Transforming Power in Partnerships

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Introduction

In the last years, there has been a growing movement within the international civil society sector to decolonise, localise and thereby #shiftthepower from the Global Minority, where most of the resources and power are held, to the Global Majority. As language like "development" and "beneficiaries" have faded from our vocabularies, a new emphasis on participation and partnerships has emerged.

But, as one of the pieces in this publication points out, the word 'partnership' can obscure the power dynamics that, despite our best intentions, persist. Having worked closely with a range of INGOs over the last six years, we as FAIR SHARE found ourselves asking: what are the ingredients of a truly equitable partnership, which challenges rather than reproduces the colonial hierarchies and structures of our sector?

That's how the idea for the publication was born – but we also knew that we wanted to take the creation of the publication itself as an opportunity to experiment with partnership. Rather than soliciting pieces from individual writers, we curated writing pairs, made up of people who would bring in different geopolitical perspectives. Embracing this difference was one of our core intentions with this publication: we invited writers to incorporate their personal, lived experience and lean into, rather than try to reconcile, any tensions that emerged between their points of view.

To enable more granular and concrete discussions, we identified three major themes within the topic of 'partnerships': risk, funding and knowledge production. Each of these domains comes with its own nuances around how power is negotiated and where the levers for change are. Indeed, to go beyond description or diagnosis, we also asked each writing pair to develop concrete recommendations for the sector on these subjects.

A major premise of FAIR SHARE's work is that the how is as important as the what; that the means are not neutral, because they shape the ends. In order for the civil society sector to live up to its mandate and tackle the polycrises of our times, we need to forge strong partnerships that are equitable, inclusive and sustainable. We hope this collection of reflections and analysis provides some inspiration and guidance for doing just that.

DO YOU HAVE EXPERIENCES WITH GLOBAL MINORITY-GLOBAL MAJORITY PARTNERSHIPS TO SHARE?

For example, approaches or structures you've tested to mitigate power dynamics? What worked, and what didn't? Let us know for an upcoming blog post by sharing your thoughts via anusha@fairsharewl.org with the subject line "Transforming Power in Partnerships."

The Myth of Partnerships

Letter from the Editor

Anusha Bharadwaj

Partnerships are often described as relationships between equals. Yet the structures within which they operate rarely live up to this promise. Who controls resources, who defines risk, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate all shape the terms on which partnership becomes possible. Transforming these power dynamics therefore requires moving beyond representation towards changing the structures, practices and cultures through which power is exercised. This publication asks what that means in the everyday realities of Global Minority-Global Majority partnerships.

I also come to these questions personally. I have experienced partnerships and funding systems as a founder of a Global Majority organisation and now work within feminist spaces in the Global North. Moving between these contexts has made me acutely aware that the same relationship can look very different depending on where one sits within its structures of power. It is also why I feel particularly close to the questions the contributors explore here – not as an external observer but as someone who continues to navigate these tensions from different positions.

The three contributions in this publication each approach that question from different entry points: funding, risk and knowledge production. Together, they reveal that these are not separate technical questions. They are different expressions of the same underlying question: who gets to define the rules of the relationship and whose interests do those rules protect?

In their contribution on risk, Dr. Irene Dawa and Jennifer Eloundou challenge the assumption that risk is an objective reality to be managed. They demonstrate how actors with greater institutional power often have sophisticated mechanisms to protect themselves from financial, reputational or compliance risks, while partners closer to communities may be expected to absorb operational, political and relational uncertainty; risk is therefore often distributed unequally. The piece argues for moving beyond a model of risk management that seeks primarily to protect institutions towards one that recognises shared responsibility, mutual accountability and the unequal distribution of vulnerability. A feminist approach cannot simply ask how risk can be better managed. As the authors argue, it must ask who defines risk, who carries it, who is protected from it and whose risks remain invisible.

Shama Dossa and Muturi Kamau's analysis on knowledge production asks what happens after knowledge is gathered and begins to travel. Drawing on the authors' different experiences of knowledge-making, they engage in a dialogue with one another that ultimately challenges the idea that participation alone redistributes power. Global Majority actors may be invited into research, consultations or knowledge processes while others continue to frame the questions, interpret the evidence, and assign authority. The authors push us towards a deeper question of governance: who has the authority to define what knowledge means, where it travels and how it is used? Their exploration of care, accountability and stewardship offers a different possibility, one in which knowledge does not become another extractive resource but remains accountable to the people, relationships and contexts from which it emerged.

Finally, Eka Gejadze and Ayomide Yemi's piece on funding asks who gets to be considered fundable in the first place. It examines how supposedly neutral ideas of organisational readiness, credibility and institutional maturity can determine who is considered worthy of investment. Drawing on experiences from both philanthropy as well as building and leading a community-rooted organisation, the authors expose the gap between how organisations understand their own legitimacy and how legitimacy is externally assessed. Their central challenge is not simply that some organisations

face greater barriers to accessing funding, but that the very metrics used to determine who is 'ready', 'credible' or 'mature' are themselves shaped by particular histories, assumptions and positions of power. The deeper question is therefore not simply who receives resources, but who has the power to define 'worthiness'.

Across all three contributions, lived experience is placed in conversation with structural analysis. This matters, as it prevents 'the Global Majority' and 'the Global Minority' from being invoked as abstract concepts; instead, they are reflections grounded in the realities of people navigating funding systems, partnership expectations, institutional norms and unequal distributions of power. The co-writers do not always come to these questions from the same place, and that is precisely the point. Their different experiences and positionalities are not a complication to overcome but part of the knowledge this publication seeks to generate.

Taken together, the pieces suggest that transforming partnerships is not about making existing systems slightly more inclusive. It requires questioning the systems themselves: who sets the standards, who carries the consequences, whose knowledge counts and who has the power to change the terms of engagement.

This is also what feminist leadership asks of us. Not simply to redistribute seats at the table but to question who built the table, who decides what happens around it and who bears the cost when the terms remain unchanged. Transforming power in partnerships therefore requires more than good intentions. It requires structural change, mutual accountability and a willingness, particularly from those with greater institutional power, to relinquish control, share risk and make space for different forms of knowledge and legitimacy.

The question is not whether partnership is possible. It is what kind of partnership we are willing to build, and what we are willing to change to make it genuinely equitable.

I hope you will journey with our co-writers as they articulate, challenge and analyse these questions. More importantly, I hope this publication invites us not simply to reflect on power in partnerships but to recognise where we hold it, how we exercise it and what we are willing to change. The real value of these conversations will lie not in how widely they are read, but in what they make possible in practice.

ANUSHA BHARADWAJ

Publication editor



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anusha Bharadwaj is a feminist leader and social impact practitioner working at the intersection of gender, education, leadership and organisational change. She is Co-Executive Director of FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders and Founder & Strategic Advisor at VOICE-4, a feminist organisation creating gender-transformative safe spaces for adolescents and young women. An Ashoka Fellow, Anusha brings over two decades of experience working across India and internationally to challenge unequal structures and create more equitable approaches to leadership, knowledge and power.

Risk, Power and Partnerships: Rethinking What We Are Really Protecting

Dr. Irene Dawa and Jennifer Eloundou

Risk is often presented as a neutral, technical concept that enables organisations to make informed decisions under conditions of uncertainty. In practice, however, risk is never simply identified; it is defined, prioritised, and managed through relationships of power. Decisions about what constitutes a risk, whose risks warrant attention, and which risks are considered acceptable are not value-free. They reflect institutional priorities, shape funding relationships, and influence whose knowledge is recognised as credible. (Stoddard et al., 2019).

This raises a series of questions that are often absent from discussions of risk management. Who has the authority to define what counts as risk? Whose concerns become visible within funding and compliance systems, and whose remain overlooked? How do these definitions shape who is trusted, who receives funding, and who is expected to absorb uncertainty? These questions suggest that risk management is not only about reducing exposure to uncertainty but also about governing relationships between donors, international organisations, and local actors.

Funding decisions provide a clear illustration of these dynamics. The allocation of resources is simultaneously an allocation of trust. Organisations perceived as "low risk" are often rewarded with larger grants, longer funding cycles, and greater operational flexibility. Conversely, organisations labelled as "high risk" may face shorter funding horizons, more restrictive reporting requirements, and repeated due diligence processes. Risk assessments therefore do more than determine financial oversight: they shape who access to resources and, as a result, who has capacity to influence humanitarian responses.

Importantly, these assessments are not based solely on evidence; they are also informed by assumptions about organisational legitimacy and capability. International organisations are frequently presumed to possess stronger governance systems and lower levels of institutional risk, while local organisations are often required to demonstrate these qualities repeatedly before similar levels of trust are extended. Such assumptions persist despite growing evidence that many local organisations possess extensive contextual knowledge, long-standing accountability to affected communities, and robust governance mechanisms. In this way, perceptions of risk become closely intertwined with the production of knowledge, reflecting limited understandings of whose expertise, evidence and experience is considered legitimate and valuable.

"Perceptions of risk become closely intertwined with the production of knowledge."

Viewed through this lens, risk management becomes more than an administrative exercise. It is a mechanism through which power is exercised by determining who defines acceptable risk, how access to resources is controlled, and whose knowledge informs decisions. Understanding this relationship is essential for localisation: if the objective is to shift leadership towards national and local actors, then transforming partnerships requires more than transferring resources or responsibilities. It also requires reconsidering who has the authority to define risk, whose accountability systems are recognised, and how trust is produced within humanitarian and development cooperation.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON RISK

Feminist organisations have played an important role in challenging dominant understandings of risk. A recurring concern is that women-led organisations, grassroots groups, and local actors are often labelled as higher-risk partners despite their deep contextual knowledge and community legitimacy. Research by CARE's Call to Action Field Implementation initiative (2025) found that risks are disproportionately

emphasised when donors consider partnerships with women-led organisations, reflecting underlying gendered and racialised assumptions about trustworthiness and organisational capability.

This has important implications for power within partnerships. When local organisations are subjected to greater scrutiny than larger international actors, existing inequalities are reinforced. Resources remain concentrated within institutions that already possess influence, while organisations closest to communities struggle to access funding and decision-making spaces - limiting opportunities for locally led responses.

A feminist perspective invites a different question: what is the risk of not investing in these actors? Studies of women's rights organisations consistently demonstrate their contribution to democratic participation, human rights, and social transformation, yet evidence also suggests that reduced funding for feminist movements contributes to shrinking civic space and weakens the capacity of organisations to challenge injustice (Nolan et al., 2025). As the authors argue, movements can "fade into silence without funding." From this perspective, the greatest risk may not be funding women-led organisations. The greater risk may be failing to support them at all.

WHOSE ACCOUNTABILITY? AN INTERNATIONAL AUDITOR AND A LOCAL ORGANISATION FOUNDER REFLECT ON RISK AND TRUST

As an international auditor, Jennifer has repeatedly observed the impact of funding interruptions on local organisations. Community-based organisations are often expected to maintain activities and meet project commitments even when donor disbursements are delayed. In some cases, they pre-finance activities using their own limited reserves, assuming financial risks that were never intended to be theirs. Projects approved as multi-phase initiatives have stalled after the completion of the first phase when funding was discontinued. By that stage, local organisations had already recruited staff, entered contractual agreements, and committed operational resources based on the expectation that subsequent phases would proceed.

"A feminist perspective invites a different question: what is the risk of not investing in these actors?"

For Jennifer, these situations raise a fundamental question about accountability. While donors may frame funding interruptions as prudent portfolio management or risk mitigation, the financial losses, reputational damage, and disruption to community relationships are rarely shared equally. Instead, they are absorbed by local organisations that had little influence over the decisions that created the risk.

Irene recognises this pattern from a different vantage point. As the founder of a women-led organisation in Uganda, she has experienced how accountability requirements often shift responsibility onto local organisations in ways that are neither visible nor adequately acknowledged. Before a project even begins, organisations are expected to repeatedly demonstrate that they are trustworthy through multiple due diligence processes, each requiring staff time, documentation, and financial resources. Yet when funding decisions change, the trust demonstrated through these processes offers little protection against the consequences of interrupted partnerships.

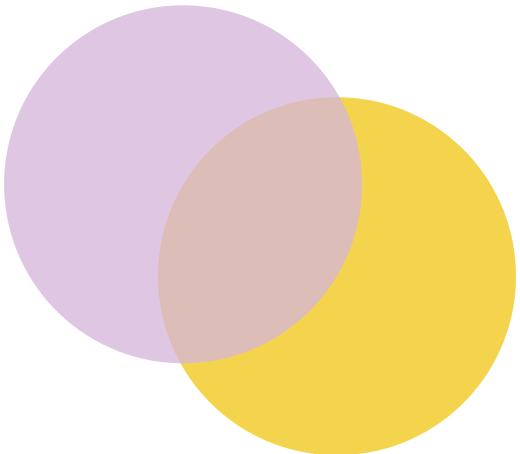
Jennifer has encountered similar contradictions during audits. Organisations may fully comply with donor requirements, maintain strong financial systems, and satisfy successive assessments, yet compliance itself does not reduce the risks created by unpredictable funding. Instead, audit findings often reveal organisations carrying unpaid commitments, retaining staff beyond available budgets or struggling to explain to communities why promised activities can no longer continue. The organisations most successful at demonstrating accountability are frequently those left absorbing the greatest uncertainty.

"The actors with the least influence over funding and compliance decisions are often those who bear the greatest financial, operational, and reputational consequences"

This shared experience also shapes how both authors understand Uganda's Quality Assurance Mechanism (QuAM). Developed by the Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA) and the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF), QuAM sought to

address one of the persistent inefficiencies in the aid system: the duplication of donor due diligence. Its premise was straightforward: if an organisation had already undergone an independent national assessment and demonstrated sound governance, transparency, and accountability, donors and INGOs should be able to recognise that certification rather than requiring repeated verification. For Irene, QuAM represented an important effort by Ugandan civil society to define and demonstrate accountability on its own terms instead of continually responding to externally imposed standards. However, despite investing in this system, local organisations are still required by many donors and INGOs to undergo additional due diligence to verify their credibility. This reflects deeper inequalities in trust and power, where local organisations bear the costs of compliance, audits, and governance while larger institutions retain control over funding and risk decisions. From a feminist perspective, this shifts accountability onto those with the fewest resources, diverting time and funding away from community impact. While Irene values QuAM for strengthening governance, transparency, and accountability to communities, its true success depends on whether donors are willing to recognise and rely on locally developed systems. For localisation to move beyond rhetoric, trust and risk must be shared more equitably, ensuring accountability mechanisms reduce rather than increase the burden on local organisations.

Together, Jennifer and Irene's experiences point to a broader reality. Whether viewed from the perspective of an auditor examining organisational systems or a local leader navigating them daily, the actors with the least influence over funding and compliance decisions are often those who bear the greatest financial, operational, and reputational consequences. Accountability, intended to strengthen partnerships, can instead reinforce unequal distributions of risk unless trust itself becomes a mutual exercise and investment.



RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM RISK TRANSFER TO RISK SHARING

This reflection began with an important question: whose risks matter, and who is expected to carry them?

Jennifer's experience as an international auditor and Irene's experience as the leader of a women-led organisation suggest that the central challenge is not simply how risk is managed, but how power is exercised through risk management itself. To transform this dynamic, our recommendations are as follows:

1. **Donors and international organisations should adopt shared accountability frameworks that recognise risk as a collective responsibility** rather than one that can be transferred contractually to local partners. These frameworks should clearly define the responsibilities of all actors, including donors, INGOs, intermediaries, and national organisations, while recognising that each actor has different capacities to anticipate, manage, and absorb risk. Shared accountability also requires recognising that funding decisions themselves create risks, and that those making these decisions should share responsibility for their consequences.
2. **Funders should explicitly share financial and reputational risks that are currently transferred to local organisations.** When funding is delayed, programmes are suspended, or strategic priorities change, local partners should not be expected to absorb the resulting costs alone. Partnership agreements should include mechanisms for compensating unavoidable financial losses, covering transition costs, and jointly managing reputational consequences when programmes are interrupted for reasons beyond the control of implementing organisations.
3. **Due diligence should become mutual rather than one-directional.** Local organisations are routinely assessed for their financial systems, governance structures, and compliance capacities, yet they rarely have opportunities to assess donors and international partners. Mutual due diligence would encourage all partners to examine issues such as funding reliability, timeliness of disbursements, decision-making transparency, communication practices, and commitments to equitable partnership. Such an approach would reinforce the principle that trust and accountability should operate in both directions.

4. **Donors and INGOs should formally recognise nationally developed accountability mechanisms, such as Uganda's Quality Assurance Mechanism (QuAM),** wherever they meet agreed standards of governance and accountability. Rather than requiring local organisations to repeatedly demonstrate their legitimacy through multiple donor-specific assessments, funders should build on existing national systems. Doing so would reduce unnecessary compliance costs, strengthen nationally owned accountability mechanisms, and demonstrate confidence in locally developed approaches to organisational governance.
5. **Finally, local and national organisations should participate as equal partners in defining, assessing, and managing risk.** Too often, compliance frameworks and funding conditions are designed without meaningful involvement from those responsible for implementing programmes on the ground. Risk assessments should therefore become collaborative processes that integrate operational realities, community perspectives, and local knowledge alongside donor requirements. This would not only improve the quality of risk management but also redistribute decision-making power within partnerships.

At a time of shrinking civic space, growing backlash against gender equality, and unprecedented humanitarian need, there is an opportunity to reimagine risk as a collective responsibility rather than an institutional liability. The future of equitable partnerships will depend not on how effectively risk is avoided, but on how courageously it is shared, how intentionally power is redistributed, and how consistently investments are made in the people and movements working on the frontlines of social change.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Jennifer Eloundou

is an international auditor specialising in international cooperation and non-governmental organisations. Committed to advancing gender equality for over eight years, she holds an academic background in Law and Political Science. She has developed extensive expertise in the civil society sector, with a particular focus on grantmaking processes and funding mechanisms in African contexts. Her work combines technical expertise in governance, accountability and financial oversight with a strong commitment to supporting civil society organisations in strengthening their effectiveness and maximising their social impact.

Still Extracting? Thought Leadership, Care and the Political Economy of Knowledge Partnerships

Shama Dossa and Muturi Kamau

Partnerships are often celebrated as spaces where knowledge is shared and co-created. There is growing recognition that the people and communities closest to social and environmental challenges hold knowledge indispensable to more effective and equitable responses — a shift reflecting years of advocacy to move beyond models in which expertise flowed in only one direction.

"What happens to knowledge once it begins to travel further than the people and relationships from which it emerged?"

This article examines knowledge production as a site where power is exercised, negotiated and reproduced within Global Majority–Global Minority partnerships. Working from two different professional contexts (Shama rooted in feminist movement building, philanthropy and learning; Muturi in community land governance, environmental justice and extractive-industry governance), we found ourselves returning to a strikingly similar question: what happens to knowledge once it begins to travel further than the people and relationships from which it emerged?

Whether knowledge emerges through movement organising, community consultations or environmental assessments, it rarely remains where it was first generated. It moves through translations, reports, funding proposals, policy processes and conferences. As it travels, so too do opportunities for influence, legitimacy and thought leadership, yet the relationships that produced the knowledge do not always travel with it. The question, then, is not only who contributes knowledge, but who governs what it becomes, whose interests it serves, and who remains accountable.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO POWER: WHO GOVERNS KNOWLEDGE?

Participation has become a defining aspiration of equitable partnerships. Communities are increasingly consulted, local organisations lead research, and knowledge is more often described as co-created than transferred. These shifts represent important progress.

Yet participation answers only one question: who is involved in producing knowledge. It says far less about who governs what that knowledge becomes. This is also where power resides: knowledge governance concerns who has authority to interpret, legitimise, circulate and ultimately benefit from knowledge as it travels.

Communities and local organisations may shape research questions, contribute lived experience and generate rich contextual knowledge. Yet decisions about translation, interpretation, publication, funding, policy influence, public narrative and thought leadership frequently remain concentrated within institutions that hold greater structural power. Authority therefore remains unequal even where participation is shared.

Knowledge production is not a neutral process. Reports, indicators and evaluations do not simply transmit community knowledge; they reconstruct it into forms legible to funders, governments and policymakers. As knowledge travels, it is progressively detached from the relationships and contexts that originally gave it meaning.

"Authority therefore remains unequal even where participation is shared."

This dynamic is especially visible in Muturi's field, community-based environmental decision-making. Communities document their territories, livelihoods and ecologies in detail, and their knowledge informs environmental assessments and investment decisions. Yet once documented, it enters institutional processes where communities exercise far less influence over how it is interpreted or used. Their knowledge travels; their authority usually does not.

CARE, RELATIONAL LABOUR, AND THE HIDDEN SUBSIDIES OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

An intersectional feminist perspective reveals another dimension of knowledge governance: whose labour makes knowledge possible. The issue is not only who receives authorship or public recognition, but whose work enables knowledge to be generated, interpreted and circulated in the first place.

Across partnerships, much of this labour remains invisible: relationship-building, translation, contextual interpretation, community accountability, trust-building, emotional labour, cultural brokerage, navigating political risk and sustaining relationships long after projects end.

This work is disproportionately carried by women, Indigenous leaders, local researchers, community organisers and movement actors closest to affected communities. Yet it is rarely recognised as intellectual labour and thought leadership. Instead, it is treated as an expected attribute of proximity rather than a form of expertise that shapes the quality and credibility of knowledge itself.

Thought leadership rests on a hidden subsidy: the care and relational labour that makes knowledge production possible while remaining invisible within budgets, authorship structures and institutional recognition. If governance determines whose knowledge travels, care determines whether that knowledge can exist at all.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN US

As our conversations evolved, we found ourselves returning to the same questions but arriving at different conclusions about where transformation must begin.

Shama is drawn towards care, reciprocity and relational transformation. From this perspective, extractive knowledge partnerships are not simply poorly designed; they are rooted in colonial knowledge hierarchies, white saviourism and enduring assumptions about whose knowledge carries authority. Governance reforms introduced without first confronting these histories risk reproducing the very power relations they seek to dismantle. Capitalism, patriarchy and neoliberal knowledge systems are adept at inhabiting new institutional arrangements while leaving old hierarchies intact. Moreover, communities themselves are not homogeneous; they too are sites where power is negotiated and contested.

Muturi begins elsewhere. Communities cannot wait for institutions to become more self-aware before authority is redistributed. Funding continues to flow. Knowledge continues to travel. Decisions continue to be made. Unless communities gain meaningful influence over how knowledge is interpreted, represented and used, relational goodwill remains contingent on institutional priorities and leadership. Structural accountability cannot depend on conditions that may never fully emerge.

"Who bears the cost of waiting is therefore not simply a practical question. It is a question of power."

Our disagreement ultimately became less about whether relationships or structures matter and more about sequencing. Can structural reform succeed without relational transformation? Can relational transformation endure without structural accountability?

Perhaps this is a false choice. People shape institutions, but institutions also shape what people can imagine and do. Global Minority organisations enter partnerships with structural advantages (control over funding, publication, policy access and institutional legitimacy) that do not disappear because individuals have good intentions. When transformation relies primarily on changing mindsets, it risks leaving those same hierarchies intact.

Who bears the cost of waiting is therefore not simply a practical question. It is a question of power.

WHEN KNOWLEDGE BECOMES VALUE

Knowledge does not simply inform decisions. It creates value. It shapes reputations, influences policy, attracts funding and establishes who is recognised as an expert. If knowledge generates value, an important governance question follows: who captures that value, and on whose terms?

Across community land governance and extractive industry contexts, communities contribute detailed knowledge about their territories, livelihoods and histories.

Elders identify sacred sites. Women describe seasonal water sources. Pastoralists map grazing routes. Fisherfolk explain ecological change. Yet something changes once this knowledge enters institutional processes. Conversations become baseline studies. Community histories become datasets. Lived experiences become technical evidence. Communities are acknowledged as contributors, but rarely remain co-governors of the knowledge they helped create.

The extractive sector offers a parallel. Raw materials often leave communities and acquire greater value elsewhere through processing, finance and global markets. Knowledge follows a similar trajectory: generated collectively, yet the recognition, legitimacy and opportunities it creates accumulate within institutions with the greatest capacity to publish, fund, interpret and amplify it.

Funding is central to this process. It does not simply resource knowledge production; it shapes whose knowledge becomes visible, credible and influential. Institutions that control grant-making shape which questions are asked, which interpretations are legitimised and which stories travel. Funding is therefore not only a financial mechanism but a mechanism of knowledge governance.

THE HIDDEN COST OF PARTICIPATION

Participation is often presented as an opportunity to be heard, influence decisions and contribute lived experience. Yet participation is also a form of labour. Communities invest time in consultations, revisit painful histories, explain complex social realities, translate local knowledge into institutional forms and remain engaged long after projects end. Local organisations sustain relationships, manage expectations and broker trust across funding cycles.

Feminist scholars have long argued that care is not simply an ethic but a form of labour. We extend that argument: participation itself is a form of labour, one that remains unequally recognised, resourced and rewarded. Although participation is frequently celebrated as evidence of inclusion, the work required to make it meaningful often falls on those with the least institutional power.

"Language of partnership can obscure the very inequalities it seeks to overcome."

This labour is inseparable from risk. Who bears the consequences of challenging an interpretation already written into a proposal or report? Who can question a funder without jeopardising future support? Local organisations and communities frequently absorb these risks (being perceived as difficult, excluded from future opportunities or having their knowledge reframed or dismissed) while institutions that benefit from that knowledge face far less exposure.

This raises a broader question about the language of partnership itself. Partnerships are frequently assumed to imply reciprocity, shared authority and mutual benefit. Yet unless labour, risk and decision-making power are more equitably distributed, the language of partnership can obscure the very inequalities it seeks to overcome.

WHEN KNOWLEDGE LEAVES HOME

The journey of knowledge is not a neutral process of dissemination. As it travels, knowledge passes through successive moments of interpretation, translation and legitimisation, each an opportunity to sustain or to weaken the relationships from which it emerged. The challenge is not that knowledge travels: communities often hope it will, wanting their experiences to inform policy, shape investment decisions and influence public debate. The question is what responsibilities accompany its journey. Recognising those responsibilities also means acknowledging that wider circulation is not always the most equitable outcome: in some contexts, stewardship may require communities to retain authority over whether, how and why particular knowledge is shared.

"Accountability frequently ends where dissemination begins."

Too often, partnerships invest considerable effort in generating knowledge but far less in sustaining relationships once it begins to circulate. Individuals and communities are rarely invited back to reflect on how their knowledge has been interpreted, how it has shaped decisions or whether it still represents their experiences. Accountability frequently ends where dissemination begins.

This is where stewardship becomes essential. Our understanding of stewardship draws on a wider body of feminist, Indigenous and environmental thought that understands responsibility as relational rather than proprietary. Rather than asking who owns knowledge, stewardship asks who remains accountable for its care, interpretation and use over time, accountable to the people, places and relationships from which it emerged. It asks not only how knowledge is generated, but how it is interpreted, challenged, revisited and governed throughout its life.

Across our respective fields, we have encountered partnerships that point towards this possibility. A research collaboration on collective care that Shama facilitated across the Asia and Pacific regions drew on Indigenous Pacific methodologies (Talanoa and the Kakala Research Framework) alongside feminist ethics of care. Participants shaped research questions, collectively interpreted emerging insights and remained involved in determining what the knowledge would become. The learning was then handed back to the movements to steward and to choose what should be publicly shared. Similarly, in extractive-industry contexts, the most meaningful engagements were not those in which communities simply contributed information, but those in which they remained involved in interpreting findings and shaping decisions over time. What distinguished these partnerships was not participation alone, but sustained shared authority.

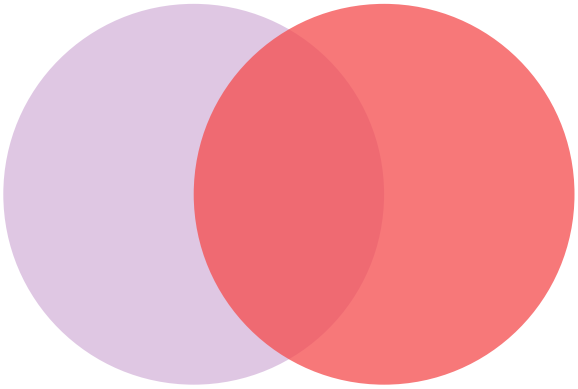
These examples did not eliminate power imbalances or escape the constraints of donor-funded research. They did, however, demonstrate that knowledge partnerships can be organised differently: around reciprocity, collective interpretation, accountability and stewardship rather than extraction alone.

> **"Knowledge partnerships can be organised differently: around reciprocity, collective interpretation, accountability and stewardship".**

This also challenges conventional understandings of research quality. Rigour has traditionally been associated with validity, reliability and objectivity. Yet Indigenous, feminist, decolonial, disability justice and critical race scholars have long argued that knowledge is always situated. Perhaps self-reflexivity is not separate from rigour, but one of its essential conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS: STEWARDSHIP, SHARED GOVERNANCE & DISTRIBUTED RISK

If equitable knowledge partnerships require stewardship rather than extraction, then participation alone is not enough. Partnerships must redistribute authority over how knowledge is interpreted, valued and governed throughout its life. This requires changes not only in practice but also in funding, accountability and institutional design.



IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- **Move from participation to shared governance.** Partnership agreements should go beyond deliverables and intellectual property to define at the outset who has authority to interpret findings, approve dissemination, shape future use and remain accountable once knowledge travels.
- **Recognise and resource care and relational labour.** Relationship-building, translation, cultural brokerage, community accountability and collective sense-making are intellectual labour, and should be budgeted and compensated rather than treated as voluntary contributions or overheads.
- **Make interpretation a shared responsibility.** Contributors should remain involved beyond data collection. Partnerships should create structured opportunities for communities and local organisations to review, interpret and validate findings before they inform publications, policy or funding. Stewardship requires continuing accountability, not one-off consultation.
- **Redistribute risk as well as resources.** Partnerships should address who bears the risks of speaking

critically, challenging dominant interpretations or disagreeing with funders. Accountability cannot exist where silence is the safest option; equitable partnerships need mechanisms that protect dissent so communities can share their perspective openly without jeopardising future support.

- **Share the value created by knowledge.** Knowledge generates publications, influence, funding and professional recognition. Partnerships should consider how these benefits are shared: through co-authorship, speaking opportunities, institutional visibility and continued investment in the organisations and communities whose knowledge made them possible.

LONGER-TERM STRUCTURAL SHIFTS

Invest in Majority World knowledge infrastructure. Equity cannot depend on individual partnerships alone. Funders should strengthen publishing platforms, research institutions, learning networks, translation and communications capacity within the Majority World, so knowledge can be interpreted, legitimised and circulated from where it originates.

Replace ownership with stewardship. Rather than focusing on intellectual ownership, partnerships should define continuing responsibilities to the people, places and relationships from which knowledge emerged, shifting attention from rights over knowledge to accountability for its journey.

Align funding with stewardship. Funding should support relationship-building, translation, collective interpretation and long-term accountability alongside technical outputs. Grant-making should require applicants to explain how governance, authorship, interpretation and benefit-sharing will be addressed before decisions are made.

FROM EXTRACTION TO RECIPROCITY

Across debates about mining, energy transitions, ocean governance and environmental justice, attention has increasingly shifted from extraction itself to questions of sovereignty, stewardship and benefit. Knowledge partnerships require a similar shift. The central question is no longer only whether people participate in producing knowledge, nor who receives credit for it. The deeper question is this: when knowledge emerges through relationships and partnerships, what responsibilities accompany its use? If we are serious about transforming power, we need to ask not only who captures the value of knowledge, but what forms of accountability, stewardship and care should govern its production in the first place.

Perhaps the question is not who owns knowledge, but how we learn to care for it. Chamoru writer and environmental justice advocate Julian Aguon (2022) argues that if we hope to withstand the forces of extraction, we must replace them with an ethos of reciprocity. That challenge extends beyond land, oceans and natural resources; it applies equally to knowledge partnerships. The relationships through which knowledge is produced do not disappear when knowledge begins to travel. Neither should our responsibilities to them.

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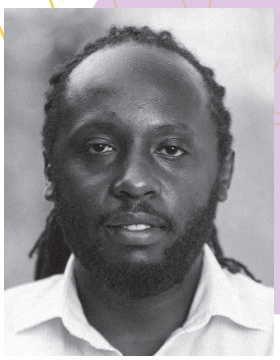

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Who Gets to Be Funded? Rethinking Legitimacy, Trust and Power in Philanthropy

Ekaterine Gejadze and Ayomide Yemi

Funding is often discussed as a question of resources: who has access to money, and who does not. But funding is also a question of power. Behind every funding decision lies a judgement about which organisations are considered credible, legitimate, and deserving of investment.

Credibility and legitimacy are a double-edged sword in the funding world. On one hand, they appear to be neutral measures of organisational capacity; a way for funders to assess who can be trusted with resources. On the other hand, the standards used to make these judgements are not created in a vacum. They are shaped by social norms, unequal access to resources and the legacy of colonial power. As a result, the same standards intended to assess readiness can actually determine who gets through the funding door at all.

This raises a fundamental question: who gets to define what a legitimate organisation looks like? And why are some organisations considered more deserving of funding than others? In funding relationships between Global Majority and Global Minority actors, these definitions matter because they influence whose work is recognised, whose knowledge is trusted and whose organisations are given the opportunity to grow.

While philanthropic actors increasingly speak about shifting power, trust-based funding and participatory approaches, funding systems continue to favour organisations that already have the resources, networks and institutional characteristics that funders value. Those without them remain outside the system, often struggling simply to gain entry. This is particularly true for emerging and grassroots organisations, which are often expected to demonstrate the capacities the funding system requires before they are given the opportunity to build them.

But how can organisations prove that they are worthy of investment if the system is unwilling to accommodate their realities, recognise their existing strengths, or give them the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do?

AYO'S PERSPECTIVE: WHEN READINESS BECOMES A BARRIER

No one understands the importance of funding quite like a founder. It is one of those things that can keep you awake at night. In business they say that customers keep the lights on; in the NGO sector, it's the funders.

As the founder of Renbi Women, a Nigerian non-profit supporting vulnerable women and children, I have come across many funding opportunities that align perfectly with our mission and the communities we serve. Yet eligibility requirements often mean we don't even get the chance to share the impact of our work.

> **"There is a fine line between managing risk and creating exclusion."**

These requirements can include minimum organisational budgets, previous grant histories, audited financial records, sophisticated communications infrastructure, and other indicators of institutional maturity. I understand why these criteria exist; they are intended to manage risk and ensure accountability. However, I am also of the opinion that there is a fine line between managing risk and creating exclusion.

Among these requirements, previous grant history is one I find most concerning. I often wonder how funders can expect emerging organisations to qualify for their grants when one of the criteria for eligibility is having already received substantial funding. This raises a fundamental question: if organisations are unable to enter the funding system in the first place, how are they expected to build the very track record that receiving funding requires? It can feel like a battle that has already been decided before it has even begun.

This challenge becomes even more apparent when I look at the organisations and founders I encounter in Nigeria.

"To use the same indicators across contexts, from Nigeria to the U.K or the U.S, may appear neutral, but actually reinforces existing inequalities."

I have met community leaders doing extraordinary work in their communities despite having limited administrative infrastructure or organisational visibility, as they prioritise their limited resources towards programme delivery. The absence of these institutional markers does not make them less committed, less accountable, or less capable of creating meaningful change. In many cases, they possess something that larger institutions cannot easily replicate: deep community trust, contextual knowledge and proximity to the communities they serve. The problem is that these strengths are often much harder to capture through conventional measures of organisational readiness.

And this is where the question of fairness and neutrality becomes important. A women-led organisation in Nigeria operates within a context shaped by currency devaluation, high inflation, fragile infrastructure, and limited access to seed capital or local philanthropic networks. To use the same indicators across contexts, from Nigeria to the U.K or the U.S, may appear neutral, but actually reinforces existing inequalities. It ignores the different starting points from which these organisations enter the funding system. Intersectional feminism reminds us that people's opportunities are shaped by how various systems of exclusion overlap; organisations are no different.

But perhaps the issue is not only that organisations operate in different contexts. We also need to ask where the standards themselves come from. Where did our ideas of organisational "readiness", "professionalism", and "institutional maturity" originate? Who decided that a particular organisational structure, level of financial infrastructure, or grant history should determine whether an organisation is trustworthy and deserves investment?

These questions matter because the way we define risk and trust can also shape who gets funded. In Global Majority contexts, requirements around documentation and verification can place a greater burden on organisations to prove their trustworthiness. Accountability matters, but we should also continuously examine whether these systems unintentionally reproduce the inequalities philanthropy seeks to address. Otherwise, what appears to be an objective assessment of organisational capacity can, in practice, become a reflection of accumulated privilege.

EKA'S PERSPECTIVE: TRUST, POWER AND THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND FUNDING DECISIONS

As someone who has been part of the philanthropic community for almost 15 years, the questions that Ayo raises are quite important. To go even further, the barriers facing emerging organisations are not only found in application processes and eligibility requirements. They are also shaped by deeper assumptions within philanthropy about trust, credibility, and who is considered capable of managing resources.

"How to trust groups that are new or are not registered officially? what if they misuse the grant money?" a donor representative asked at a funders' meeting I attended in Germany some years ago. Coming from the feminist background of grant giving, such an open declaration of mistrust concerned me - especially as this comment was made towards groups based in a restrictive human rights context. Even as organisations with unconventional structures are often celebrated as innovative and revolutionary in Global Minority contexts, there's an idea that informal groups in politically "risky" contexts are not trustworthy enough to fund.

Oftentimes, such assumptions and prejudices shape who is eligible to access grants, and are used to create funding mechanisms that are exclusive of alternative forms of movement building. "Should have a budget for three years, published accounts internationally, things like that," one activist told the Fund for Human Rights for their report Mapping Power In Philanthropy: "Institutional donor criteria [...] automatically kick out local partners." Criteria that some grantmaking programmes employ are intentionally designed to welcome the type of organisations a funder wants to give money to and exclude those that are considered inadmissible.

"The concept of organisational readiness reveals itself to be socially constructed and biased."

Shaped by colonial legacies, the concept of organisational readiness reveals itself to be socially constructed and biased; receiving funding becomes a matter of aligning with Global Minority presumptions about risk and credibility, developed without engaging or partnering with local organisations to re-shape the existing asymmetries.

While this is true for the majority of philanthropic organisations, women's and feminist funds have been trying to turn this phenomenon on its head and open doors to marginalised communities, for example by questioning the existing status quo of wealth allocation and bringing activists from the ground to make funding decisions. During my time in this sector, I saw many emerging groups receive their first grants from feminist funds.

However, there is still a long way to go. While conversations about shifting power and trust-based philanthropy have swept through the funding community in the past couple of years, challenging systems that have been dominated by Global Minority institutions and seeking to place local leaders as decision-makers, real changes in donor practices have been slow and inconsistent. As noted in *Mapping Power for Philanthropy,* "operationalizing power shifting practices have turned into mid-level practices, while leaving leadership and systems-level practices intact."

Shifting power is not just about funding, but also navigating questions around who has agency to determine organisational strategy and overall governance of funding decisions. Unless, as leaders, we look inside of our organisations and intentionally work to change the systems that were built on hierarchies, unnecessary bureaucracy and rigid grantmaking frameworks to exclude certain groups, we keep reproducing the power imbalance and normalising inequality. As Srilatha Batliwala writes in All About Power: "One of the problems we face as social justice advocates is that we think power is something that has to be changed outside – not within ourselves. We rarely reflect on our own use and abuse of power. Or we tend to think of ourselves as saviors. But to be real change makers in the world, we must begin with ourselves."

THE WIDER IMPACT ON THE SECTOR: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN NEW VOICES ARE EXCLUDED?

Together, these perspectives reveal that funding barriers are not only created through individual decisions. They are produced through systems that determine whose organisations, knowledge, and approaches are considered credible and whose expertise and lived experiences are recognised as legitimate.

When funding systems fail to account for these differences in context, access, and history, they inevitably reproduce the very global inequalities they claim to fight.

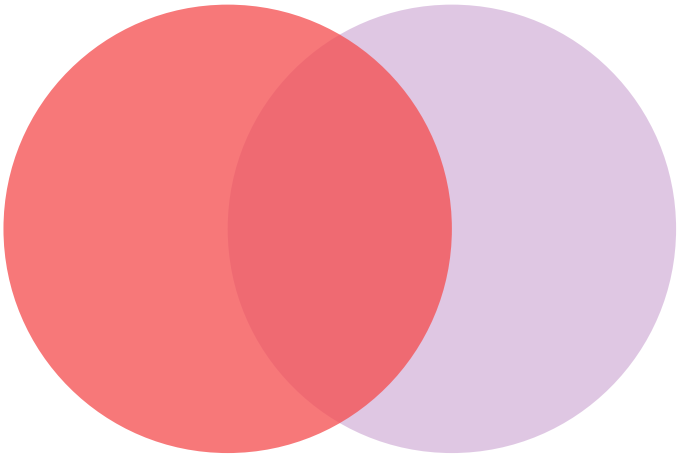
"The result is not only a question of fairness. It is also a question of effectiveness."

Over time, this can create a cycle in which resources continue to circulate among organisations that have already been recognised by the system, while newer and community-rooted organisations have to keep struggling to gain entry.

The result is not only a question of fairness. It is also a question of effectiveness. When funding repeatedly circulates around the same organisations because they are best positioned to meet existing requirements, the sector risks limiting the diversity of voices, approaches, and perspectives needed to address increasingly complex social challenges.

Importantly, these dynamics are not shaped by funders alone. They move throughout the wider funding ecosystem, including foundations, bilateral donors, intermediaries, INGOs, and local civil society organisations. Decisions made at one level influence opportunities and power at another.

This is why conversations about funding are ultimately conversations about partnerships and power.



RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT WOULD MORE EQUITABLE FUNDING LOOK LIKE?

Creating more equitable funding relationships does not require abandoning accountability. It requires expanding how we understand organisational readiness, capacity, and evidence of impact.

- **Funders:** Ask yourselves, who are we funding, who are we missing, and why? Funders should critically examine the networks and processes that shape their decisions rather than repeatedly funding the same organisations.
- **Intermediaries:** Act as a bridge between funders and communities by identifying credible emerging and grassroots organisations that may sit outside traditional funding networks.
- **INGOs and large CSOs:** Create more meaningful pathways for emerging and community-rooted organisations to participate as partners, rather than treating them primarily as implementing organisations.
- **Governments and bilateral institutions:** Create dedicated programmes and partnership pathways that give smaller and emerging organisations opportunities to access funding, build capacity, and participate in decision-making.
- **Local and grassroots organisations:** Strengthen collective voice by documenting community-led impact, building networks, sharing knowledge, and advocating collectively for more equitable funding practices.

WHO DECIDES?

Funding barriers continue to limit the ability of many emerging and grassroots organisations to sustain their work and contribute to movements for change.

If philanthropy is serious about meaningful transformation, it must move beyond asking whether organisations fit existing definitions of legitimacy and instead question whether those definitions are fair, inclusive, and fit for purpose.

Shifting power requires critically interrogating: who gets funded, who decides who is worthy of funding, and who gets to define what "worthy" looks like?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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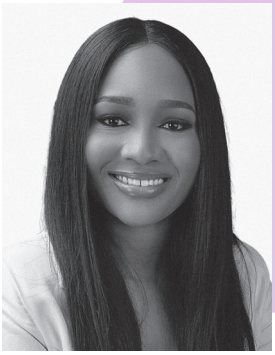
Her passion lies in advancing feminist values through inclusive leadership and collaboration, building participatory funding mechanisms, and facilitating collective learning and collective action initiatives. She is very keen on creating relationships that are built on inclusion, trust and solidarity.



Ayomide Yemi

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