

PARTNERSHIPS AND POWER:

Understanding the Dynamics Between International and National Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Organizations

BACKGROUND

The field of global health is changing. There are increasing calls to shift resources and decision-making to a more diverse set of entities, actors, and institutions. At the same time, national and international reckonings on racial injustice are permeating global and local conversations. And, in response, the development aid ecosystem is aspiring to make programs more accessible, equitable, and resilient by shifting leadership, decision-making, and funding to local actors.

Within global health, the history of the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) field is one that is constantly evolving. From the start, SRHR has been a sector shaped by politics and personal beliefs, making it particularly susceptible to political headwinds. The history of sexual and reproductive health has its roots in systems of oppression, with entrenched power dynamics between international NGOs (INGOs), national NGOs (NNGOs), and funders. As a result, the sector's approach to program development and implementation often failed to consider the perspectives and voices of impacted communities. Within this context, international organizations focused on SRHR have committed to ongoing, critical reflection on the past, learning (and unlearning) from their histories, and building a future that is grounded in informed choice, supports bodily autonomy, and is driven by the individuals, communities, and local organizations who know their needs best.

Today, INGOs play multiple roles across global health and SRHR. While they can hold positions with significant power, they also operate in an ecosystem of constraints and traditions that influence their ability to shift power and resources to local decision-makers. Donor funding mechanisms, non-profit governance structures, organizational risk tolerance, and compliance requirements create complexity and, oftentimes, rigidity, that stands in the way of marked transformation.

Within this environment, INGOs are increasingly recognizing that how they operate today does not contribute to the vision and goals of equitable development, and that active steps must be taken to change. In recent years, many SRHR INGOs have been considering their future role in international development, including assessing their current operating models and reflecting on how best to adapt and contribute to the evolution of the sector. In addition, there is recognition that this work can't be done in isolation, but rather must be done in community with the full and credible engagement of key stakeholders at local, national, and regional levels.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Established in 2022, Transforming INGO Models for Equity (TIME) is a collaboration-based initiative that seeks to explore how SRHR INGOs can and should rethink how they operate to contribute to responsive, equitable, and inclusive development.

It is grounded in the understanding that the SRHR community is prepared, and in many cases is already, moving towards more locally-led development. And that INGOs would benefit from a consultative process that examines how to adapt their operational models to achieve this goal. At its core, TIME believes that one INGO alone cannot lead sector-wide reforms, but together – working as a community of INGOs, NNGOs, and funders – it is possible to chart a course that is equitable, resilient, and accountable.

In fact, the story of TIME began with collaboration. In 2021, the leaders of four SRHR INGOs¹ were all independently thinking about how to transform their organizations and better meet the needs of partners. Each one realized that this reflective work would be stronger if they did it together. That initial group of leaders spurred the creation of the TIME initiative, based on the belief that SRHR INGOs need to acknowledge and learn from their history, use their place of power to amplify progress in the present, and co-create a more equitable future.

Since then, TIME has become an initiative that is bigger than any one organization. This brief represents the culmination of a year of listening. From the start, the initiative understood that progress required genuine introspection and that this process was as (if not more) important than the outcome. TIME has done the work. It has spent a good amount of time listening to local, international, and regional organizations across sub-Saharan Africa² in a variety of ways to foster authentic understanding of the contextual and relational challenges – and solutions – that are only possible with trust-building and thoughtful exchange.

The purpose of Phase 1 of TIME (October 2021-December 2022) was to develop an understanding of the current ecosystem SRHR INGOs operate in today, to better envision what their role might look like tomorrow. Phase 2 will focus on building a re-imagined vision for the future, while developing a multi-dimensional roadmap that gives INGOs and NNGOs the tools, opportunity, and resources to make meaningful change.

PROJECT APPROACH AND STRATEGIES

The first phase of the TIME initiative was focused on building a strong foundation to learn and grow. We needed evidence-based information that would allow us to rethink the roles of SRHR INGOs strategically, holistically, and honestly.

Our guiding principles were:

- **Co-designed with cross-sector collaboration.** We deliberately sought to engage and incorporate perspectives from local, community, national, and regional partners.
- **Iterative process.** We agreed to be agile and adjust as we learned together. We built in reflective learning moments that resulted in modifications to the project scope and design, all of which made the initiative stronger and more responsive.
- **Transparency and accountability.** At various intervals we shared our findings publicly (hosting open webinars and participating in the 2022 International Conference on Family Planning) and actively sought feedback, which in turn informed our results.
- **Equitable participation.** We translated all communication into English and French and offered French interpretation for live events.
- **Spirit of generosity.** Those involved in TIME were motivated and guided to build understanding and solutions for the SRHR community, not a single organization or institution.

In addition, to help provide the necessary perspectives and focus, we established a time-bound advisory council, bringing in perspectives from INGOs, regional NGOs, national NGOs, and think-tanks.

¹ Catalyst group organizations: EngenderHealth, Ipas, PRB, Population Council

² In TIME Phase 1, it was necessary to limit activities to a single geographical focus, in order to maintain a manageable scope and scale. The initiative focused on sub-Saharan Africa as a global sample. Therefore, the information presented is subject to an inferential interpretation of the global SRHR operational landscape. The operational and communication languages during this phase were limited to English and French.

The four main questions and associated activities of TIME Phase 1 were:

<p>1 What is the history of SRHR and what does that history teach us about where we are today, and where we are going?</p>	<p>Completed a literature review which covered the history of SRHR in sub-Saharan Africa, existing power dynamics at play, and conversations related to decolonization of the global health sector.</p>
<p>2 Who are the key players working in SRHR in Sub-Saharan Africa today?</p>	<p>Performed a stakeholders mapping exercise to identify anglophone and francophone stakeholders working in sub-Saharan Africa, for the purpose of gathering a representative sample of viewpoints and building an emergent database for future engagement in the initiative.</p>
<p>3 What are the defining features of INGO-NNGO relationships and power dynamics today?</p>	<p>Conducted 12 key informant and in-depth interviews with select respondents to understand more fully the challenges and opportunities of partnership across different types of SRHR organizations.</p> <p>Conducted a “deep-dive” survey of organizations (international, national, and regional) working in Africa on SRHR, to understand core elements of INGO/NNGO collaboration, and to identify people who would like to engage more deeply.</p>
<p>4 What are the next steps for INGOs to meaningfully and practically transform?</p>	<p>Disseminated the results of the survey and interviews at two public webinars (English / French translation).</p> <p>Participated in the 2022 International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP) to foster additional insights, including contributing to the planning of the ICFP pre-conference workshop on power-shifting in global health and hosting a side event and a live stage session specifically on TIME.</p>

During this first phase of the initiative, we focused our engagement on NNGOs as the primary stakeholder group to ensure that their perspectives on INGO-NNGO partnership and relationship dynamics were front and center in the work. This decision was deliberate, as the shift to locally-led development necessitates a clear understanding of power imbalances, and is an area that INGOs have relative autonomy over to effect change. As INGOs seek to reimagine their role and operational models, they will need to understand the power imbalances embedded in their relationships with NNGOs (TIME Phase 1), focus on changing their operations and ways of working (TIME Phase 2), and finally, engage with funders to address existing barriers to change (TIME Phase 3).

KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS: DEFINING FEATURES OF NNGO-INGO RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER DYNAMICS

The complex power dynamics between INGOs, NNGOs, and funders lies at the heart of how SRHR development works (or doesn't). Through our surveys, interviews, and open forums, it became clear that the ways in which SRHR INGOs operate and, in particular, how they identify and enter into partnerships with national and local organizations, is in large part a by-product of the broader development aid ecosystem. The INGO-funder power relationship is unbalanced and many of the challenges (and changes) that INGOs hope to address also require changes in how funders deliver resources. At the same time, the ways in which INGOs operate and manage partnerships with local organizations – sometimes to meet funder requirements – also lead to unbalanced INGO-NNGO power relationships.

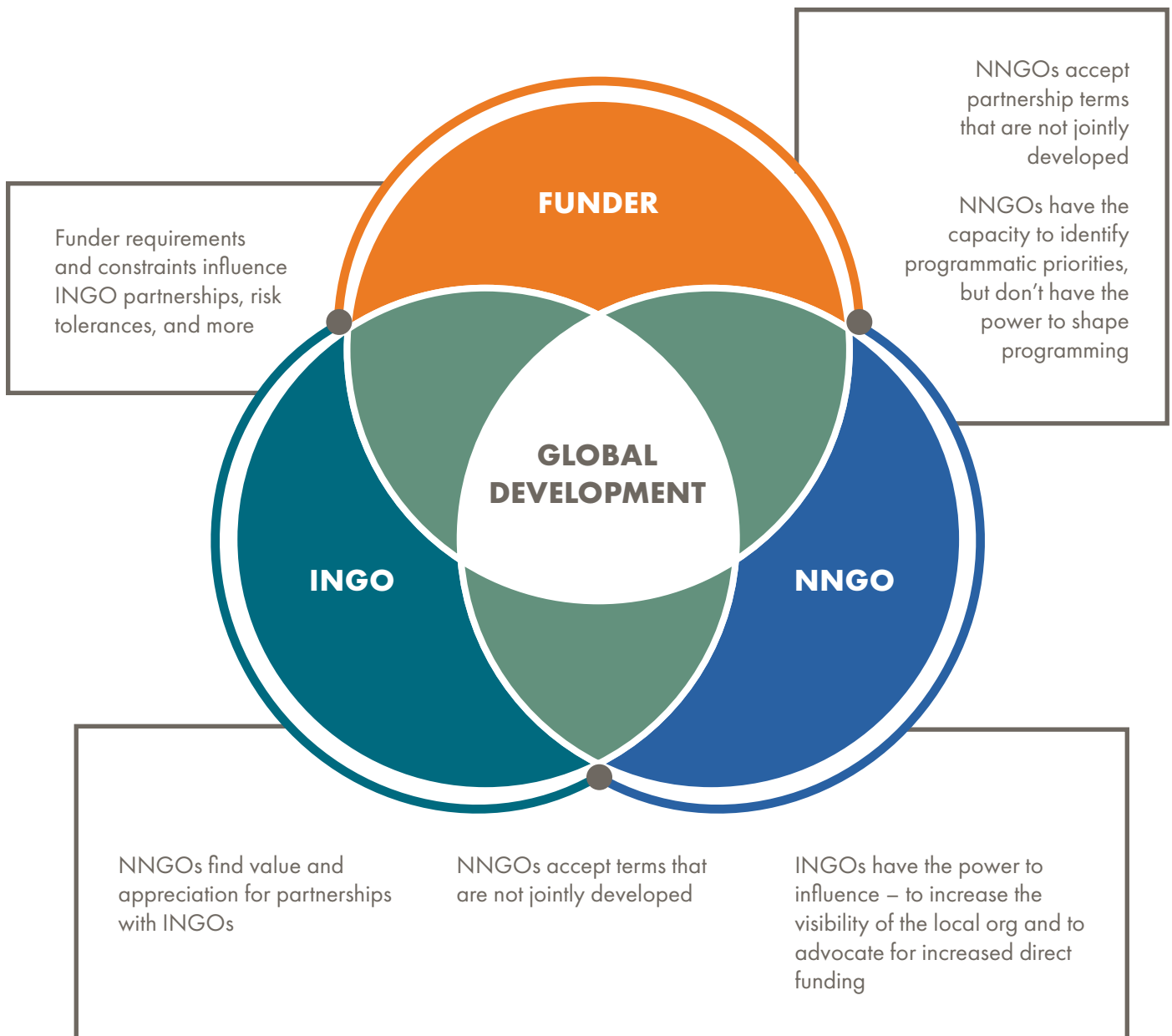


Figure 1. Power dynamics and relationships between the major stakeholders working in SRHR

The ways in which INGOs operate and partner with NNGOs point to dynamics that do not allow for equitable power in determining funding and programmatic decisions. Specifically, the review that was conducted identified five characteristics of inequitable partnerships in the SRHR ecosystem. Notably, these findings align to concerns identified in other areas of health and development.



1. Lack of trust

INGOs present as not having confidence in locally based NGOs, with a focus on NNGO mistakes rather than celebrating successes. One survey respondent alluded to a ‘master-servant’ attitude. This sentiment permeated all other responses.



2. Tokenism

INGOs fail to actively co-create or support local ownership of intervention design and program implementation and ignore local knowledge. While 80% of respondents indicated they have the capacity to identify programmatic priorities, less than 58% of them have the opportunity or power to set or shape programmatic priorities and funding priorities. Only about 23% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have enough information about funding opportunities and have the capacity to apply.

This finding aligns with other ownership issues, such as lack of follow-up after NNGO consultation, and leads to the feeling that consultations are mere tokenism designed to provide validity for the grant proposal or some other transactional requirement. Youth-led organizations that participated in TIME’s landscape analysis frequently mentioned how they feel used to “rubber stamp” an initiative or a project, and then the conversations end there.



I think for me it feels very cosmetic and forced” ... “we [are] just used as a vessel by [the] international NGO.”

NNGO



3. Linguistic injustice

NNGOs expressed concern relating to linguistic justice. There is concern about English language hegemony, where most of the opportunities to engage only provide spaces for English-speaking organizations, leaving other language speakers on the margins – Francophones, and Lusophones for example. In addition, NNGOs are faced with the challenge of meeting the high linguistic standards set by INGOs and donors in the Global North. This results in a situation where favoritism can flourish, and NNGOs accept what they can get. Some INGOs attested to this and considered it to be unfair.



The expectation that they would be able to write academically in English is unfair...our academic environment rewards writing over data collection, it is not going to be the case that my colleague who was in charge of data collection is the first author and that is a function of this unfair system that we are existing in.”

INGO



4. Unhealthy competition

Survey respondents made note of increased competition for dwindling funds, and rival organizations causing toxic environments that include political and power tussles, selfish leaders, and greed. This concern was also elevated by NNGOs who felt that local, indigenous organizations were being overlooked and/or replaced by “localized” INGO offices, perpetuating the already unhealthy competition that happens at the global level to local actors. Fears about the impact of false “decolonization” efforts and unintended consequences of shifting resources to organizations that were not truly local were also raised.



It is one thing to have a physical presence in other words, have an office building, have legal registration, in that context or say an African context, and that’s fine. But it’s another thing that the presence of that organisation, or that branch or (country office) has real power and influence in the way that organisation operates.

Think tank member



5. Donor requirements and access to funds

Complex donor requirements and access to funding has an impact on power dynamics between INGOs and NNGOs. On the one hand, NNGOs describe the challenges in developing direct NNGO-funder relationships. They shared their concerns about how donor requirements are sometimes responsible for inequitable INGO models of partnerships.



They get the requirements from the donors who set up their competitive process and then as an INGO they just have to abide to what different donors are saying and just do it that way.

NNGO

The very rigorous requirements set by funders often disadvantage NNGOs that cannot meet donor “standards.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, only 29% of NNGOs surveyed believe there is sufficient access to direct funding from donors.

And yet, in this challenging funder environment, having existing partnerships with INGOs can have an overall positive impact on access to additional funds (58%) through influencing donor interest in locally led and regional organizations (69%) or active advocacy from INGOs for increased funding for locally led organizations.

While perhaps positive in the short term, in the longer term NNGOs indicated that they settle for whatever partnership conditions are presented to access funding for their work. NNGOs recognize these challenges and highlight that funder dynamics perpetuate a hierarchal model of partnership between them and INGOs.



Local/indigenous NGOs do not have the ‘courage’ to assert themselves, or agency and know-how to negotiate and stand [their] ground on what they need... and [with the] fear of not getting the grant, they will accept whatever comes their way.

NNGO

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of TIME Phase 1 activities are clear: Many INGOs are already responding to calls for power-shifting and localization. All stakeholder groups (INGOs, NNGOs, and funders) believe that SRHR INGOs do and will have a role to play in advancing SRHR outcomes in the future, but that **more concrete and actionable reforms are necessary**.

Based on these key themes, we know that significant changes must be made to align INGO operating models to NNGO needs and to meet the equitable development aspirations of both global and local SRHR organizations. It is equally clear that there will be no one-size-fits-all approach to the transformations that will take place. However, from our findings we have identified several areas of focus that will build a stronger foundation for the journey ahead. These include:

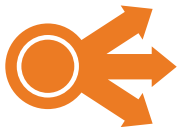
Rethinking INGO approaches to partnerships.



Identifying the inequitable aspects of INGO-NNGO partnerships will shed light on the characteristics that are necessary for more equitable relationships. These include (but are not limited to):

- Fostering relationships built on trust, mutual understanding, and respect.
- Shifting to longer-term partnerships that are stable and committed. INGOs should focus on defining common ways of working together to improve short- and long-term partnerships. This includes identifying creative solutions that address current declines in overall SRHR funding, but allow for more meaningful engagement.
- Enabling collaborative and strengths-based programming that creates space for meaningful co-creation. This includes community-led and centered programming, where local organization structure priorities and design community-appropriate solutions, and INGOs commit to amplifying their needs.

Transforming INGO operating models.



Many INGO structures are outdated and no longer fit-for-purpose. To meet rising needs and align to current demands, INGOs must adapt, including decentralizing and democratizing organizational structures, evaluating shared-service models, and considering strategic alliances or mergers to enable economies of scale. Despite organizational willingness for change, some have a lack of clarity on how to implement changes in a way that responsibly supports an effective rebalancing of power, resources, and roles among international and national NGOs, while right-sizing INGO capabilities to match the unique role that INGOs will continue to play in this sector.

INGOs should focus on identifying and understanding the operational models at their disposal, as well as the criteria they should take into account when considering if, or how, to restructure how they operate. This is an area where INGOs can and should learn from each other, sharing lessons learned, processes, and tools.

Building strong coalitions and communities of practice that are built on trust.



Trust is the basis for any meaningful and equitable partnership. To build trust, there must first be understanding. This includes making sure there is a common language and agreement on basic concepts, such as decolonization, locally-led development, equitable development, equitable partnership, and trust. INGOs and NNGOs need to be able to “speak the same language” to foster genuine, inclusive approaches. INGOs and NNGOs should work together to ensure that the right voices are in the right conversations at the right time. They should also commit to finding and nurturing relationships with peer organizations that are also committed to change, and together, work to co-create a vision that is more equitable and inclusive.

Bringing funders into the conversation.



There cannot be sector-wide reform without the primary holder of power – funders. Together, INGOs, NNGOs, and funders should identify areas in need, including changing unfair funding practices that are currently barriers to INGO and NNGO autonomy. It should also include relationship-building and advocacy efforts with a range of philanthropic and bilateral funders, to ensure that they live up to their own commitments to shifting power and resourcing to local partners, while creating a pathway to transition that is responsible and sustainable. SRHR INGOs should go beyond commitments and use their positions of relative power to champion change.

Because INGOs, NNGOs, and funders are inter-dependent on each other, all must be actively involved in the drive towards equitable development. SRHR INGOs need to address how they operate and partner. NNGOs need to be brought in as true thought and implementation partners, must participate and lead capacity-sharing strategies, and should receive increasing amounts of highly flexible funding from donors directly. And funders must be more proactively engaged by INGOs and NNGOs to help build a pathway for localized development that is built to last.

The current ecosystem that SRHR INGOs operate in today is one in flux. How this next chapter in the SRHR story unfolds will be up to the INGO, NNGO, and funder actors in it. Whose voices will tell it?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The TIME Initiative was led and supported by EngenderHealth and Humentum on behalf of all participating organizations. EngenderHealth and Humentum are grateful to the TIME Advisory Council for their leadership and collaboration, and to the survey respondents, and interviewees for lending their voice and experiences. We are thankful to The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for their generous funding.

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