

Creating Partnerships For Impact

Key observations
and recommendations



2023





Today's global development sector—which includes development organizations and companies, civil society organizations, donors, the private sector, and the public sector—is becoming more intricate, constantly shifting, and grappling with many escalating social challenges. These include a rise in authoritarianism, diminishing trust in institutions, disinformation, social polarization, food insecurity, climate threats, conflict, and unclear long-term impacts of development initiatives. This complex and high-stakes context demands 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 Sustainable Development Goal 17, which outlines the increasing imperative of cooperation to strengthen the means of partnership implementation and revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development. Strong partner relationships more effectively bring together the knowledge, innovations, networks, and resources

of those closest to challenges, interweaving the perspectives and assets of collaborators throughout the world. Because partnerships enable organizations and communities to work together to address development challenges by leveraging diverse, but complementary, competencies, they can lead to sustainable impact at a scale much greater than that of any individual organization.

Unfortunately, many partnerships fall short of realizing this potential. We've identified one of the root causes of this diminished impact: the inequitable exercise of power.

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. 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 initiative¹. The recommendations we propose for program partners, global development donors, and philanthropists include the role of *individuals* in operating with integrity and authenticity, changes *organizations* should make to better support change, and a *process* for achieving transformational collaborations between and among organizations.

Key Terms and Definitions:



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.**

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



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.” (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/>)



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.



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.

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.

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. **We focus on one foundational issue: power inequity.**

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 can also be 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 conflict; and international or multilateral structures funded predominantly, and effectively controlled, by the Global North. Thus, the development system often 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, in some ways, local organizations exert more power than the dominant, typically grant-giving, organizations.² 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.



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. A more detailed set of recommendations for practice is defined in the longer version of this paper: **Creating Partnerships for Greater Impact: Building a process for trust-based, equitable collaboration**, available on [IREX.org](https://www.irex.org).

2. 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.

A photograph showing three women of diverse backgrounds (two Black women and one Asian woman wearing a hijab) gathered around a laptop in a professional setting, likely a conference or meeting. They are all smiling and looking at the screen, suggesting a collaborative and positive work environment. The woman on the left is pointing at the laptop, the woman in the middle is looking on, and the woman on the right is also looking at the screen. There are water bottles on the table in front of them.

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. 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.

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.

- A. OUTCOME-FOCUSED MINDSET:** A mindset focused on outcomes views partnerships as transactional exchanges. 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 executing concrete incremental steps toward a goal, focusing on an exchange of predefined assets like funding, knowledge, resources, networks, and capacities. It limits how partners navigate risks, adapt, and respond to ever-changing needs within a dynamic world full of uncertainty.

An outcome-focused mindset is not disadvantageous in and of itself. A focus on outcomes helps ensure that programs make a measurable difference. However, partnerships that lean too heavily in the direction of an outcome-focused mindset risk focusing too much on a transactional relationship formed to win a competition over aligned values or making an impact.



B. EXPERIENCE-FOCUSED MINDSET: A mindset that contributes to sharing 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.

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. Partners invest in learning each other's missions, such that they feel a sense of commitment to the other's mission. While the foundation for building trust is a commitment to achieve a shared purpose, partnership engagements require significant investments to produce mutually beneficial and long-term or

large-scale impact through learning, strong relationships, mutual growth, and adaptation.

An experience-focused mindset recognizes that all individuals within partnerships bring a combination of inherent and evolving reservoirs of funding, knowledge (including from lived experiences), resources, networks, and capacities. This creates a fluidity for partners to continuously leverage these shared assets to advance a shared

purpose. The experience-focused mindset emphasizes the organizations' mutual benefit and long-term impact related to the shared development goal. **Guided by this perspective, the organic experience of partnering itself is development, and it achieves development.**

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 the experience-focused mindset prioritizes continually aligning partners to work together to achieve shared rewards and navigate shared challenges. This latter approach can better support power sharing between partners. **Partnerships will benefit from the right balance of both outcome-focused and experience-focused mindsets.**





The Path Toward Trust-Based, Equitable Partnerships

We believe that the potential for sustainable impact is 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.

An intentional focus on interrupting power differentials and creating a balance between experience-focused and outcome-focused mindsets can support long-term and trust-based partnerships. By addressing issues of power, partnerships will elevate marginalized groups and equip remote implementers with better contextual knowledge to implement more effective, relevant, and impactful programs.

We aspire to achieve transformation so that the partnership can achieve a mission beyond what either of the partners could have accomplished alone. Our North Star is to strengthen the broader ecosystem of global development relationships and unlock greater impact.

We envision partnerships not just as individual relationships, but as connected in a broader ecosystem of practice. Partnerships are between people, and between and among organizations—they live in the consortia of various forms of multistakeholder collaboration. We offer methods of strengthening the partnership process at the organizational, individual, and interorganizational level. For a detailed exploration of our analysis and recommendations, as well as acknowledgments and a full bibliography, see “Creating Partnerships for Impact: Building a Process for Trust-Based, Equitable Collaboration” at IREX.org.

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

While the work of global development happens at a larger scale than the individual level, organizations and societies are made up of individuals. 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 of us should reflect on and make a **commitment to operating with our partners with integrity, honesty, and authenticity.** Practicing inclusive leadership is critical to ensuring that local partners will lead local development.

Partnership Skills for Individuals



Trust

- ✓ Strengthening communication skills
- ✓ Acknowledging the role of emotions in relationships
- ✓ Building connections
- ✓ Speaking up when problems arise
- ✓ Becoming self-aware
- ✓ Practicing humility



Equity

- ✓ Exercising empathy
- ✓ Including actively
- ✓ Practicing generosity



Impact-focused

- ✓ Building and demonstrating competence
- ✓ Collaborating effectively
- ✓ Learning together, growing together
- ✓ Defining goals together
- ✓ Practicing inclusive leadership
- ✓ Focusing on transformational or catalytic initiatives



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.**

Organizations: The engine for change in building impactful partnerships

Individuals have a critical role to play in building impactful partnerships. However, the norms and expectations for individual behavior related to partnerships should be defined, supported, and measured at the organizational level. Organizations must create the enabling environment for individuals to build trust-based, equitable partnerships. Likewise, each organization is the lever for groups of organizations to come together in impactful partnerships. The five focus areas below support a culture of trust and learning that would better yield trust-based, equitable partnerships—and thereby increase an organization’s capacity for impactful work.

Organizational Factors for Change



Cultural Changes

- ✓ Cultivate an internal culture of learning as a top priority.
- ✓ Identify and redress power imbalances throughout the organization.
- ✓ Build structures and processes that reinforce the culture.
- ✓ Create a guide for selecting partners.



Partnership Methodology

- ✓ Make an organizational commitment to the values of partnership.
Provide support for individual capacity strengthening.
- ✓ Embed partnership development within individual and team workstreams.

- ✓ Acknowledge long-term expectations for partnership building.
- ✓ Determine techniques for individuals to identify and work to mitigate unfair power imbalances.
- ✓ Facilitate leadership by and networking with local organizations.
- ✓ Make the language of relationship-building a common language.



Financial & Administrative Tools and Norms

- ✓ Create systems and build skills to identify applicable legal and regulatory requirements.
- ✓ Incorporate flexibility in partnership agreements when possible to meet new challenges and opportunities.
- ✓ Modify systems to allow flexible resources for partnerships.
- ✓ Actively invest in flexible and innovative compliance, finance, and budgeting structures.
- ✓ Institute and leverage organization-wide processes and systems for managing partnerships.



Criteria for Partner Engagement and Disengagement

- ✓ Start with ability to achieve and sustain impact.
- ✓ Intentionally interrogate what perspectives we might be missing.
- ✓ Re-evaluate current partnerships.
- ✓ Include engagements with youth organizations and leaders with lived experiences.
- ✓ Develop criteria for walking away from a partnership when there is poor alignment or irreparably broken trust.



Defining Metrics for Measuring Progress

- ✓ Measure, evaluate, learn, and adapt to make progress.
- ✓ Develop and implement measures of tracking and accountability.
- ✓ Support the process of tracking capacity for partnership development over time.
- ✓ Support ongoing reflection about partnership development.

Stronger Collaborations Across Organizations

- ✓ Support coalitions or movements that seek desired policy and regulatory changes.
- ✓ Name unspoken power dynamics and actively work to change them.
- ✓ Employ innovative financial models for greater equity between partners.
- ✓ Seek complementarity as grounds for more powerful collaboration.
- ✓ Embed methods for trust-building and trust repair from the inception of the relationship.
- ✓ Adopt methods for collaborative and equitable decision making.
- ✓ Emphasize local leadership and promote locally driven approaches.
- ✓ Prioritize learning together.

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 increased impact. In this mode, there is an equitable treatment of the insights, experiences, and capabilities that rest within local organizations. Building stronger collaboration across organizations must include the considerations below.



Ecosystem

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 thus unlock greater impact.**

At IREX, we plan to use our learning to take our partnership development practice to the next level to advance more equitable, trust-based partnerships. Our goal is to yield greater impact across the development ecosystem greater than any organization could achieve alone. We invite others to join us in this learning journey to shift our practice and the balance-of-power dynamics throughout the global development sector.

Everyone in the global development community has a role to play. If we want to achieve transformational impact in global development, we must invest in trust-based, equitable partnerships.



Creating Partnerships For Impact

Building a process for trust-based,
equitable collaboration



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