be formalized through agreements, but sustainable impact requires legal and financial frameworks that ensure SNGOs' continued leadership.
	Partner co-decides on accountability requirements	Introduces joint accountability but does not guarantee equal enforcement power. Fits within 'Partnership' but remains conditional.	May ease compliance burdens, but donors often retain final authority.	Can be included in agreements, but sustainable impact requires equal enforcement of accountability standards across all partners.
Governance	Policies for diversity, inclusion, and safeguarding	No	No	Can be embedded into governance structures, but sustainable impact requires leadership commitment and cultural transformation.
	Staff diversity at governance/management level	No	No	Can be institutionalized, but sustainable impact requires power redistribution in agenda-setting and strategic influence.
	Creating advisory or decision-making bodies	Provides structured participation but may not result in decision-making power. Falls between 'Consulting' and 'Partnership,' depending on power levels.	No	Can be formalized, but sustainable impact requires decision-making power beyond advisory status.
	Support and capacity building for fundraising	No	May reduce long-term dependency, but external funding remains critical in most cases.	Can be embedded in sustainability strategies, but sustainable impact requires long-term, unrestricted financial autonomy.
	Providing or receiving more flexible funding	Enhances SNGO autonomy in resource allocation but does not shift financial control.	Reduces restrictions on fund use, but does not fundamentally shift financial dependency.	Can be included in funding agreements, but sustainable impact requires structural financial reforms and independent resource control.
Language	Awareness/dialogue on stereotypes & power	Promotes reflection on power imbalances but does not alter decision-making power.	No	Can shift internal norms, but sustainable impact requires institutional mechanisms that ensure lasting behavioural change.
	Refraining from certain phrases in discourse	No	No	Can be included in communication policies, but sustainable impact requires embedding new narratives into governance, leadership, and training frameworks.

making power to be transferred to Southern NGOs?

A lack of confidence and fatigue is evident in SNGOs' responses. In terms of limited confidence, there were three categories in which *only* SNGO responses fit. Firstly, 11 % of SNGOs referred to their limited organisational strength, with particular emphasis on their internal fundraising capacity and confidence in their own power. Secondly, another 11 % of SNGOs highlighted their limited influence on NGOs' agendas in a context in which they have co-opted the agenda. And thirdly, a small number (2 %) of SNGOs also mentioned that a lack of collective action among Southern organisations was holding them back. There is also a recognition that despite individual and collective energy in these areas, momentum is easily lost when discussion does not lead to action. One SNGO respondent highlighted '[The] lack of interest and of follow up on the recommendations taken in the workshops initiated', a fact which no doubt makes it harder to justify the significant time and resource investments in this direction.

7. Power inequalities between development NGOs...what's (not) changing?

Survey findings give us an overview of the nature, spread and diversity of specific actions being taken by NNGOs and SNGOs to address power inequalities. We see important convergence and divergence across NNGOs and SNGOs that begin to reveal fault-lines. NGOs across the North and South may agree on the problem of power inequalities between them – and on their roots in funding inequalities underpinned by Northern dominance – and are aligned on the actions they are beginning to take. However, we also see that SNGOs are less likely to move towards action and more likely to recognise the systemic and colonial roots that stymie action. NNGOs' actions are focused on the programming and partnership level, and they reveal a mindset that change beyond this is largely out of their control.

The 'big picture' is that things are moving – in some areas (e.g. programming) more than others (e.g. policy) – but not as fast as expected and being 'led' by NNGOs rather than SNGOs. A picture emerges that where individual actions within organisations and partnerships are taking place, these are still limited by and subject to bigger systemic constraints that limit progress in tackling these power inequalities.

In this section we delve deeper into the analysis of how power is changing through these actions, assessing the actions being taken through three theoretical frameworks to see whether they (i) redistribute decision-making power (Dahl 1957), (ii) reduce external dependency (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978), and (iii) establish lasting institutional change (Scott 2001) – or whether they remain limited in scope and impact.

Given the prominence of decision-making power and resource dependence in actions taken by SNGOs and NNGOs, and the prerequisite for long-term impact to feed into institutional change, together these three theoretical framings enabled us to assess more deeply the transformative potential of actions being taken. As highlighted in the methodology, actions reported by at least 10 % of organisations in the sample were considered, leading to an analysis of how 14 actions across our five policy areas performed in terms of shifting power across these multiple dimensions (Table 7.1).

At the heart of Dahl's (1957) conceptualisation of power in organisations and governance is the ability to influence decision-making processes and outcomes (Dahl 1957). As Section 5.1 on programming highlighted, change can be seen along a spectrum or a ladder of power, from exclusion, to informing, consulting, partnership and deciding (c.f. Greijn & Elbers 2020).

In contrast Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependency theory focuses on financial and operational autonomy. It explores how access to and control over resources shape organisational decision-making. Organisations that depend on external funding are often subject to constraints imposed by those controlling financial flows, influencing their strategic priorities and limiting independent agenda-setting. Even when

funding is designed to be flexible or participatory, conditions such as compliance requirements, thematic restrictions, or reporting obligations can shape how resources are used. In North-South partnerships, examining financial dependency provides insight into the extent to which SNGOs can function autonomously or remain tied to externally controlled priorities.

Building from these two frameworks, Scott's (2001) institutional theory provides a lens to assess whether power shifts become structurally embedded and sustainable. Institutionalization occurs across three pillars: (i) the regulative pillar, which consists of formal policies, legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms ensuring compliance with governance changes; (ii) the normative pillar, which reflects shared expectations and values that shape the legitimacy of power redistribution; and (iii) the cultural-cognitive pillar, which captures deeply ingrained beliefs and organisational cultures influencing perceptions of expertise and authority. In assessing actions to shift power, this framework helps distinguish between superficial adjustments and long-term transformations that are reinforced through institutional norms and legal mechanisms. Table 7.1 applies these theoretical lenses to examine the main power shifting actions that were identified in the survey.

As Section 5 initially indicated, this deeper analysis does highlight the ways in which organisations are taking steps toward more inclusive governance, greater SNGO involvement in decision-making, and financial flexibility. Some initiatives promote diversity in leadership, while others experiment with more participatory approaches to policy and program design. These actions indicate a growing awareness of power imbalances and the need for change. They reflect a broader recognition that equitable partnerships require shifts in decision-making authority (Dahl 1957), financial autonomy (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978), and deeper institutionalization (Scott 2001). While these initiatives vary in scope and approach, they represent important steps toward reconfiguring traditional power dynamics and fostering more collaborative and accountable relationships between Northern and Southern actors.

And yet, Table 7.1 highlights strikingly that much work remains to be done.

Although many actions address the visibility and participation of SNGOs, the table also shows that decision-making power (Dahl 1957) and financial control (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978) remain largely concentrated in Northern institutions, while institutional sustainability (Scott 2001) is often lacking in power-shifting efforts. While SNGOs may gain greater participation in governance structures, their ability to set agendas and make final decisions often remains constrained. Resource dependency theory highlights how financial autonomy is often limited, as even flexible funding mechanisms retain donor-imposed conditions, compliance obligations, and thematic restrictions that shape SNGO priorities. Institutional theory (Scott 2001) underscores that power shifts must become embedded within formal governance structures, financial frameworks, and cultural norms to ensure long-term sustainability.

Together these findings suggest that many current power-shifting efforts remain partial and fragile, running the risk of reinforcing rather than dismantling existing hierarchies. Without deeper structural commitments, these shifts risk being temporary adjustments rather than transformative change.

This three-fold framing of power reveals a lot about the complexity of power and the multiple angles through which it is exercised. However it also highlights another striking finding that points towards a limitation to centralising power in our understanding of what is happening (or not) vis-à-vis where we want to go. If we focus on where power is currently situated *within* existing systems we lack the tools to conceptualise what a transformative future will look like and what it will take to get there. Understanding and analysing power within relationships and systems that *already exist* struggles to look beyond these to ask and answer, 'where do we go from here?'. We reflect on this in our concluding section.

8. Where do we go from here? some concluding reflections on systems-thinking for transformative futures

While not overlooking the meaning behind and importance of individual programme, partnerships and policy changes, our analysis also highlights that the sum of these actions does not add up to more than its parts: they do not – and cannot – cumulatively build into the broader systemic change that is necessary for a truly decolonised or ‘locally-led’ future. This is not to overshadow the hard fought-for progress behind each action taken. But if our power analysis shows that innovations *within* the aid system in the name of localisation and locally-led development are making incremental improvements *without fundamentally shifting where decision-making power and financial power lie*, what will it take to transform things?

Researchers and practitioners alike often refer to the aid ‘system’ as a metaphor that draws attention to roles, relations and processes involving key actors in development and their limiting or detrimental effects (see e.g. Doane & Fomunjong 2025; Green & Sriskandarajah 2024; van Wessel et al. 2023). In some cases, the nature of that system is made more explicit (Bond 2021). Complexity is at the heart of the system, including the complex nature of power and how it is deployed within the aid system. As we have seen, it is easy to focus our analysis on particular roles and relationships, or particular processes of change within these, to see how power inequalities are changing. But while many responses highlighted that broader systemic inequalities remain a key constraint upon the change NGOs in the North and South want to see, how we might overcome these is harder to get through a power analysis.

If we focus only on relationships *as is* and actions *being taken*, we are left with significant blind spots that emerge from the ways in which existing power is centred, executed and perpetuated. We do not see alternative systems or future transformations. Our analytic framework does not allow it, because the existing focus thereby maintains a central role for powerful actors: their behaviour and roles must be ‘transformed’, reshaping collaborations. We do not centre our (re)imagined future.

While Section 7 explores the multiple dimensions through which power inequalities are being confronted and addressed – in the process shifting some control in important dimensions – the big problem in moving forwards is that these frameworks do not question different organisations’ roles within the system more fundamentally. It was clear from SNGO responses and priorities that this is the work that needs to be done. Yet instead, the inequalities to be raised and addressed are those that the system can manage – in bounded relationships and programmes that have little cumulative impact on the bigger underpinning system. The ‘elephant in the room’, for example – the question of whether NGOs’ role as funder-mediaries should be phased out or not – is not raised by NGOs contributing to the debates or actions around localisation and locally-led development. Lukes (2005) conceptualises three dimensions (or ‘faces’) of power. We appear to see here its third and most subtle and covert face: its ability to shape people and organisations’ perceptions, desires and beliefs in a way that makes them accept their situation as ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’.

While our research highlights deep and widespread awareness of power inequalities globally, it is also clear that the direction of progress of efforts to tackle these is Northern-led. It is not just time and resources preventing SNGOs from taking the lead. They also do not see much scope for initiating action given their resource dependency and orientation towards their operational priorities – including their organisational survival. These areas of action all work within the possibilities of the system as it is. A deeper and more fundamental transformation will require escaping these system limitations. It will require the pursuit not of innovations *within* the aid system, but innovations *of* the system itself.

Looking to a growing community of systems-change thinking and practice for alternative options can help our thinking here. Leicester’s (2020) *Three Horizons Framework* moves beyond the narrower focus

afforded by multi-dimensional frameworks of power to explore innovations within the contexts of any given system. He highlights that innovations are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for systemic change. In fact, some innovations – ‘sustaining’ innovations – might appear progressive, but in fact serve to perpetuate the shelf life of the existing system. That six NNGOs noted their efforts to nationalise their country office indicates that some NNGOs are still sustaining inequalities through competing locally for resources and funding while powered by their brand recognition and large fundraising budgets: a practice that they were called out for in 2020.⁷

In contrast ‘disruptive’ innovations do genuinely ‘shake things up’ by challenging and improving the status quo. Our survey shows that this is where actions are predominantly occurring. In the area of programming, SNGOs are increasingly involved in decision-making and co-creating programmes; funding requirements are made more flexible; and policy is increasingly informed by consultations with partners. Yet these actions do not address the bigger structural issues within organisations (in terms of broader institutional policies) or how the bigger development system works (e.g. building capacity in fundraising without changing the flow or the terms of funding accompanying global finance). This is where we see clear misalignment between NNGOs and SNGOs: NNGOs are taking the lead in ways that sustain or disrupt inequalities, but SNGOs prioritise much deeper transformations.

Individually or in their accumulation, these actions cannot change the underlying foundations of the system. For this, Leicester (2020) argues, we need a new, third, horizon, one that transforms the system itself. Such ‘transformative innovations’ put “the rules, rights, norms, values and culture of existing dominant systems into question, working towards an intentional vision of a future different from the past, *innovating the system, rather than innovating within the system*” (Leicester 2020: 11, emphasis added).

What would a system that centres SNGOs’ ability to pursue local priorities and to strengthen their capacity, sustainability and legitimacy look like? Given the centrality of the distortionary power of funding (whoever holds the funds, holds the power), it is clear in the #shift-the-power movement’s focus on community-led philanthropy that instead of looking externally for donor funding to finance short-term projects, a transformative system that centres Southern NGOs needs them to look internally, to recognise the assets and resources communities already have and to build stronger foundations that can unlock the power of organised communities in determining the course of their own development. External funding then draws upon community leadership, recognising and building upon their local resources, assets and strategies rather than overlooking, undermining or displacing them (Hodgson 2020).

This work has not only already begun, it is building. Hodgson and Knight (2025) illustrate how 2023’s Shift the Power conference in Bogota, Colombia, built on its predecessors to bring an unprecedented number of different actors within global development together, representing a new form of ‘relational organising’ through which people and organisations can strengthen their own systems and institutions that work for them and their collective goals. Organisations and initiatives such as the Reimagining the International NGO (RINGO) project, Kuja Platform and One World Together are bringing people and organisations together with the intention of building infrastructure fit for a new and Southern-centred system. Weaving connections and relationships are at the heart of these approaches. Common across such initiatives is that they recentre the significance of civil society collaborations for development in the Global South, breaking the confines of the system that reproduces NNGO leadership. Without necessarily putting NNGOs “out of business”, they are rooted in a recognition of the capacity and leadership of Southern NGOs, community-based organisations and public

⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/an-open-letter-to-international-ngos-who-are-looking-to-localise-their-operations/>.

administration that already exists. This recognition offers a new foundation for reimagining civil society collaborations for development (van Wessel 2024; van Wessel et al. 2023).

As new possibilities and transformative systems begin to emerge and take hold, these are confronted with the stark reality of rapid and drastic shifts in the aid sector. Unprecedented cuts to ODA budgets and a reorientation of foreign policy objectives towards the national interest – and away from long-term strategic priorities such as inclusion – threaten even this partial and fragile progress. As Northern and Southern NGOs grapple with the need to find new ways to mobilise resources in this context, future investments in, and research into, emerging possibilities and transformative systems innovations become all the more pressing.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nicola Banks: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Badru Bukenya:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Willem Elbers:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Innocent Kamya:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Emmanuel Kumi:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Lau Schulpen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gijs van Selm:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Margit van Wessel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Thomas Yeboah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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