



Dialogues on strengthening equitable partnerships

March–April 2023

Event report

A teal-tinted background image showing a close-up of two hands clasped together in a firm grip. One hand is wearing a watch with a dark strap and a metal link bracelet. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting with foliage.

The equitable dimensions of partnerships

Dialogue series report

Author information

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Illustrations

The illustrations in this document were created by Jorge Martin during the final dialogue of the series.

Cover image: Mystockimages

About the event

For more information about this project, visit www.iied.org/strengthening-ethical-equitable-partnerships, or contact Tracy Kajumba at tracy.kajumba@iied.org

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Executive summary

IIED acknowledges that as a research institution working to achieve social, climate, environmental and economic justice, there is a risk of perpetuating the dynamics of inequality by not acknowledging issues of power and resource differences and addressing them. This dialogue series report is part of a wider research project on [strengthening equitable partnerships](#), which aims to understand the nature of power dynamics in partnerships and define pathways for addressing them. Through this research, IIED is working to develop a shared vision of what equitable partnerships mean and embed this thinking in its internal operations and in the work with partners and use the evidence to influence and create impact in the wider sector.

This report presents the outcomes of four dialogues convened in the period of March to April 2023, which delved into the ethical dimensions of partnerships. The dialogues convened participants representing grassroots organisations, civil society organisations, research organisations and philanthropies in Africa, Asia and the Americas. The dialogues have shed light on what it means for different organisations to have an equitable partnership and what are the barriers, the enablers, the lessons learned and key recommendations for fostering equitable partnerships.

Participants concurred on envisioning an equitable partnership as one that acknowledges power imbalances, actively addresses them, values the voices, languages, interests and knowledge systems of all involved actors, ensures equitable compensation for partners' contributions, is based on transparency, reciprocity, trust, solidarity and respect, is based on shared visions of purpose, follows fair decision-making processes, understands and adapts to the local context, promotes mutual learning, shares risks fairly, and brings about mutual accountability and complementarity.

Key obstacles to achieving equitable partnerships reported by participants include limited awareness or recognition of power imbalances, disregard for cultural differences and diverse worldviews, unequal distribution of human and financial resources, insufficient transparency and mutual accountability, a lack of trust, inequitable mindsets and prejudice, top-down decision-making processes, colonial institutional histories and derived power dynamics, onerous and inflexible donor requirements, lack of investment of time for meaningful engagement, unbalanced risk management that minimises risk for the most powerful actor, and the use of language and concepts that perpetuate power dynamics. The enablers identified by the participants were clustered according to corresponding barriers and included: explicit addressing of power imbalances through processes, procedures, structures and ways of working; shifting mindsets and models of success; ensuring the direct allocation of resources to smaller organisations and local level organisations; and creating greater transparency. Other enablers were:

- Ensuring that partners comply with donor requirements and grant conditions while recognising and respecting their interests, knowledge systems and values
- Sharing decision-making power fairly, redistributing it effectively, and embedding time for reflection on power, inequality and historical context
- Opening up spaces for co-creation and remaining intentional about advancing an equitable partnership, and
- Ensuring clarity and transparency regarding grant or donor requirements that some partners may need to follow, and the implications for them.

Drawing on personal and institutional experience, the participants shared valuable lessons learned and recommendations for tackling inequality in partnerships, including the importance of standing in solidarity and being present when partners face challenges, and practical aspects, such as considering partnership life cycles from the outset and allowing sufficient time to cultivate and let equitable partnerships to grow organically.

The findings of the report will be used to inform other processes, including analysis of power dynamics, contribute to the synthesis of common principles of equitable partnerships, and inform a co-designed equitable partnership framework, which will be the final product of this research.

1. Introduction: Dialogue series on the equitable dimensions of partnerships

This report summarises contributions from participants representing different organisations in the series of dialogues organised to explore the equitable dimensions of partnerships. The dialogue series consisted of four dialogues convened in the period March to April 2023. The first dialogue, held on 25 March, convened IIED's direct partners; the second dialogue, on 5 April, convened IIED's direct partners and strategic and peer organisations in the Americas; the third dialogue, on 18 April, convened strategic and peer organisations in Africa and Asia; and the fourth and final dialogue, on 25 April, convened funding partners and participant organisations from the previous dialogues.

Each of the dialogues had two guest speakers to frame and open the discussion:

Table 1: Dialogues and speakers

Dialogue	Date	Guest speakers
1. IIED direct partners	25/03/23	- Joseph Kimani, Slum Dwellers International, Kenya - Suranjana Gupta, Huairou Commission, India
2. IIED direct partners, strategic and peer organisations in the Americas	05/04/23	- Inés López, Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI), México - Conservación Amazónica (ACEAA), Bolivia
3. Strategic and peer partners	18/04/23	- Ingrid Zuleta, Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands - Shenaaz Moosa, South South North
4. Funding partners	25/04/23	- Heather McGray, Climate Justice Resilience Fund (CJRF) - Alice Chadwick El-Ali, UKCDR

1.1. Purpose of the dialogues

The aim of the dialogues was to create spaces for the exchange of experiences between organisations with different levels of power and resources to:

- Develop a shared understanding of what it means to have equitable partnerships
- Identify barriers and enablers of equitable partnerships
- Share examples of best practices that have the potential to advance equitable partnerships, and
- Identify lessons and recommendations from the lived experiences of different organisations.

1.2. Methodology and approach

The dialogues were conducted online, and the methodology followed for the dialogues was inspired by the [three-tier dialogue approach designed by the Green Economy Coalition](#), which is designed to counteract power dynamics between groups and identify areas of common interest or resonance. For example, IIED's direct partners, which include grassroots and community-based organisations, were invited to one dialogue, while international research and strategic organisations with whom IIED does not have joint implementation projects were invited to another. Direct IIED partners, other strategic organisations and donors from the Americas were invited to another dialogue, which was facilitated in Spanish. Finally, the outputs were consolidated to be shared in the donor dialogue, to which all organisations involved in the previous dialogues were also invited. The key messages shared in this last dialogue were previously shared with all organisations participating in the dialogues in order to validate the information that would be discussed in the last dialogue with donors.

Other strategies used to balance the unequal power dynamics between organisations participating in the dialogues included establishing safe space guidelines to keep the dialogue in supported and protected spaces (breakout groups) for all those sharing their experiences. In terms of structure, all

dialogues began with presentations of progressive examples of equitable partnerships, often from grassroots organisations. For notetaking and capturing the inputs from the breakout discussion groups, rather than resorting to a reporting back format through a nominated person, participants were invited to contribute to shared Google docs and write down their ideas about the topics being discussed. This enabled increased interaction and participation and added a safe way for participants to express themselves. All participants had access to provide input and to edit the notes before and after all the dialogues, which were the basis for this report.

The dialogues involved 63 representatives from over 40 organisations in 22 countries. These included grassroots organisations, Indigenous Peoples' organisations, social movements, local and national civil society organisations (CSOs), international CSOs, local governments and funding organisations.

Direct inputs from participants were collated via shared Google documents in English, French and Spanish, and the answers were clustered based on resonance across the different dialogues.

1.3. Research questions

The prompt questions addressed in the dialogue series included the following:

1. **Defining equitable partnerships:** What does an equitable partnership between organisations with different levels of power and resources look like?
2. **Challenges of equitable partnerships:** What are the most common challenges that different organisations face in building equitable partnerships?
3. **Enablers of equitable partnerships:** How have different organisations managed to overcome these barriers and shift power dynamics?
4. **Examples of best practice:** What examples of best practice exist from equitable partnerships?
5. **Lessons and recommendations:** What lessons and recommendations can different organisations share?

2. Defining equitable partnerships

This chapter presents a summary of the points of resonance found in the four dialogues with comments on some points of difference in perspectives between different types of organisations. The points are presented in order of highest to lowest resonance. Thus, the list represents a progressive consensus between different organisations.



Our aim was to develop a vision of an equitable partnership which represents the participants' views on the essential characteristics that distinguish a *partnership* from an *equitable partnership*. That is, it identifies those attributes that add the values of *equity* and *ethics* in relationships between organisations.

In the view of the participants, **an equitable partnership:**

1. Acknowledges existing power imbalances and their historical context and actively works to reduce them

An equitable partnership implies acknowledging pre-existing hierarchies that underlie and generate unequal power dynamics among partnership members. It must recognise power dynamics in order to balance them. It involves recognising that power dynamics are not necessarily equal, and it is key to discuss this openly and honestly to unpack the issues and see how to work together as equals. At the start of a programme or relationship, it's important to put these dynamics on the table, to be able to ask questions about the balance of power and what Southern — or Majority World — leadership actually looks like. This could include discussion of the governance structures of a project or programme, as well as contract language and procedures, ideally meeting face to face.

Balancing power imbalances is a two-way process where the 'less powerful' actor has to step out of internalised oppression to claim the spaces for equal recognition, and the 'more powerful' actor needs to acknowledge the sources and impacts of the power imbalances and take action to address them.

2. Takes action to establish an equal playing field and balances power and resources

This means that all necessary action is taken to ensure there is balance of power. It requires the rotation of power spaces within the partnership itself and that all people have the chance to be in those spaces. It also means a balance of resource distribution in terms of work done and resources provided. If there are different levels of power, then moving towards equity means power sharing, which at times may feel like and involve the more powerful party ceding and therefore losing power (reducing control, autonomy, sharing positions of dependency, and so on) and having to rely more on trust and the quality of respectful relationships, rather than power imbalance, as a guarantor of successful

partnership. This also means raising voice and power through directly engaging those on the ground/marginalised groups in the design and leadership of programmes and working to remove barriers to opportunity and access to resources.

3. Values the voices, languages, interests, knowledge systems and ideas of every organisation

An equitable partnership creates an environment where each voice counts. This requires mutual respect, and appreciating what each organisation can contribute according to their capacity, leadership and governance. These are relationships based on dignity, respect and placing equal value on each partner's contribution at all stages of engagement. It also means being cognisant, considerate and respectful of differences, and being inclusive of different knowledge systems, while thinking of ways to work together towards common goals. Valuing different languages means that language is not imposed by one partner and the partnership makes efforts to accommodate languages beyond English.

4. Ensures recognition and fair compensation for partners' contributions

All partners' knowledge, time, experience and expertise are credited, invested in, built upon and remunerated. An equitable partnership deliberately assesses whether there are ways in which the relationship is extractive, for example: Are you overly taking credit for the successes of your partner? Are you making space for them to visibly claim those successes for themselves?

5. Is based on transparency, reciprocity, trust, solidarity and respect

Equitable partnerships mean mutual participation, mutual trust and respect, mutual benefit and fairness. They create spaces for new ideas, respect and trust among partners. An equitable partnership is based on reciprocity and trust. Partners are transparent with one another about successes and challenges, ask for help, share mistakes, share their respective knowledge and contribute in the ways that they can (through ideas, financial resources, connecting with their networks and so on).

Transparency means all partners have access to the same knowledge and partners are explicit about how resources will be allocated and how co-creation will be key throughout the collaboration.

6. Is based on shared vision and interests

This means taking time to appreciate and learn from one another and nurturing a culture of trust, respect and open communication. It means engaging and communicating in a language that is understood by both parties. It also means engaging through an equitable process in which parties are able to learn about each other's interests, needs and challenges.

7. Has fair decision-making processes, enabling co-creation and subsidiarity (including community leadership)

An equitable partnership has clear decision-making practices, in which there is room for co-creation and co-production, with very few instances of top-down project design and implementation. Communities are given a space to share their Indigenous and local knowledge and co-create solutions for their challenges.

An equitable partnership follows principles of subsidiarity and comparative advantage — each partner doing what they do best, and decisions being made as closely as possible to those that are affected by the problem and solution. The mindset is to be working together not imposing.

8. Understands the (local) context, is decolonial and understands cultural differences

An equitable partnership means being sensitive to structural and cultural differences, rather than assuming homogeneity among the social/organisational cultures of organisations. It means recognising and combating coloniality and respecting different cultural norms and values. It means customising partnership tools (for example, contracts, ways of working) and embracing the fact that organisations are not the same. When working with Indigenous Peoples' organisations and communities, consideration is given to varied holistic worldviews and the holistic wellbeing of the people and space/territory in which the partnership is operating (rather than taking a narrow sectoral view by just looking at the conservation of ecosystems, for example). When engaging with historically marginalised

groups, individuals and organisations adopt an approach that is power equalising, decolonial, and based on community leadership and co-design, co-inquiry and mutual learning.

9. Creates spaces for mutual learning and understanding

An equitable partnership creates space and opportunities for mutual learning, which can strengthen each partner's capacity to adapt to external change and promote a shift towards more equitable practices. Identifying and building on each other's strengths is important, as is identifying each other's capacity needs, and working out how to build on what is already there. When one partner is supporting another's institutional growth, there is no assumption that they need to grow in the same way — rather, partners support one another to develop in ways that make sense to them and work best in their context. More generally, all parties are aware of their interdependence and complementarity.

10. Shares risks fairly among partners and goes beyond short-term projects

An equitable partnership shares risks fairly among partners, especially when there are power imbalances. It goes beyond short-term projects to allow time for priorities to be co-defined and equitable partnership practices to be put in place.

11. Enables mutual accountability, and complementarity, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities

An equitable partnership involves clearly defining roles, rights and responsibilities; this is the basis for two-way accountability. In order to support ethical partnerships, accountability processes should create a space to ask who is accountable to whom — and what matters most for the success of a project, programme or relationship. Whose accountability is valued and why? For example, intermediaries should not only be accountable to funders but also to local partners and the communities they work with, and funders should also be accountable to their project partners. Accountability also means mutual transparency with respect to budgets.

Participants shared examples of organisations that have adopted characteristics of equitable partnerships; these are captured in Box 1, below.

Box 1: Examples of equitable practices

The **PARAN alliance** in northern Kenya, a membership organisation, is gradually growing into a solid platform that creates space for all of its members. They have learned that there are also power imbalances in alliances. However, working collectively means taking time to understand one another and nurture a culture of trust. That means providing space for grassroots communities to be heard and building on their ideas, knowledge and solutions for creating facilities/scaling programmes with due credibility and acknowledgement.

The **Community Land Action Now (CLAN!)** is a network of communities in Kenya addressing the issue of secure land tenure. The members of the network have a decision-making system that grants equal voting rights at the Annual General meeting. The network is a partnership of more than 58 communities, including 6 that were awarded sub-grants as co-implementers through successful applications to work with their regional constituencies to secure 50 community lands under the tenure regime.

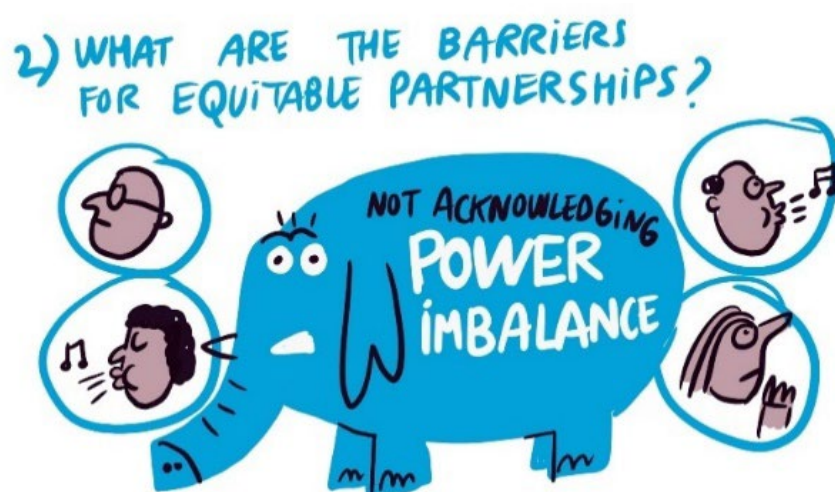
Fauna & Flora have been providing partners with funding to enable them to choose how to develop their organisations, sometimes to meet the requirements of donors. In the conservation sector, funding is usually provided to implement work but not often to support the development of organisations. This funding, supported by Arcadia, focuses on partners' own priorities for developing the organisational infrastructure that allows them to implement their work impactfully and effectively, for example strategic planning, professional development programmes, financial management, data management, or writing proposals.

Blue Ventures' Frontline Community Fund drives flexible, multi-year funding to community-based organisations on the frontlines of the ocean emergency so that they can restore marine life, safeguard livelihoods and find ways to adapt to a changing climate. The fund has three key features. For communities, it's equitable, with regional participatory governance panels deciding which organisations get support. For donors, it minimises risk, with community partner selection, vetting and development taken care of, allowing donors to provide direct support without the usual logistical and financial hurdles. For both, it's data driven, with participatory monitoring at community partner sites enabling better decision making and showing impact in real time. Launched in 2023 and backed by Blue Ventures, a world leader in community-based marine conservation, the fund aims to disburse US\$100 million by 2030.

Asociación ANDES, an Indigenous NGO based in Cusco, Peru, works to shift power to Indigenous communities through decolonising and emancipatory action-research that supports community self-determination, agency and policy influence and reaffirms Indigenous knowledge systems as the core of Sumak Causay (holistic collective wellbeing). Research is rooted in Indigenous cosmovision and defined and conducted by community researchers ('local experts') who are selected by their communities, are accountable to Indigenous authorities and are fairly paid.

3. Barriers and enablers to ethical partnerships

3.1. Barriers to ethical partnerships



What are the barriers to equitable partnerships? The responses that resonated most with the groups were:

1. Lack of awareness of power imbalances

This means that larger and more privileged organisations can be unaware of their power and the effect that this has on other groups, including partners. As a result, they may take certain things for granted and have unrealistic or unfair expectations about partners, their experiences and contributions, and may impose their priorities and perspectives. For example, for smaller organisations, even seemingly small bottlenecks can create significant barriers to work.



2. Ignoring cultural differences and diverse worldviews

A lack of appreciation of differences in work patterns, institutional timelines and processes can undermine possibilities for equitable partnerships. Within organisations, individuals may have diverse views on what an equitable partnership looks like, and how to best achieve it. Linguistic challenges play a role in this, as do the practical challenges of working across different time zones. But it is also about lack of openness to different views and ways of doing things. An inability to recognise the validity of diverse worldviews, strategies for change and approaches to shared work is an important inhibitor to partnerships in general — but in unethical partnerships, one party might also seek to impose their worldview on others. Working across long physical distances and across cultures can also make it challenging to have open, honest and clear conversations — often leading to barriers to understanding. This can create barriers to talking about power imbalances in partnerships and how to resolve them.

3. Unequal distribution of human and financial resources

A lack of financial resources generally constrains the time people have to cultivate relationships. However, it is the unequal distribution of funds among partners that constitutes a key barrier to equitable partnerships. Often, partners based in the global South are beholden to partners in the global North, who tend to control and make decisions about resource allocation on projects. Such imbalances

in resourcing also shape power dynamics between partners, and between donors and the organisations they fund, which can prevent them from speaking out, but also stifle creativity, innovation and good work.

4. Lack of transparency and mutual accountability

When organisations in the global North control budgets, there is often a lack of transparency in how resources are allocated and spent, which creates a barrier to equitable partnerships. Partners in the global South often don't have oversight of budgets, nor do they get to participate in decision making about how the funds are used — this can undermine trust. It also fosters a sense that accountability only flows one way — from the partner receiving funds to the one controlling them, but not vice versa. There can also be a lack of transparency in communicating who has done the work, and how results were achieved in a project or programme — for example, if large organisations claim credit for success without adequately acknowledging or valuing the work of their partners.

5. Lack of trust and inability to speak openly

Within organisations, workplace cultures may not be supportive of talking honestly and openly about difficult topics such as power, racism and colonialism, gender discrimination and sexism. This can be a barrier to those seeking to challenge internal unethical practices, but who may fear retaliation and job loss. A lack of trust between individuals and organisations in partnerships can also hamper open conversations about power and inequality. At the same time, factors such as race, gender and seniority play a role in whether people feel comfortable and empowered to speak openly about injustice and inequality — with those with relative privilege and power more likely to be listened to and taken seriously. More generally, there is a widespread reluctance to talk honestly and explicitly about capitalism and the way in which it shapes and constrains both the nature of the work and how we go about doing it — including partnership dynamics.

6. Inequitable mindsets and prejudice

Larger and more powerful organisations can be prejudiced towards smaller partners, and partners based in the global South, perceiving them to have less knowledge, skills and resources. This has led to certain patterns of thinking about 'capacity building' as a one-way street — with capacity assessments usually being carried out only on Southern partners. This reproduces the idea of Northern partners as 'saviours' or 'big brothers', as opposed to equal partners who themselves have weaknesses as well as strengths and have something to learn. The preference that many donors and funders exhibit for working with academic and professional experts, whose knowledge is valued over that of local knowledge-holders, is part of this. False assumptions can also be made about the institutional development of smaller organisations, whose growth may be wrongly seen to be tied to larger and more powerful partners, rather than being organic and independent.

7. Top-down decision-making processes, frameworks and approaches

The top-down predetermination of the scope of work, targets and timelines by funders can create challenges to equity for all parties in a partnership. For organisations that are directly accountable to donors, there is a tension between balancing the demands of donors and the requirements of the funding model on the one hand, and being open and flexible to the needs of partners and potentially different ways of working on the other.

The project-based nature of work in sectors such as international development, conservation and natural resource management contributes to the imposition of such frameworks. Project timelines are often imposed by funders or larger partners in such a way that smaller partners must accept them, even if they do not align with how time is structured in their organisation or the communities they live and work in. The urgency that is engendered by strict project timelines can constrain time spent on open, honest relationship building that is so central to ethical partnerships.



The notion of ‘urgency’ itself is also culturally specific, and usually it is Western ideas about time and deadlines that dominate. The discrete, time-bound nature of projects itself can undermine partnerships by directing focus towards project successes, rather than valuing the relationships that enabled those successes. The resultant project cycle, in which time is increasingly spent on proposal writing and reporting, rather than on substantive work, also contributes to this dynamic.

8. Institutional colonial histories and power dynamics

The legacies of colonialism continue to shape global governance, including global funding flows and the constitution of international organisations, which impact on the nature and dynamics of partnerships in many sectors. While the aid system may be seeking to tackle the drivers of vulnerabilities, all too often, trade and investment systems are reinforcing these drivers. Global power hierarchies in resource distribution also tend to overlap with racial hierarchies. More generally, racism and racial prejudice are a critical problem and barrier to ethical partnerships. Discomfort about or inability to talk about racism and more subtle forms of coloniality within an institutional or partnership context is a related barrier.

9. Inflexible and onerous donor requirements

A lack of flexibility on the part of funders when it comes to both proposals and reporting feed inequities among partner organisations requesting or receiving funds. The grant submission systems of funders are increasingly stringent and onerous, creating barriers for smaller organisations that shape their relationships with partners. The use of English, jargon and technical language, including in contracts, can help reproduce unequal partnership dynamics that lend more control to larger organisations, those with more capacity to hire grant-writing professionals, and those in English-speaking countries or countries with high rates of English literacy. Onerous financial, legal and reporting requirements imposed by donors can lead to inequitable sharing of risk, and uphold frameworks of upward accountability to donors, as opposed to mutual or two-way accountability. The inflexible nature of these requirements demonstrates a low appetite for risk among funders, as well as a lack of trust. It also shows a lack of understanding of the risks faced by organisations receiving funding - including their interests and needs being ignored in the context of top-down programme delivery.

10. Lack of time for meaningful engagement

As noted above, the artificial time constraints created by project cycles are a barrier to nurturing equitable partnerships. The limited time that many organisations have to respond to calls for proposals with short timeframes, coupled with short funding cycles and general pressures on fundraising, can lead to rushed decision making and a greater risk of unethical work. The short timeframes of projects can lead to a disproportionate focus on results, with partnerships being taken for granted and undervalued. The time-bound nature of projects can also lead to a lack of continuity in partnerships — for example, due to staff turnover or funders changing investment strategies. This can undermine the kind of long-term relationship building that contributes to equity.

11. Unbalanced risk sharing

Risk is often inequitably shared between funders and grantees, and between partners of different sizes (for example, in contracts). Assumptions can be made about organisational capacity and appetite for risk, without proper consultation or transparent communication. Risk assessment tools (for example, due diligence processes) are often applied only in one direction, capturing the risks for donors or intermediaries, but not for smaller organisations or communities.

12. Use of language and concepts that perpetuate power imbalances

The use of generalising language and labels such as ‘community’, ‘global North’ and ‘global South’, can have a homogenising effect, and can work to reify and uphold power imbalances rather than seeking a more nuanced perspective. Other terms, such as ‘capacity-building’ and ‘empowerment’, if used in haphazard or inappropriate ways, can perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes that undermine equity.

3.1. Enablers of ethical partnerships

The enablers that dialogue participants identified were — as much as possible — clustered according to a corresponding barrier. For example, increased transparency and clarity in roles and responsibilities aims to tackle a lack of mistrust and mutual accountability.

1. Explicitly addressing power imbalances through processes, procedures, structures and ways of working

Innovative, outside-the-box solutions could contribute to redressing specific power imbalances — for example, policies that give women greater representation in decision-making bodies. Expert facilitation could help with having uncomfortable but honest conversations about power and privilege within and between organisations. Expertise in diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI), feminist and decolonial theories could add value to facilitated conversations. Instigating a

review of institutional power dynamics and fostering a culture of empathy, collaboration, humility and respect could be another avenue to challenge power imbalances.



2. Shifting mindsets and models of success

Adopting different models for understanding and measuring success could go some way to refocusing attention on partnerships and taking stock of how partnerships factor into ideas of success. This should be part of a broader move away from stringent, often Eurocentric metrics for reporting results and outcomes — and towards alternative models of granting and funding that are more rooted in trust and equity. If a 'scarcity mindset' and rushed timelines are undermining equitable partnerships between organisations, then efforts to factor in time to reflect and nurture relationships — with other individuals, communities and organisations — could help to tackle this.

Finally, focusing on the collaborative advantage of partnerships, and how to build on or work with what is already there, should replace mindsets that fixate on what's not working — including, especially, a tendency to highlight what's not working in the global South.

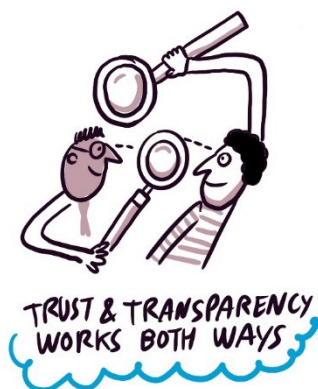


3. More direct allocation of resources and new approaches to capacity



Smaller organisations, and organisations at the local level, should be supported to access more funds directly. This could go some way towards enabling them to strengthen their organisational structures and processes, including governance and financial management, but would also allow them to learn, even if that means learning from mistakes, and help to shift power. Given the constraints on direct access to funding, larger organisations could support smaller partners through mentoring and capacity strengthening to overcome such barriers. More generally, there should be a greater focus on the equitable sharing of resources within partnerships.

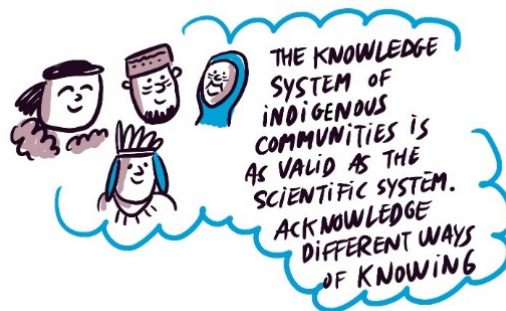
4. Greater transparency, trust and clarity



Clear communication, active listening and intentionality can all contribute to the achievement of increased transparency, recognised as a key principle of equitable partnerships. Transparency can foster increased trust and mutual respect, such that all parties feel equal in the relationship. In particular, greater transparency is needed around project budgets and the grant or donor requirements that some partners may need to comply with — and the implications for their partners. At the early stages of a partnership or a project (or both), efforts should be made to clearly agree roles and responsibilities, the individual and organisational needs of all parties, shared objectives, communication preferences, how to work together, and expectations and risks. At the end of a project, seeking clarity about how a partnership might develop beyond the project's lifetime can address ethical issues around longevity and how to engage with partners beyond project cycles.

5. Understanding and valuing partners' and communities' interests, knowledge systems and values

In order to overcome barriers to building common understanding around shared interests and values, virtual and physical spaces could be created to encourage reflection and discussion. This could go some way to making shared challenges more visible and reducing feelings of isolation in partnerships — it could also foster energy for collective action. All parties should make efforts to not make assumptions about their partners, and not take their partners for granted. Within the international development and conservation sectors, there should be greater recognition of local, community and ancestral knowledge systems, and of community governance systems, as equally valid to dominant knowledge systems and governance approaches.



6. Redistributing, devolving and sharing decision-making power

To counter the top-down imposition of frameworks, approaches and decisions, greater emphasis should be placed on co-creation and the sharing of decision-making power. Creating safe spaces for discussion, frameworks for dialogue and consultation, and regular, clear communication and engagement (in the form of meetings, workshops or webinars) can all contribute to this. Spending time not only on shifting decision-making power to communities, but also on having conversations with organisations who hold relatively more power in some way about how to cede it or redistribute it more equitably is a key means to tackle power inequalities across whole sectors. Advocating for the value and inclusion of grassroots and local practices and knowledge is also an important enabler for more equitable partnerships. Following the principles of locally led development or adaptation, including those related to devolving decision-making power to the lowest appropriate level, is another enabler.

Heather McGray, from the CJRF, provided an example at the donor dialogue of how CJRF has devolved decision making and adopted more inclusive governance by changing the composition of its Board of Directors to a board composed of activists, practitioners and Indigenous groups.



7. Embedding time to reflect on power, inequality and context



Making time within project cycles to gain a deep understanding of the context in which a partnership might be operating is important for addressing issues of ethics and equity. This includes being attuned to historical and present inequalities and power dynamics, and colonial histories — but also mapping actors and stakeholders to understand whose voices are being included and excluded and identify how partners fit into those conversations. In addition, it implies addressing racism and other forms of discrimination at an

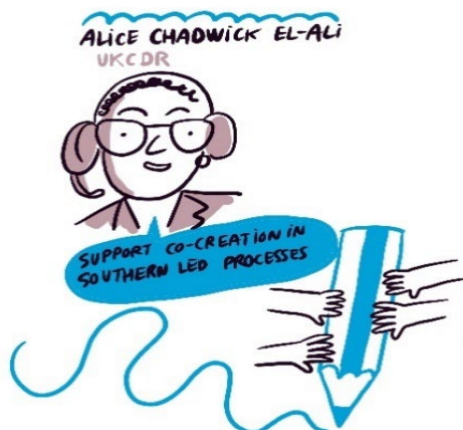
institutional level. Embedding opportunities for learning and reflection in project cycles can provide additional opportunities to ask questions about how things went, and how they could be done better.

8. Lowering barriers and increasing flexibility

Steps could be taken to lower the barriers to funding for smaller organisations to address the unequal power dynamics that come with larger partners playing the role of intermediary between funders and local partners. When it comes to applying for grants, application forms and contracts could be made available in multiple languages or translation services could be offered free and on demand. Less intensive reporting requirements, in terms of length, style and content, as well as the use of simple reporting templates, can reduce the demand on smaller organisations. Reporting could also be more flexible and incorporate innovative alternatives, for example, verbal or video-based reporting. Building in flexibility around budgets, timelines and ways of working is another enabler. Larger organisations in partnerships could, if capacity allows, support their smaller partners to access additional funding that might complement their partnership activities or enable those partners to strengthen their internal capacity in ways that they see fit. Finally, when funding must flow through one party in a partnership, it is important that that partner be as flexible as possible with the terms of sub-granting — thereby empowering partners to determine how funds are used rather than allowing funding to become a tool to restrict activities and growth.



9. Opening spaces for co-creation and moving away from language and concepts that perpetuate power asymmetries



It is important to create spaces for co-creation and be aware that language can have a powerful effect on how we think and how we act. Some terms and concepts might be reinforcing inequitable partnership practices and could be challenged — for example, the idea of ‘supporting’ a partner could be better conceptualised as ‘accompanying’. The term ‘capacity-building’ can hide certain assumptions and has been much critiqued. There are contrasting opinions about the usefulness and underlying ethics of this concept — and how we could shift both the terminology and thinking around it. The idea of ‘capacity strengthening’ implies starting with what is already there, rather than from scratch. The idea of ‘capacity sharing’ or ‘learning exchange’ is more attuned to the principle of mutuality in an equitable partnership and the need for learning to go both or multiple ways in a partnership.

10. Being intentional about managing an equitable partnership and co-defining equitable partnerships

Equitable partnerships are not created by chance. It takes being intentional about creating an equitable partnership by investing time in developing the relationship. This involves understanding what the barriers to equity are in that relationship and how to remove them. It requires mutual understanding and a long-term commitment. Building a relationship is an investment, and being intentional about managing the partnership equitably goes beyond having a memorandum of understanding or partnership agreement and requires openly discussing partners' needs, objectives, roles, expectations, risks and ways of communicating. It also involves keeping that channel of communication open and making time to talk about and review the relationship, not just the objectives of the work.



4. Identified lessons learned and best practices

The dialogue participants identified the following lessons to address inequity in partnerships:

1. Partners should stand in solidarity

It is important for organisations to understand community issues and perspectives and stand in solidarity with them to address local challenges. This supports normative values of solidarity that exist in most communities. While it might not seem as productive as other practical issues like fundraising, the expression of solidarity from partners often inspires communities, leading to more productive actions.

2. Value systems of constituent communities should be respected

There is a need to respect the intergenerational knowledge systems of communities within partnerships, and respect the relationships of communities with the landscapes within which they operate, their economic livelihoods and their cultural diversity. Partners need to value community practices, some of which strengthen communal systems (for example, food festivals, land ownership and so on) so that the approaches used to support programmes are inclusive and respect existing value systems, and do not impose external practices but build on existing norms.

3. Partnerships must be initiated on equitable terms with full transparency

Often, grassroots organisations are asked or may be forced to join partnerships for the convenience of other organisations coordinating the programmes, and this has led to the marginalisation of voices and enabled elite capture. Formalisation may or may not be on mutually agreed terms. For example, formal partnership agreements may include terms that grassroots groups do not want. Partnerships need an agreement that may include the legal issues but also has enough space to allow partners to work more informally, build trust and pursue goals and objectives that they are really committed to. In most partnerships, implementing partners follow donor requirements without understanding the different capabilities of the organisations with which they are working, some of which may be weaker. There are institutional expectations of each partner which may not be explicitly stated when initiating partnerships. There is a need for transparency to avoid hidden agendas which create conflict in the partnership. A safe environment is needed to allow partners to state and pursue their goals and explore the extent to which they can be achieved within a partnership.

4. It takes time to let partnerships grow organically and equitably, and they may not last forever

It takes time to let alliances grow organically and equitably — it may mean taking five steps forward and three backwards to create reassurances among all members and ensure that all voices are included in the journey of creating/recreating alliances. Partnerships may not last forever; they may have a life cycle: start, flourish, be active, and then end. Organisations need to keep this in mind and stay conscious of these processes, learn from them and put in place an exit strategy that is mutually agreed.

5. It is important to value partnerships and not just the projects funded

At the donor dialogue, it was noted that it is important for funders/donors to think about building partnerships beyond the individual projects they fund. This means building relationships with Southern partners to co-create research agendas — not just what gets funded but the shape of funding calls. Partnerships between Northern and Southern funding institutions/governments can be one way of achieving this shift and allowing leadership of research decision making from the South. Similarly, intermediaries should invest in building partnerships that go beyond individual projects.

6. Building equitable partnerships takes time

Building an equitable partnership does not happen overnight. It takes time for institutions to get to know each other, nurture trust and mutual respect, and identify common ground. It is also important to understand that the time requirements are different for different partners, and this needs to be

considered in the design of projects in order to avoid ‘parachute science’¹ which tends to be extractive. There is a need to shift to local research leadership.

7. Some donor requirements are disempowering and undermine reciprocity

Equal allocation of resources can be challenging due to donor requirements. Some donors are willing to increase flexibility for local partners, but institutional bureaucracy can be challenging. For example, auditors require stringent documentation, which is top-down and not favourable for local partners (for example, if receipts are not available locally). It is important for conditions to be clear from the start to allow discussions on flexibility where possible.

8. There is a need for champions in organisations

It is important to increase awareness and desire among individuals to do things differently; these champions can apply pressure in a strategic manner to push for change within organisations towards forming more equitable and ethical partnerships. We may need to demonstrate that the outcomes of equitable partnership approaches are better and more sustainable, although slower to realise, to strengthen the case for organisational change.

¹ Parachute science is an extractive practice whereby researchers — typically from highly resourced countries — design and carry out research and extract data from other regions or populations, typically low-resourced settings or countries, without appropriately recognising the local expertise.

5. Key recommendations

Several recommendations emerged from the four dialogues on how to cultivate and maintain equitable partnerships. Some recommendations are for any partnering organisation, while others are more specific to particular types of organisations, although they may still be useful for the other types. In the table below, we highlight which type of organisation they are most applicable to.

Table 2: Recommendations for different types of organisations

Recommendation	For NGOs	For research organisations	For governments	For donor organisations
1. Explicitly address power imbalances among partners and find ways of addressing them. This can include having discussions about what governance structures of a project or programme and what contract language and procedures should be in place, ideally meeting face to face. At an organisational level, develop an intentional and purposeful power-equalising culture that promotes empathy, inclusion and respect. For donors, this can include reviewing granting practices.	X	X	X	X
2. Ensure recognition and fair compensation for partners' contributions. This includes recognising community contributors to knowledge generation as co-authors and community members as co-researchers. This shifts the power from research being extractive towards mutuality, respect and reciprocity.	X	X	X	X
3. Value resources other than funds. Often, discussions about finance overpower the discussion on partnership, but when discussion is shifted to other resources such as knowledge, networks, infrastructures and know-how, among others, it helps to further understand each other's contribution and makes partnerships more collaborative.	X	X	X	X
4. Redistribute, devolve and share decision-making power. This involves creating spaces for the meaningful engagement and inclusion of historically marginalised groups whenever possible. This includes supporting grassroots organisations and communities to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives and supporting locally led approaches that have equitable governance arrangements.	X	X	X	X
5. Push for shared responsibility and accountability. If you are in a sub-granting relationship, make sure partners receive proper cost recovery. If Northern actors take 20% for overhead costs, so should the partner, and they should be able to accumulate enough to grow reserves and invest in their own resilience. All partners should strive to ensure mutual accountability and transparency.	X	X	X	X
6. Co-design programmes with local organisations. Projects should be designed by all partners, including communities, to develop context-based solutions and value diverse knowledge systems.	X	X	X	
7. Invest time and resources to nurture and manage an equitable partnership. This includes investing time in developing the relationship and maintaining open channels of communication between partners even when shared projects are over. For donors this can include providing funding to support the partnership processes and learning.	X	X	X	X
8. Be mindful of colonial legacies as well as cultural differences. Be careful about comparisons and making generalisations based on limited experiences in different regions. We have to account not just for the colonial past and settler colonialism but also for different cultural norms and how they are interpreted — this is an expression of power.	X	X	X	X

9. Shift mindsets and models of success. Move away from a competitive and scarcity mindset. This should be part of a broader move away from stringent, often Eurocentric, metrics for reporting results and outcomes — and towards alternative models of granting and funding that are more rooted in trust and equity.	X
10. Adopt or develop tools for balancing risk sharing. Adapt the tools and processes for risk assessment and risk management so that they enable a shared understanding of the risks taken by all members of the partnership and establish joint risk mitigation strategies at partnership level.	X
11. Enable flexibility in funding requirements and improve access to funds by local organisations. Provide more flexible funding to foster co-creation and community leadership and to improve access to funds by local organisations. Introduce more flexible reporting requirements and provide support for ethical partnership building.	X

Appendix 1. List of contributors to the dialogues

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This report presents the outcomes of four dialogues organised by IIED to explore the equitable dimensions of partnerships. The dialogues convened participants representing grassroots organisations, civil society organisations, research organisations and philanthropies in Africa, Asia and the Americas. The ensuing discussions shed light on what it means for different organisations to have an equitable partnership and drew together key lessons and recommendations for fostering equitable partnerships.

This report is part of a wider research project on strengthening ethical and equitable partnerships. Through this research, IIED is working to develop a shared vision for equitable partnerships, embed this thinking in its work and influence the wider sector.



Event Materials

Monitoring, evaluation and learning; Governance

Keywords:

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