IREX

Creating Partnerships For Impact

Building a process for trust-based, equitable collaboration

2023

Acknowledgments

Table Of Contents

Executive Summary

Creating impact in the global development sector depends on effective partnerships. Without productive collaboration across organizations with differing strengths and perspectives, it is impossible to adequately respond to the scale and complexity of today's growing global development challenges. Partnering is a part of IREX's DNA. And it is because partnerships play such an important role in creating impact that we are taking the time to reflect on what we could do to improve this essential aspect of how we operate. At IREX we strive to.

✓ Unleash greater impact through effective and equitable partnerships.

✓ Support IREX's organizational strategy of advancing local solutions.

✓ Contribute our thinking to the global development sector to create multiplying impact.

While partnerships in the global development space are beset by many challenges, we've identified one of the root causes of many partnership challenges: the inequitable exercise of power. This power imbalance is also a critical obstacle to more effective global development progress. From our review of individuals and organizations engaged in global development partnerships, we found that **power imbalances within partnerships are both a foundational challenge and an opportunity for greater development impact.**

The global development system almost always conveys more power to one organization in any given relationship. In many situations, local organizations have less power to define the terms, scope, and evaluation criteria of a program, for example. The fact that local organizations may have less power in these relationships does not mean they have less skill, smarts, or strategic ability than an organization with more power—quite the opposite.[1] In other contexts, in fact, organizations with less partnership power may exert more societal power than dominant power partners, typically grant-giving organizations.

So while local organizations have some power in the development system, there is no denying that in all partnership relationships in global development, there is an unequal distribution of decision-making, whether it is fiscal, evaluative, or another form of power.

In light of historically rooted global power inequities between the world's richest and poorest countries, which still limit the impact we can have today, our paper explores what we have learned about how to shift this imbalance by building trust-based, equitable partnerships.

We observed two mindsets that development practitioners employ to frame their approach to partnership. An *outcome-focused mindset* centers on results and embraces unequal power structures (though perhaps unintentionally) to follow the rules of the development system. An *experience-focused mindset* centers on shared values, purpose, and an equalizing distribution of power as part of a naturally evolving relationship.

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1.   See: Transforming Agency, Access, and Power, www.taapinclusion.org.

IREX proposes that partnerships must have a combination of both outcome-focused and experience-focused mindsets to walk the path toward achieving trust-based, equitable partnerships.

In the global development system, there are many forces for change. Foreign aid policy, which is generally an expression of national interests, is one critical force defining the development aid system where IREX and many other actors in the development sector have little to no influence. In this paper, we are focusing our analysis on elements closer to our sphere of influence, such as building partnerships with local subgrantees in the countries in which we work. We share what we have learned about these forces, including how to realize trust-based, equitable partnerships at the individual, organizational, interorganizational, and development ecosystem level.

We make **three key recommendations** with concrete actions we can take to build trust-based, equitable partnerships:

1 Organizations should equip **individuals** with skills to reinforce the key values of trust-based, equitable partnerships. These skills include communications, relationship management, and inclusive leadership, among others.

2 **Organizations** should recognize and address their own barriers that may impede their ability to achieve equitable partnerships, such as addressing internal power imbalances, culture, partnership selection, and engagement practices, to name a few.

3 At the **interorganizational level**, organizations should adopt a "learn together, grow together" approach to achieve impactful partnerships. We believe that partnerships are best able to deliver increased positive impact when they establish equity and build trust from the beginning. This includes actively challenging deep-rooted power inequities and being transparent about power dynamics, including within the partner relationship.

We maintain that these actions will catalyze transformational change across the broader ecosystem of global development and thus unlock greater impact.

Introduction: Rethinking Partnerships For Greater Impact

Today's global development sector—which includes development organizations and companies, civil society organizations, donors, the private sector, and the public sector—is increasingly more intricate, constantly shifting, and grappling with many escalating social challenges. These include a rise in authoritarianism, diminishing trust in institutions, a crippling pandemic, climate change, disinformation, social polarization, violent conflicts, food insecurity, climate threats, and unclear long-term impacts of development initiatives. This complex and high-stakes context demands a renewed attention to partnerships and their significant role in addressing today's global development problems while respecting the democratic processes and decision-making of the countries in which we work.

The United Nations has recognized the potential of partnerships by elevating them as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). SDG 17, "Partnerships for the Goals," stresses the need for cooperation to strengthen the means of partnership implementation and revitalize

global partnerships for sustainable development. Unfortunately, many partnerships fall short of realizing this potential. While we recognize this paper alone will not remedy the shortcomings of all partnerships, we are calling attention to a pivotal challenge that has not received enough detailed and sustained analysis.

Partnerships can lead to sustainable impact at a scale much greater than any individual organization. Partnerships enable organizations and communities to work together to address development challenges by leveraging diverse, but complementary, competencies.

Strong partner relationships more effectively bring together the knowledge, innovations, networks, and resources of those closest to social challenges with the perspectives and assets of collaborators in other parts of the world. For example, innovations in collaboration and financing models are empowering how development practitioners work together, thus strengthening partner relationships. Co-creation[1] is once such mechanism that is increasingly employed for collectively designing and implementing effective solutions to societal challenges.

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1. "Co-Creation at USAID." USAID. www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/how-to-work-with-usaid/co-creation-usaid#:~:text=Co%2DCreation%20Defined&text=Time%2Dlimited%20 and%20participatory%2C%20partners,forward%20with%20programs%20and%20projects.

Such inclusive and trust-based engagements between organizations and individual stakeholders offer powerful contributions that foster just, prosperous, and inclusive societies.

IREX developed this paper to **advance the understanding of trust-based, equitable, and impactful partnerships** and their ability to unlock far-reaching, high-impact, sustainable results in global development. We conducted a knowledge-gathering process to help us understand the critical problems in partnerships that impede positive development impact and identified opportunities to improve partnerships. This paper is based on in-depth experience and learning from desk research, interviews with diverse individuals who regularly engage in partnerships across the global development sector, a survey of IREX's local partners (currently for internal use), and IREX's ongoing engagement in issues of power and equity, including the Transforming Agency, Access, and Power initiative.[1] We talked to practitioners in the nonprofit sector, private sector, and public sector. Through an analysis of these conversations, we were able to identify key themes and current challenges within the global development space while pointing toward solutions to produce greater development impact. This paper also builds on the reflection and knowledge-building of a broad array of research and exploration initiatives, including The Purposeship Principles Standard,[2] Time to Decolonise Aid,[3] The Guide to Cross-Sector Collaboration,[4] and Localization at USAID,[5] which have all begun the work of rethinking power dynamics in partnerships.

We've taken what we have learned, combined with our decades of experience, to recommend actions for cultivating **trust-based, equitable, and impactful partnerships.** These recommendations consider what changes organizations should make to better support change, the role of individuals in operating with integrity and authenticity, and the process for achieving transformational collaborations between and among organizations. In making these recommendations, we understand that IREX is an organization that is subject to power dynamics ourselves—as a grantee to powerful donors, or as a grantor to local partners. We acknowledge the limitations of our perspective, and will continue to learn from partners that traditionally lack the power of international NGOs about how to better understand, articulate, and act upon strategies for more effectively sharing power. In short, this document, even as it shares our own learning and research, is meant to guide IREX's own learning and imperfect evolution towards trust-based, equitable partnership.

1. See: Transforming Agency, Access, and Power, www.taapinclusion.org.
2. Paloma Andrés Urrutia, Kelly Elizabeth Behrend, Andrea Mara Hanai, "The Purposeship Principles Standard A Guide for Purpose-Driven, Cross-Sector Relationships." docplayer.net/140102447-The-purposeship-principles-standard-a-guide-for-purpose-driven-cross-sector-relationships.html
3. "Time to Decolonise Aid" Peace Direct, 10 May 2021. www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PD-Decolonising-Aid_Second-Edition.pdf.
4. "The Guide to Cross-Sector Collaboration." Resonance, https://www.resonanceglobal.com/the-guide-to-cross-sector-collaboration.
5. "Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach." August 2022. usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/USAIDs_Localization_Vision-508.pdf.

We invite program partners, global development donors, philanthropists, and others who find IREX's learnings and insights helpful to use this paper in their own global development work. We have observed that those who have honed their partnership practices are sought after by organizations looking to collaborate. This improves their organizational competitiveness and their ability to perform well in today's complex environment. By contrast, organizations that struggle to effectively collaborate might experience shrinking opportunities to partner. This may limit their exposure to interesting work and impede their ability to expand their learning, innovation, and, ultimately, their impact.

Key Terms and Definitions:

To establish a shared understanding of partnerships and how they are developed, we begin by aligning how we employ partnerships language in this paper to achieve transformative impact.

Partnership: A trusted engagement between two entities with a common purpose —entities including global development organizations and companies, donors, civil society, the public and private sectors, and individuals. A partnership provides access to tools and resources, knowledge, credibility, visibility, and/or services needed for greater efficiency, effectiveness, and trust. **A partnership advances more profound impact than any individual organization could achieve on its own.**

Partner: An entity that engages in a relationship with one or more other entities with the goal of advancing impact greater than what any entity could achieve on its own. These include actors and entities that collaborate on program implementation, provide funding, share knowledge and information, and provide other resources.

Power: Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual, and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of

individual and social power. Power is dynamic and relational, rather than absolute – it is exercised in the social, economic, and political relations between individuals and groups."[1]

Equity:

The concept of **equity** recognizes that every society has historical power structures that work to the maximum benefit of some while marginalizing or excluding others. Equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place, and therefore we must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances so that everyone gets what they need. It is different from the concept of equal, which means everyone gets the same thing.[2]

Trust:

Trust is an individual's belief that it is acceptable to place ones' well-being and confidence in another person, organization, or institution because that individual expects that the person, organization, or institution is competent and perceived to be benevolent and reliable (trustworthy) and will act consistently with the individual's expectations of positive behavior.[3]

Impact:

A positive effect when trust-based, equitable partnerships become the norm, thereby yielding a much greater ability to address societal and development challenges and rectify social wrongs.

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1. This definition of power comes from Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 2007, https://justassociates.org/all-resources/a-new-weave-of-power-people-politics-the-action-guide-for-advocacy-and-citizen-participation/
2. "The Toolkit and Guide for Inclusive Development." Transforming Agency, Access, and Power, www.taapinclusion.org.
3. Adapted from IREX's draft definition of trust. Rachael Spencer, "Social Trust Summary," unpublished, 2023.

Problem Analysis: Addressing Power Inequities In Partnerships

While partnerships have the potential to be game changers for many of the seemingly intractable global development problems that persist today, the current reality of partnerships is fraught with complexities that manifest at the individual, organizational, interorganizational, and systems levels. **In our analysis, we focus on one foundational issue: power inequity.** We focus on power because it was a recurring theme in our practitioner conversations, and it influences every aspect of partnerships, yet it is rarely named or interrogated in this context. A focus on this issue first can help clear a path toward improving a host of other problems related to partnerships.

IREX's Vision for Partnerships
Global partnerships intentionally tackle power differentials and equitably combine the strengths and experience of different organizations, communities, and people to effectively meet pressing challenges and expand the reach and impact of limited resources.

The problem: Inequitable power relationships weaken the impact of partnerships. Power differentials that are unacknowledged and unaddressed in partnerships feed fear, and hinder effectiveness, equity, trust, inclusion, mutuality, and ultimately positive impact.

Just as the world faces the interconnected challenges of deepening inequality and diminishing trust in institutions, these challenges are also found within the very fabric of partnership engagements between global development practitioners and local community partners. Often, resource allocation and development agendas are decided in power-dominant institutions, such as bilateral donor organizations. This inequity is a result of several, often overlapping factors: colonial legacies; great-power competition during the Cold War; regional conflicts; international or multilateral structures funded predominantly, and effectively controlled, by the Global North. Thus, the development system almost always conveys less power to one or more organizations in any given relationship. In many situations, local organizations have less power to define the terms, scope, and evaluation criteria of a program. That local organizations may have less power in these relationships does not mean they have less capacity—such as influence, skill, smarts, resilience, or strategic ability – than more resource-rich organizations. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In some contexts, local organizations may exert more power than the dominant, typically grant-giving, organizations. For example, local organizations understand much better than international organizations how to navigate local culture and politics. Additionally, they are often the organizations implementing international projects and, therefore, making decisions on the ground about how these projects are developed and executed. And, of course, they will remain in the communities they serve long after international organizations have moved on, which gives them much greater influence and long-term impact. But while nondominant organizations are hardly pawns in the development system, there is no denying that in all partnership relationships in global development, there is an unequal distribution of power.

This dominant versus nondominant power structure affects a host of factors: those who get direct access to money; those who define and prioritize problems; those who design solutions; and those who get recognized. This structure determines what gets defined as knowledge and impact, and who gets to define it. This structure also determines who gets evaluated, who defines the standards by

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1.   "UNDESA World Social Report 2020." United Nations, 21, January 2020, www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-social-report/2020-2.html.

which they are evaluated, and who does the evaluating. Power differences often inure incorrect and internalized biases about the capacities of nondominant people and institutions while granting privileges to people and institutions that have more dominant power. Issues of power are especially salient now in the context of resounding calls across global development to "decolonize aid."[1] It is important to note that partners can be dominant in some relationships and nondominant in others.

These power dynamics are usually one-sided: a "grantor" and "recipient" exchange assets in a transaction. If the organization with more power fails to meaningfully build trust and equity, the transaction can impede mutuality in partner relationships and lessen impact. Smaller, informal organizations led by marginalized groups (e.g., youth, women, ethnic or religious minorities, displaced populations, indigenous people, or LGBTQI+ groups) historically have less access to power and resources or may be excluded. Grant requirements intended to promote accountability—including due diligence, compliance, finance structures, evaluation, project timelines, and other administrative practices—are important to prevent corruption and promote program effectiveness. Yet, they are often designed and enforced based on societal norms that reinforce power imbalances and cause exclusion.

These power imbalances may be either unintentional or the results of policies that are outdated and out of sync with current development values, or perhaps in some cases, intentional, but not seen as problematic.

As development practitioners, we, the authors of this document, include ourselves and our organization in the assertion that while there is an increasing recognition of power differentials among power-dominant institutions, many still struggle to (or are reluctant to) transform their practices in a way that fundamentally changes existing and instead commonly promote a myth of equal partnerships.

At IREX, we believe that striving towards more equal power relationships is not only ethically imperative; it also leads to greater development impact. This document provides a strategic discussion of our commitment to address power imbalances in how we engage in partnerships as well as a more detailed set of concrete recommendations for everyday practice.

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1.   Byatnal, Amruta. "Deep Dive: Decolonizing Aid – From Rhetoric to Action." Devex, 24 August 2021, www.devex.com/news/deep-dive-decolonizing-aid-from-rhetoric-to-action-100646#:~:text=The%20idea%20of%20decolonizing%20aid,by%20aid%20and%20development%20programs.

We have observed that development practitioners are potentially guided by two different mindsets relevant to the discussion at hand—outcome-focused and experience-focused—that frame how partnerships are developed within a context of unacknowledged power differentials between partners. These mindsets exist in an overlapping continuum rather than a dichotomy. While currently an outcome-focused mindset dominates, partnerships can benefit from the right balance of both.

Interrogating our Mindset

The development system is complex and layered. Some layers—such as foreign policy—are outside any one organization's control. Within those layers outside of our control, there will be power imbalances that will necessarily affect our work. Nonetheless, we do have control over some layers, especially our own behavior when building partnerships with subgrantees and other partners who may traditionally not have a position of power . We will aim to maximize our own actions to begin to shift inequitable balances of power. This starts with the mindset that we bring to our work.

A. OUTCOME-FOCUSED MINDSET: A mindset focused on outcomes is usually dominant in the global development marketplace. While an emphasis on results is important, partnerships overly focused on outcomes shape and reinforce power differentials in the partner relationship.

This outcome-focused partnership mindset entails a primary focus on receiving funding for a program to achieve relatively short-term goals. The achievement of these goals is measured by outcomes of the program that may include, for example, a certain number of people trained, a number of grants made, or an amount of knowledge increased. The unequal power dynamics stemming from long-term geopolitical inequities shape this mindset (albeit likely without individual awareness). The goal

of this mindset is to execute concrete incremental steps toward a goal, focusing on an exchange of predefined assets like funding, knowledge, resources, networks, and capacities. The impact potential for this approach is generally constrained by program implementation cycles, time frames, and outputs. These constraints also influence and limit how partners navigate risks, adapt, and respond to ever-changing needs within a dynamic world full of uncertainty. Engagements of this type have an underlying assumption that resources are scarce, which promotes a culture of competition, fear, and risk aversion.

An outcome-focused mindset is not disadvantageous in and of itself. In many ways this mindset is critical to global development. If there are no resources to fund and staff initiatives, many needs will go unmet. If measures of accountability are not in place, money could be wasted or stolen. A focus on outcomes helps ensure that programs make a measurable difference, in contrast to outdated assumptions that completing a program equated to proof that its goals were reached. However, partnerships that lean too heavily in the direction of an outcome-focused mindset risk focusing too much on winning the competition for assets and securing greater power and status from "power brokers" (institutions that control access to funds or social capital).

B. EXPERIENCE-FOCUSED MINDSET:

A mindset that can contribute to equalizing the distribution of power within partnerships. An experience-focused mindset views a partnership as a journey, a process of learning together and growing together, and a relationship that strives for mutual flourishing. Unfortunately, the current global development system is not set up to reward a focus on experience.

In a partnership driven by an experience-focused mindset, alignment between partners is based on shared values and purpose and a strong relationship rather than a specific project or opportunity. The foundation for building trust is a commitment to achieve a shared purpose. For instance, the shared purpose can be a shared development goal related to a social issue. This initial commitment is followed by setting and resetting strategic priorities to make progress in a naturally evolving process. Shared decision-making about strategic priorities can be done on an ongoing basis, which serves to continually engender trust and inclusion. An experience-focused mindset means that partners invest in learning each other's missions, such that they each feel a sense of commitment to the partner's mission.

"To create strong partnerships, sit down and go through the process of learning together."

HANNE DALMUT, CONCORDIA

The process of cultivating impactful partnership engagements usually requires significant investments of time and resources. This is necessary to help cultivate relationships between people, so they will feel safe to be authentic and honest and thus operate with integrity even when challenges arise when implementing a project. In turn, partners can overcome obstacles together, and trust becomes the foundation for partnerships to produce mutually beneficial and long-term or large-scale impact through learning, strong relationships, mutual growth, and adaptation. While critical to long-term impact, trust is challenging to build and not as straightforward to discern or measure as traditional outputs like "X number of people trained."

An experience-focused mindset recognizes that all individuals within partnerships have the potential to contribute **assets that may exist outside of initially agreed-upon structures.** In other words, all partners bring a combination of inherent and evolving reservoirs of funding, knowledge (including from lived experiences), resources, networks, and capacities. This mindset therefore acknowledges an equitable distribution of power, resources, and the potential to contribute across partners. This creates a fluidity for partners to continuously leverage these shared assets on an ongoing basis to advance a shared purpose. At the same time, a focus on experience supports ongoing learning and growth for each organization in the partnership. Intentionality about the process can support transparency, learning together, adaptability, and innovation. The goal in an experience-focused mindset is for people to contribute to the organizations' mutual benefit and the long-term impact of the shared development goal. **Guided by this perspective, the organic experience of partnering itself is development, and it achieves development.**

"[In partnerships,] our relationship as individuals at the end of the day is always going to be more important than the work that we do together."

EMPLOYEE, INGO (REQUESTED ANONYMITY)

Both outcome-focused and experience-focused mindsets require partnerships to be conducted through mutually agreed-upon ethical standards. However, an outcome-focused mindset places emphasis on adhering to measures of compliance and producing measurable results, while an experience-focused mindset prioritizes continually aligning partners to work better together to achieve shared rewards and to navigate shared challenges. This latter approach can better support equalizing power between partners.

Partnerships can benefit from the right balance of both outcome- and experience-focused mindsets. Currently, the global development system overemphasizes a focus on outcomes, relying heavily on transactional elements such as an exchange of assets. If we are guided exclusively by an outcome-driven mindset, we will miss out on the long-term, strategic, and transformational benefits of investing in the process of developing partnerships that can effectively respond to rapid changes and complexities—including dire threats such as a sudden outbreak of war, disease, or natural disaster—with learning and flexibility.

Reflections from IREX's experience:

✓ We grapple with the central conflict between the slower pace and significant effort needed to prioritize inclusion, trust, and relationship building on the one hand, and the typical length of time of projects on the other. This central conflict varies by context but is always present.

✓ The structures for partnerships are often defined by the funding, which narrows the lens for how partner relationships can be developed. Our funding primarily comes from donors that require numerous practices to ensure compliance. These structures can introduce tension with the need to design and adapt programs for local realities. For instance, some partners at the local level struggle to fulfill compliance requirements, such as methods of financial reporting.

✓ We are not only constrained in how we partner; but in who we partner with. Often our funders set the parameters for the spectrum of partnership, which considerably narrows the field of potential partners.

✓ We struggle to cultivate trust-based and meaningful long-term relationships when they are not directly funded. In fact, the project orientation defines our internal team structure in many ways; teams are often siloed within our own organization, even while working diligently to deliver outputs for specific donors. While there are some IREX staff who work across teams, the team structure often limits what we can achieve through partnerships at an organizational level.

Note: This document examines partnerships broadly to inform our practices within the global development sector and to specifically strengthen our internal practices at IREX. For this reason, we share reflections about our own experiences with partnership to propel us forward and keep us accountable during the learning journey.

BOX 1.

The Path Toward Trust-Based, Equitable Partnerships

Our interviewees expressed a strong desire to align their personal and organizational principles of inclusion and equity with how they conduct partnerships. Many also articulated that this kind of alignment would require interrupting power differentials within partnerships at an individual, organizational, interorganizational, and ecosystem level. We heard that the potential for sustainable impact was more likely when partnerships **directly address power inequities as well as prioritize, invest in, articulate, and reflect on the experience of partnering while working toward outcomes.**

In this section, we examine how an intentional focus on interrupting power differentials and creating a balance between the experience-focused and outcome-focused mindsets can support long-term and trust-based partnerships. By addressing issues of power, partnerships can elevate marginalized groups and equip remote implementers with better contextual knowledge to contribute more effective, relevant, and impactful programs.

Both dominant and nondominant partners have a role to play to cultivate the right conditions for effective, sustainable, and inclusive development. Some of the privileges of the dominant partner could include setting the rules of engagement, creating the framework for a project, dispersing the money, and evaluating the nondominant partner. In light of this power imbalance, dominant partners must embrace humility and frequently reflect on their own practices, including how the history of their role has been shaped by historical legacies such as colonialism. Ongoing self-reflection is critical so that those with more privilege within existing structures can understand their positionality and are better able to mobilize against the forces that hinder progress. Self-reflection also enables such partners to better serve as allies for those who are marginalized. Nondominant groups play a crucial role through self-awareness, self-empowerment, and advocacy. Cultivating a balance between a focus on outcomes and on experience is one artery of the larger global development ecosystem for creating partnership conditions that challenge deep-rooted inequities at the intersections of race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status.

In response to a deeper understanding of problems within global development partnerships, we encourage organizations in our sector to commit to partnership values that are trust-based and equitable and that disrupt power differentials.

At IREX, we commit to:

1 **Declare our values and align them with our practice:** Our partnership values: trust-based, equitable relationships will yield greater positive social impact. We will practice ongoing self-reflection and learning to align our values and actions.

2 **Create and socialize a partnership methodology that investigates power differentials and seeks to create space for fair participation and contribution:** We focus on areas that are within our sphere of influence: partner relationships at the individual, organizational, and intraorganizational levels. We will collaborate in an intentional, aspirational, and continuous process within partnership engagements to better understand, acknowledge, and actively address existing power differentials to build stronger equitable partnerships that engender trust.

Note: As a next step, IREX plans to socialize the partnerships process outlined in the following pages, to align with our organization's values and institutional priorities. We recommend the same for all organizations committed to partnerships for impact.

BOX 2.

A survey of 61 organizations that are current and former local partners of IREX found broad support that IREX is on a path to trust-based, equitable partnerships. The survey asked partner organizations to answer four questions about IREX CS/PI principles related to 1) collaboration and inclusivity, 2) equality in communication, 3) adaptation and flexibility to current situations, and 4) do no harm principles in their partnerships with IREX. The survey found a very high agreement with all four questions, 93-97% agreement with each question.

Qualitative feedback shed light on areas where IREX can improve. For example, an NGO from the Americas noted, "There is collaboration on the brainstorm side but not necessarily on the decision-making side." Another respondent reported having a disappointing experience due to lack of localization in trainings, materials, and data collection, no follow-up on the organizational capacity assessment they completed, and the experience of overly complicated requirements for a small award. There may have been selection bias in the organizations that IREX staff shared as contacts for the survey, as well as self-selection bias from individuals particularly motivated to respond. Thus, even the very small number of critical feedback submissions provides important data for reflection and improvement.

"We freely interacted with the IREX team like peers and not supervisors. There was effective communication and transparency in everything."
NGO, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Qualitative feedback was generally very positive, and reinforced what we learned in our interviews for this paper. The report concludes, "IREX is adhering to its... principles in its partnerships and that our partners benefit from their collaboration with IREX."[1]

Relevant findings include:

97%
of respondent organizations agreed that IREX demonstrated a commitment to adaptation and flexibility when circumstances required it.

97%
of respondents agree that IREX is careful not to cause harm to their partners.

93%
of respondents agreed that IREX has a collaborative and inclusive approach to partnership.

93%
of respondents felt that IREX communicated as a peer and co-implementer.

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1. The survey was focused on capacity strengthening and performance improvement support provided by IREX to local partners; because the general findings reinforce the direction IREX has defined for the Partnerships Approach, we include them here. Spiers, Hannah, "Capacity Strengthening and Performance Improvement Initiative: Partner Survey Results Report," IREX, 2023 (unpublished)

Process For Cultivating Impactful Partnerships

"Partnership is both a process and outcome."

MELIZSA MUGYENYI,
THE GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST

Often it makes sense to start a relationship with a focus on outcomes; for example, an nongovernmental organization (NGO) agreeing to a partnership with another NGO that fills a specific capacity gap in a timebound proposal for a donor. However, more impactful relationships can be cultivated by using that initial agreement as a starting point, and then allowing for time to nurture the relationship. This relationship building can be done through learning about and committing to the other organization's mission, seeking opportunities to learn together, seeking opportunities to shift the balance of power toward equity (e.g., allowing frank and uncomfortable conversations), and giving time to build trust through honest reflection. It is through a committed process that partners can find a good balance between outcome focus and experience focus. And it is unlikely that a "good balance" will result in a standard formula such as 50% outcome-focused and 50% experience-focused. Rather, each relationship can evolve individually toward a mutually defined balance.

Balance between outcome & experience
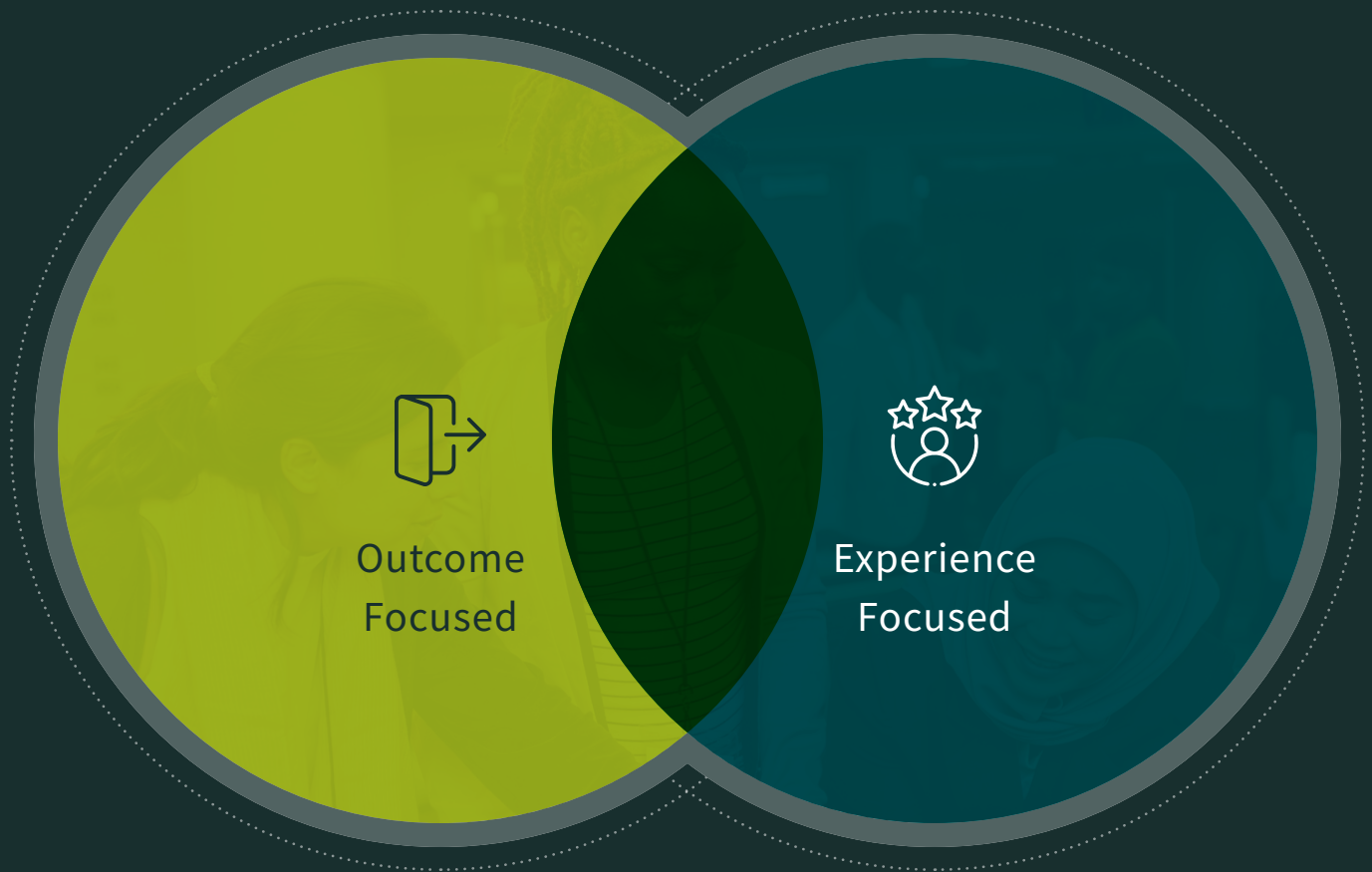
Outcome
Focused

Experience
Focused

FIGURE 1. BALANCE BETWEEN OUTCOME AND EXPERIENCE FOCUS.

We aspire to achieve transformation, such that the partnership can achieve a mission beyond what either of the partners could have accomplished alone.

As such, we envision the process for cultivating trust-based, equitable partnerships will start with inclusive leadership[1] and a shift toward balanced power so local partners can lead local development. Parallel to any equity and inclusion initiative, the people and organizations with more power must take responsibility for uncovering and dismantling individual and organizational biases and assumptions that hinder equitable partnerships and thus hinder locally led development. In cases where IREX holds power, we intend to must take a critical stance toward our "normal" way of looking at the world, interacting with others, and making decisions. Through deep introspection and inner reflection, humility, and learning about systems of power, those with more power can better support structural shifts toward equity by sharing power and ceding power.[2] Finally, by transforming our mindsets, practices, and systems related to partnerships, all actors in the development ecosystem can better support the conditions for the evolution to locally led development.[3]

1. Bourke, Juliet. "The Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership." Deloitte, 14 April 2016, https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/six-signature-traits-of-inclusive-leadership.html.
2. Jaffe, Jan. "Reflective Practices to #ShiftThePower." Candid Learning for Funders, 15, March 2019, learningforfunders.candid.org/content/blog/reflective-practices-to-shiftthepower/.
3. The principle "Practice mutuality with local partners" from USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, which defines mutuality as a relationship aimed at reciprocity and balanced access to power, is very much aligned with this idea. See https://www.usaid.gov/local-capacity-strengthening-policy

We recognize that the actions and practices we lay out below are in some ways idealized and that our vision is ambitious. In practice, walking the walk will be imperfect. IREX has chosen to operate by the rules of the global development marketplace, which means that competition among organizations for limited funds will constrain collaboration and can limit trust. Further, we operate in a system that is functionally very reactive and often fails both to anticipate shocks and work toward long-term improvements. We alone cannot change the broader structural power dynamics that we have inherited. We cannot change which countries give foreign aid and which receive it, how that aid policy is created, or what the aid priorities are. Given these and other constraints, we strive to identify the factors in our circle of influence that we can help move toward the direction of partnerships for impact.

"We work with partners to reach the audiences we want to reach, to touch what we want to touch, to bring in new ideas, reveal the blind spots. Our mission is way too big for us to do it ourselves."

MAI LE, VILLAGE CAPITAL

The partnership ecosystem sits within a much bigger, more complex, global development sector that include political norms, cultural mores that influence which geographies are prioritized in development initiatives, unequal geopolitical power across nation-states, the foreign policies that drive development investment, among many other forces.[1] We will focus on one element within that sector, the partnership ecosystem, which consists of organizational, individual, and interorganizational levels, all of which play essential roles in realizing trust-based, equitable partnerships.

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1. We also recognize and understand that foreign policy, or the policy environment of the countries in which global development organizations work, are often, though not always, an expression of democratic processes and decision making grounded in the rule of law. IREX and other development organizations must negotiate the balance of advancing equity and impact while respecting democratic processes and decision-making.

We envision partnerships not just as individual relationships, but as connected in a broader ecosystem of practice. Partnerships are between people, are between and among organizations, and live in consortia of other forms of multistakeholder collaboration. We present here some concrete goals for IREX for strengthening the partnership process at the organizational, individual, and interorganizational levels.

The North Star: to strengthen the broader ecosystem of global development relationships and unlock greater impact.

Individuals: Building partnership skills, taking actions that support partnership values

While the work of global development happens at a scale larger than the individual, organizations and societies are made up of individuals. In our day-to-day lives, we make sense of the world, do our work, and relate to others as individuals. Individual human connection is at the heart of partnerships. As the foundation of this connection, each one of us should reflect on and make a **commitment to operating with our partners with integrity, honesty, and authenticity**. These characteristics are not just personal traits with which some of us are arbitrarily endowed. IREX recognizes that these are relationship-building skills and will invest in developing and evaluating these skills. This will require an investment of time and exploration and an examination of our personal assumptions, habits, and practices.

Our conversations, readings, and thinking about partnerships have revealed a set of key skills that individuals need to develop to build impactful partnerships. These skills reinforce the key values of **trust**, **equity**, and **focus on impact**. While there is overlap across these three areas, we have identified relevant skills that individuals need, as well as concrete illustrative actions that be can be taken to yield results in each of those areas.

"Sometimes we lose sight of a simple truth about systems: They are made up of people. Despite all of the frameworks and tools at our disposal and all of our learning as a field of practice, purely technical, rational approaches to systems change will not make much of a dent in shifting power or altering our most deeply held beliefs."

KATHERINE MILLIGAN, JUANITA ZERDA, AND JOHN KANIA, THE RELATIONAL WORK OF SYSTEMS CHANGE.

Trust

Relevant Skills:

Communicate more effectively:

Engage in deep, active listening from the beginning of a relationship; engage in productive conversations (including practicing disagreeing respectfully and productively).

Acknowledge the role of emotions in relationships:

Give space and value to be emotionally attuned; reflect and share; notice and document when uncertainties and warning signs appear. Leaders with more power have more responsibility to model vulnerability and respect for others' emotional experience.

Build connections:

Build personal connections with others beyond professional relationships; cultivate intrinsic motivation rather than orientation to generic service delivery; build relationships for the long term (longer-term partnerships allow for greater growth and impact, personal transformation, and empathy, as well as the ability to respond with agility to new opportunities).

Speak up when problems arise:

This also means recognizing limits and warning signs. For example, when so much work is virtual, "it's hard to build those trusting relationships when we never shook people's hands or looked in their eyes."[1] So it's important to have strategies and processes in place to anticipate and overcome issues with mistrust, broken trust, or misaligned values; and winnow to work with partners with the right fit, over time.

Be self-aware:

Be willing to take a step back and examine our mental frameworks, assumptions, and thought processes; recognize both the strengths and gaps in ourselves and our organization; be attuned to how the power dynamics in the sector may show up in individual interactions and strive to not perpetuate neocolonial power structures.

1.   Cormier, Michelle. Creating Partnerships for Impact Interview, January 25, 2022.

Practice humility: Be present, honest, and visible with the individual's, and ultimately the organization's, "whole self"; name our mistakes and shortcomings, do not excuse or ignore them, and get curious about them. Understand the value we offer others and be able to speak clearly and with integrity about it; prioritize honesty and integrity over self-promotion; recognize that acknowledging our limits also offers opportunities to extend our individual capacity.

Illustrative Actions:

✔ Communicate more or in different ways to account for differences.

✔ Model honesty about your shortcomings and doubts.

✔ Engage in reflective exercises such as "critical moments" practice.[1]

Equity

Relevant Skills:

Exercise empathy: Understand and empathize with others' needs and priorities. Actively push yourself and your organization to look for and see from new perspectives.

Include actively: Consider that everyone has a role to play.[2] Strive for true inclusion of partners at all stages of a project. Demonstrate value for all contributions, even if they all won't ultimately be used. Invite differing perspectives and views. Provide tools for constructive disagreement. Be intentional about using inclusive language and platforms. Welcome diverse communication styles. Recognize that social impact and value might look different in different contexts. Credibility is increased for all involved when inclusion is genuine.

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1. Amulya, Joy. "Community Development TIG Week: The Power of Collective Reflective Practice in Community Development Evaluation by Joy Amulya" American Evaluation Association, 2, April 2022, aea365.org/blog/community-development-tig-week-the-power-of-collective-reflective-practice-in-community-development-evaluation-by-joy-amulya/.
2. Mohan, Bavidra. Creating Partnerships for Impact Interview.

Practice generosity:

Support the needs of other people and organizations. Look for opportunities to step aside and let others with lived experience lead. Create a space for partners to admit failure—without failure necessarily leading to the end of the relationship.

Illustrative Actions:

✓ Train all staff in empathetic communication; openly reward the practice of empathy.

✓ Structure agendas to be cognizant of distinct learning styles.

✓ Take different time zones into account when scheduling meetings.

Impact-focused

Relevant Skills:

Build and demonstrate competence:

Put ongoing effort into your professional development so that you can contribute more effectively.

Collaborate effectively:

Learn about the missions of partner organizations. Actively include perspectives of others and ideas in your strategies. Work from an inclusive and egalitarian stance.

Learn together, grow together,

and work toward a shared purpose that is beyond the reach of any individual or single organization.

Define goals together

and determine how to track and measure them.

Practicing inclusive leadership

by working to gain leadership skills that value inclusion, collaboration, and equity.

Focus on transformational or catalytic initiatives:

Individual work can be overwhelming, but it is important for each person to take a step back from the day-to-day tasks and look for opportunities where their efforts will have even greater impact.

Illustrative Actions:

✔ Provide ample opportunities for individuals' professional development that increase their competence and inclusive leadership skills.

✔ Collaboratively define indicators to mark progress toward the shared mission. Ensure that both partners must measure progress, regardless of which one is granting money and which one is receiving it—or which has greater access to power and which has less.

✔ Build learning opportunities and celebrate them within organizations in the way "success stories" might typically be celebrated.

Organizations: The engine for change in building impactful partnerships

Individuals have a critical role to play in building impactful partnerships. However, as we will see, the norms and expectations for individual behavior related to partnerships should be defined, supported, and measured at the organizational level. In other words, organizations must create the enabling environment for individuals to build trust-based, equitable partnerships. Likewise, individual organizations are the lever for groups of organizations to come together in impactful partnerships. Organizations are a key driver for change, so we consider what changes organizations might make to better support these positive changes.

Organizations should strongly consider structural changes to support a culture of

trust and learning that would better yield **trust-based**, **equitable** partnerships—and thereby **increase the organization's capacity for impactful work overall**. Flowing from these structural changes, organizations should craft specific policy about partnerships that includes (1) a commitment to partnership values that support the understanding that trust-based, equitable relationships will yield greater positive social impact; (2) a concrete partnership methodology that defines individual skills and mindsets, the expected common practices that flow from them, and language to be used when discussing partnerships to both support individuals and push toward larger-scale change interorganizationally; (3) the provision for financial and administrative

tools and norms to support partnerships; (4) a definition of what types of organizations to prioritize in partnerships; and (5) defined metrics for measuring progress in partnerships as an organization.

Cultural changes

✓ **Cultivate an internal culture of learning as a top priority** such that the idea of "learning together, growing together" in a partnership is a natural outgrowth of the culture. Learning is both a cause and an outcome of impact. Add in continual reflections as to how well the system is building the kinds of partnership culture we desire. If the system isn't working, bend it!

✓ **Identify and redress power imbalances throughout the organization.** An important place to start is investing in diversity within the executive leadership team. It is critical to include leaders with lived experiences in the development challenges that the organization addresses and backgrounds that reflect the populations that the organization serves. Support those leaders without lived experience to humbly draw from collective internal learning.

✓ **Build structures and processes that reinforce the culture**, such as building an explicit description of the culture into onboarding materials, and creating incentives and rewards for individuals and teams that exemplify and demonstrate organizational cultures and values.

✓ Create a **guide for selecting partners.** What organizations are prioritized for partnerships, and why? The guide should relate directly to the organization's values and integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, see IREX's core values (see https://www.irex.org/our-values). The mission and strategy of the organizations should also inform the guide, which in turn will aid teams and individuals in decision-making.

"We have policies and procedures in place about the types of organizations that we want to prioritize working with…. We have to partner with organizations that are local and small and bring women's perspectives into our design and implementation from the context where we're working, because that's a core value to us. And when we work with them, we need to make sure that we're doing that ethically and mindfully of the size and type of the organization it is because you can sink a partner by overwhelming them."

JENN WILLIAMSON, ACDI/VOCA

Partnership methodology

✓ **Make an organizational commitment to the values of partnership and make that commitment known** (see Section VI. Box 2). Create individual fluency with the partnership values across all staff. Strive to maintain these values with integrity and mutual accountability.

✓ **Provide support for individual capacity strengthening for the skills and mindsets needed to cultivate trust-based relationships intended to grow into partnerships where we "learn together, grow together"** (see Section VI. A. 1). This is done through staff onboarding, opportunities for professional development, ongoing shared learning moments, and a company culture that prioritizes cultivating partnership according to the organization's specific methodology.

✓ **Embed partnership development within individual and team workstreams.** This begins with setting partnerships as a priority for all. Provide time and structure to reflect on partnerships before, during, and after the process.

✓ **Acknowledge long-term expectations for partnership building.** We learned that there is a "slow burn" of starting and nurturing partnerships, which means that staff should be set up to take incremental steps as the relationship develops. This includes allocating time for people to engage in proactive (not just reactive) relationship development. An example is setting up regular check-ins with early-stage partners. **Balance the long term by seeking quick, mutually beneficial wins to give the relationship momentum,** laying the groundwork for a longer-term partnership. An example includes knowledge exchanges such as co-publishing, knowledge-sharing engagements, and visibility opportunities such as intimate salons, learning journeys touring the work of innovators, and opportunities for the organizations to increase their brand visibility together.

✓ **Determine practical techniques and tools for individual staff and teams to identify and address unfair power imbalances in partnerships.** Guide teams to create space for those with lived experiences to lead in proposal writing, program design, or implementation. Invest in diversity and inclusive processes, including co-creation, learning journeys or tours by partners, dominant–nondominant power collaboration, and capacity strengthening in all directions. Practice inclusive facilitation for meetings, workshops, and other interactions.

✓ **Facilitate leadership by and networking with local organizations.** Dominant power organizations should ready leaders, teams, and individuals to accept nondominant organizations on their own terms and encourage staff to question normative frameworks such as perfectionism.

✓ Make the **language of relationship building** a common language across the organization. **Adjust communications** in organization-wide skills and tools to "speak the language" of diverse stakeholders.

> "Strong partnerships come from horizontal relationships. It's important for both organizations to recognize that the other one has capacity. But sometimes there is a power relationship—the one giving money is asking for things, it's not so trusting. We feel observed, very watched. It's not a relationship of equals. The organizations [that grant money] do an evaluation of the partner [that receives money], but we never get to evaluate them."
>
> MARÍA LUISA MÉNDEZ, ASOCIACIÓN PAZ JOVEN GUATEMALA (TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH)

Financial and administrative tools and norms

✓ **Create systems and build skills to identify applicable legal and regulatory requirements** to ensure compliance when adapting systems to support equitable partnerships.

✓ **Incorporate flexibility in partnership agreements** when possible to meet to new challenges and opportunities. Compliance personnel should bring a perspective of equity, flexibility, and balance to help craft compliant and equitable agreements.

✓ **Modify systems to allow flexible resources (both time and money) for partnerships.** When organizations embark on partnerships, they need the flexibility to be able to prioritize reflection, learning, and experimentation, as well as embrace risk taking. They must also be able to live with imperfection. Many current financial and administrative systems are not set up to handle this approach.

✓ **Actively explore and invest in flexible and innovative compliance, and finance and budgeting (overhead) structures** that lower the barriers for partnering with diverse institutions. IREX and other INGOs currently have a limited ability to set up a partnership outside of rigid compliance requirements. This hinders the ability to partner with diverse institutions.

✓ **Institute and leverage organization-wide processes and systems for managing partnerships.** Centralized partnership tracking can enable staff to see opportunities for easy follow ups with relationships in projects. Establish continual practices of scheduling reminders to nurture partnerships to scaffold habits of follow up. Practice shepherding conversations over a long term since it's easier to renew an engagement rather than starting from the beginning.

Criteria for partner engagement and disengagement

✓ Start by seeking partners with the **ability to achieve and sustain impact.**

Intentionally interrogate **"what perspectives are we missing?"** including different identity groups, different capacity levels, and informal groups; and proactively reach out to leaders and organizations connected to those perspectives.

✓ **Re-evaluate current partnerships** to make sure that they match your organization's committed values. Identify any changes that could be made to collaboration to improve the relationship.

✓ Include engagements with organizations led by **youth, the next generation of leaders,** as well as leaders with lived experience in the types of development challenges the organizations seek to address.

✓ Develop a shared understanding about when to step back, walk away, or assume a less prominent role in a partnership. **Organizations should be ready to walk away from a partnership when there are ethical lapses, poor alignment** of vision, conflict in values, disinterest in building trust, irreparably broken trust, a lack of inclusion and equity, and/or when there is insufficient focus on meaningful positive impact.

Defining metrics for measuring progress

✓ **Measure, evaluate, learn, and adapt to make progress.** Develop and implement measures of tracking and accountability for partnerships. Support the process of **tracking capacity for partnership development over time** as well as the progress and impact of partnerships for ourselves, our partners, and our donors. Support ongoing reflection about partnership development.

Reflections from IREX's experience:

In our conversations, partners with experience working with us, as well as other IREXers, consistently cited a common set of skills and characteristics in which IREX excels. IREX staff were described as:

✓ **Good communicators:** seen as facilitators rather than directors; honest, open

✓ **Power sharers:** authentic, respectful, humble; led by context and local needs; elevating the work of the communities we serve; proactively sharing power and putting local people first

✓ **Mission-driven:** focused on the work rather than the glory; risk taking, working toward measurable increased impact

✓ **Experts:** contributing valuable knowledge and insights; learning-focused, creative; "the opposite of box-checking" —Employee (INGO, requested anonymity)

The more consistently we adhere to and sharpen these abilities, the greater impact IREX can have.

BOX 3

Interorganizational collaboration heralds transformation

Partnerships amplify impact when two or more organizations commit to a process in which they "learn together, grow together" in the service of positive development. The intent should be to establish **equity from the beginning** (as equitable as possible, acknowledging realities) and to build trust. Partnerships built in this way will evolve toward a transformation to a new mode of working, in which coalitions of different, complementary organizations build toward a larger mission that none could accomplish alone, **achieving greater impact.** In this mode, there is equitable treatment of the insights, experiences, and capabilities that rest within local organizations. It bears emphasizing: *the process* **of getting to this next reality—interacting in new ways, shifting power intentionally, learning—***is itself development.*

"I do think the philanthropic space is moving more toward these sort of collectives, or collaboratives. I think there is a realization that the problems are collective in nature and therefore require more collective orientation, which is exciting. We're seeing more of these collectives that are just creating space, frankly, for organizations like yours and ours to say: How might we do things differently? What might that look like?"

BAVIDRA MOHAN, ACUMEN

Building toward this new way of working will enable us to meet the challenges of today that we defined at the outset. It will allow us to rapidly adapt, learn, and innovate to respond to new opportunities and challenges. It will help us challenge deep-rooted inequities at the intersections of race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status, so that local partners lead and sustain local development over the long term. It will also help increase trust in institutions by creating stronger trust bonds across organizations and individuals.

Building stronger collaboration across organizations will rely on (1) naming unspoken power dynamics and actively working to change them, (2) employing innovative financial models for greater equity between partners, (3) seeking complementarity as a grounds for more powerful collaboration, and (4) prioritizing learning together.

Naming unspoken power dynamics; actively working to change them

✔ While we aspire toward equity, we at IREX know that the global development system is the inheritor of colonial, neocolonial, and other geopolitical systems of oppression. Rather than pretend that this history has no impact on present-day relationships, we believe that **INGOs and donors should acknowledge power dynamics openly from the beginning and put mechanisms in place to try to address them.** This includes reflecting on the ways cultural differences and intersectional barriers influence power dynamics. This acknowledgment is likely to be extremely uncomfortable but is key to creating trust and intentionally designing other ways of relating to each other.

✔ Being transparent about power dynamics and working to shift them yields greater access to human connection and more opportunity to learn together in a virtuous cycle. Committing to a culture of transparency can help surface and address problems when power imbalances occur.

✔ International / global organizations and companies should strategize how to leverage our unique role as government funders and local organizations to act as mediators of power differentials, as well as modeling the sharing of power.

"When a partnership is mutual there is co-creation of anything that is going to be done, one organization or one person does not feel that they know it all, and there is an appreciation that each person comes into the space with the different pieces that can build a very strong partnership."

MARGARET MLIWA, FORD FOUNDATION

✓ International (or global) organizations and companies can help support local organizations in holding donors accountable, beyond the more usual opposite flow of international organizations holding local organizations accountable on behalf of donors.

✓ General mechanisms to address power dynamics may include setting expectations, introducing and practicing norms so that all voices are heard, giving space for all to voice what they are afraid of or worried about at regular intervals, and reflecting regularly on intersectional power differentials. Other strategies include employing feedback mechanisms to inquire as to whether engagements are sufficiently inclusive and seeking what can be improved, and leveraging models for co-design, co-decision-making, and community ownership.

✓ We suggest **putting these commitments in writing** and giving participating partners an opportunity to co-create the norms and declare their priorities to each other. For example, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) can articulate the spirit of the partnership beyond assigned roles and can help ensure that different partners lead activities at different points.

✓ **We believe that shifting power will produce great impact in global development. We also believe that shifting power is *part of that great impact.***

Employing innovative financial mechanisms and models for greater equity between partners

✓ Co-creation, an act of bringing people together to collectively identify challenges and design solutions, is an increasingly employed mechanism (e.g., in proposal development) that can establish equity between partners, encourage diversity in thought, and effectively implement solutions to societal challenges.

✓ Participatory, community-led, and peer-to-peer grantmaking models enable shared ownership of strategic decisions.

✓ Exploring new financing models, such as impact investment, mixed funding streams (which combine revenue earning with grants), and community-led mechanisms like local cooperatives can potentially yield structural shifts in power.

Seeking complementarity as grounds for more powerful collaboration

✓ Invest in the early-stage conversations to cultivate trust and a shared culture. Draw on the partnerships mindset of honesty, humility, and empathy.

✓ Recognize and draw from partners' expertise and priorities for solutions, especially nondominant partner expertise drawn from lived experiences and related to the problem in focus.

✔ Enable partners from nondominant regions to take the lead in defining problems, proposing solutions, and making decisions, centering need rather than dominant power perceptions of their need. When there is a "sub" and "prime" relationship, find ways for both prime and sub to lead at different times.

✔ Adapt methods for collaboration and equitable decision-making, such as The Spindle's Power Awareness Tool (https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Power-Awareness-Tool.pdf).

✔ Manage communications so that partners are not overwhelmed but are included. Equip organizations with the right amount of information to contribute fully.

✔ Partner with groups that are integrated in communities and are internally motivated toward the co-created mission, so that continued impact can reverberate beyond project timelines. Different types of organizations are critical to creating a strong ecosystem. Include some organizations that specialize as connectors, conveners, and/or knowledge hubs; for example, some of the organizations we spoke with (Acumen, Ashoka, Village Capital) are structured around partnerships rather than projects (i.e., service delivery).

✓ Support coalitions or movements that seek desired policy and regulatory changes, to ultimately build a better enabling environment and support systems change.

✓ Consider how to continue relationships with institutions after individuals move on.

Prioritizing learning together, growing together

✓ Often a lack of a funding source can inhibit the development of trust in relationships between organizations; however, there are available methods for trust-building outside of funding relationships. In particular, consider "information sharing" or "learning together" partnerships that do not require funding. Aligning partners from the beginning with the spirit of learning together will help ensure that learning, reflection, and iteration comes organically out of the relationship.

✓ INGOs and donors can serve as conveners to build learning around different issue areas. This may lead to funding opportunities and more formalized partnerships but can create value for diverse stakeholders regardless.

✓ We believe that learning together leads to growing together. All partners can potentially transform as part of the relationship. A long-term commitment to these trusted relationships allows partnerships to be future-focused and to be ready to adapt to change.

✓ Build in time for each partner to embody a learning mindset for development work: to contribute to the ongoing learning and growth of others, to gain support in their own learning, and to collaborate.

✓ Simple but powerful communications can increase learning and trust. For example, clarify definitions of commonly used terms.

Interorganizational collaboration heralds transformation

We argue that these actions proposed at the individual, organizational, and interorganizational levels will catalyze some of the necessary changes in the direction of our **North Star: to strengthen and create equity across the broader ecosystem of global development relationships and unlock greater impact.**[1]

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1. While these elements will create critical changes, ecosystem transformation will require other changes to come from other sources. Foreign aid policy, which is generally an expression of national interests, is one critical force that defines the development aid system that IREX and many other actors in the system have little to no influence over. In this paper, we are focusing our analysis on elements closer to our sphere of influence. For ecosystem transformation, other elements—especially foreign policy—would have to change, too.

Conclusion

If we want to achieve transformational impact in global development, we must invest in trust-based, equitable partnerships.

This process of discovery has clarified for us the centrality of partnerships as well as their promise. At IREX, we want to do partnerships better, with a big goal in mind: **to strengthen the broader ecosystem of global development relationships and unlock greater impact.** Everyone in the global development community has a role to play.

While partnerships in development are certainly beset by many problems, we've identified **one of the root causes of many problems: the inequitable exercise of power. This power imbalance is also a critical obstacle to more effective development progress.**

We learned that two mindsets for working with partners—outcome-focused and experience-focused—offer different ways to navigate partner relationships. One tends to reinforce inequitable power structures, while the other intentionally equalizes power differentials through a process that yields trust, equity, and long-term strategic impact. A thoughtful balance of both approaches will yield both measurable positive outcomes and long-term impact.

At IREX, we plan to use these learnings to take our partnership development practice to the next level to advance more equitable, trust-based partnerships with the goal of yielding increased impact across the development ecosystem greater than any organization could achieve alone.

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