

## Final Report

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# Shift the power into practice

A research project for  
ngo-federatie & 11.11.11  
in collaboration with  
Acodev



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## Abbreviations

ACODEV	Fédération Francophone et Germanophone des Associations de Coopération au Développement (French and German-speaking Federation of Development Cooperation Associations; Belgium)
ADED	Appui Au Développement De l'Enfant en Détresse (Support for the Development of Children in Distress)
AMCES	Association des œuvres Médicales privées Confessionnelles et Sociales (Association of Private Confessional and Social Medical Works)
AMI	Association Modeste et Innocent (Modest and Innocent Association)
APIL	Action pour la Promotion des Initiatives Locales (Action for the Promotion of Local Initiatives)
CAB	Comité pour l'Autopromotion à la Base (Grassroots Self-Promotion Committee)
CADEV	Caritas Développement / Niger (Caritas Development /Niger)
COSYBU/FNTT-SI	Confédération de Syndicats de Burundi / Fédération Nationale du Transport, du Social et de l'Informel (Confederation of Trade Unions of Burundi / National Federation of Transport, Social and Informal)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DGCD/DGD	Direction Générale Coopération au Développement et Aide Humanitaire, Belgique (Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, Belgium)
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
INGO	International Non Governmental Organization
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
PARCEM/Burundi	Parole et Actions pour le Réveil des Consciences et l'Évolution des Mentalités, Burundi (Words and Actions for the Awakening of Consciences and the Evolution of Mentalities, Burundi)

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Brigitte Iyeli & Lucy Morris

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## Executive summary

How is power experienced by African civil society organisations working in partnership with international NGOs, and what does ‘shifting the power’ actually mean in practice? This important, sensitive and formerly taboo subject is now starting to be discussed and debated within the international development community at long last. But given the complex power dynamics involved, many INGOs still find it challenging to understand the first-hand experiences and perspectives of their partner civil society organisations, or to know how to shift and share power in practice.

To enable reflection and action on shifting the power in international partnerships, ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 launched a Working Group on Equal Partnerships in February 2020 in Belgium. 10 Belgian INGOs joined this Working Group, and made a common commitment to leading positive change and addressing power imbalances within the Belgian INGO sector. During their discussions, the working group identified the need for a clear framework that proposes what it means to shift the power in partnerships in practice, **from the perspective of CSOs in low-income countries themselves.**

As a result, ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 in collaboration with Acodev commissioned this research which investigates the practicalities of shifting the power between Belgian INGOs and CSOs in low-income countries, in order to establish more equitable partnerships between them. The research focused on **the perspective of 10 African CSOs** who collaborate with and receive funding from Belgian INGOs, in seven African countries, which were: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania.

This research was conducted by two INTRAC researchers (Brigitte Iyeli based in DRC and Lucy Morris based in the UK) between January and May 2022, and set out to understand how these 10 African CSOs:

- Define power and at what levels or areas of interest and
- Where they see opportunities to shift the power and move from a donor-recipient relationship to a partnership of allies, which also delegates more power to target populations.

The research used a participatory and iterative approach, based on qualitative research methods and involved: a literature review; key informant interviews and focus group discussions with the ten African CSO partners and one local community in the DRC. Both the African CSOs and the three commissioning organisations (ngo-federatie, 11.11.11 and Acodev) were regularly consulted throughout the process.

INTRAC was commissioned to carry out this external study to overcome some of the complex power dynamics involved, and the commissioning organisations explicitly requested that we listen to the African CSOs and prioritise their perspective in this research, and to prevent any interference by Belgian INGOs in order to ensure their partners could speak freely. The power of simply creating a confidential space for a conversation is not to be underestimated, and for most of these African CSO partners the study provided their first ever opportunity to discuss this important topic. As a result, they are sincerely hoping that the recommendations from this research will be acted upon.

As the topic was sensitive, all key informants were granted anonymity and were assured that their contributions would be treated in confidence e.g. that their names and any other potentially identifying information (such as title and organization) would not be used, although an anonymous selection of quotes has been presented in the report.

The scope of the research was limited by the small sample size of ten African CSO partners and the fact that only their views were solicited and are expressed in this study and not those of their Belgian INGO partners, local authorities etc.

The majority of partners (90%) validated the findings and recommendations for a transfer of power for an equitable partnership. However, one of the partners chose not to validate the findings, because their experiences of working in partnership had been very positive, and the issue of 'shifting the power' wasn't relevant to them. This is because they already feel fully empowered as an organisation and are financially autonomous thanks to the contributions of their members. While their work is supplemented by training and IT and office equipment supplied by a Belgian partner organisation, they didn't desire any changes to the already positive power dynamics in their partnerships, and therefore didn't relate to the overall conclusions and recommendations from this research.

In terms of findings, all 10 of the African CSOs which were surveyed understood power in this context as '**power over**' – e.g. the decision-making authority which Belgian INGOs have over them. This can also be seen as a form of top-down, vertical relationship. Eighty percent of African CSOs acknowledged having some power during the development and implementation of projects, but added that this power is limited, because it is within a framework pre-defined by programs and budgets designed by their INGO partners.

Without contesting the existence of this vertical relationship, thirty percent of African CSOs also regarded having '**power with**' their international partners - a new, emerging paradigm, which is a more collaborative and balanced partnership and a form of horizontal relationship. Virtually all partners reported sharing 'power with' the local communities they work with, by involving them in decision-making over the development and implementation of projects. However, this could not be properly validated or fully unpacked, and 'involving communities in decisions about existing projects' could be interpreted as another form of 'power over'.

Ninety percent of the African CSOs said that they are not involved in strategic decision-making, particularly in defining programs, budgets, standards and conditions, which they feel are imposed on them and which do not take local priorities into account enough. African CSOs felt that these unequal relationships diminish their standing, negatively affect their creativity, and reduce their effectiveness. The same CSOs also say that they lack financial autonomy as they are excluded from financial decisions such as financial negotiations with Government donors, the distribution of funds by INGOs, partnership contracts and other management tools, and decisions such as the duration of funding.

However, **positive examples of collaboration do exist** and several were mentioned during this research. These included: effective institutional and organizational capacity strengthening, involvement of African CSO partners in various forms of decision-making, project budget development and receiving information about other funding opportunities.

Seventy percent of African CSOs regarded a potential shift in power as a form of emancipation. It would provide them with greater autonomy and flexibility and would give them greater credibility in the eyes of local communities and governments. Local realities and needs would be taken into account more and, as a result, the community would be able to take greater ownership of projects.

Participating African CSOs recognised that there will be obstacles in the way of shifting power: the perpetuation of a colonial mentality was identified by half of key informants and the continuing dependence on Belgian INGO funding was acknowledged by forty percent of key informants. They also recognised INGOs' financial dependence on institutional funding and associated donor compliance requirements. They also recognised that **both parties** need to have the willingness to change and to actively engage in dialogue.

African CSOs recognise that shifting the power will be a process, and a proposal for how it should be undertaken has emerged from this research. This includes three main elements:

- Bilateral discussions between contracted partners (Belgian INGOs-African CSOs) (See Recommendations 2 & 5 below)
- Collective consultations between Belgian INGOs-African CSOs (See Recommendations 7 – 10 below)
- The creation of national frameworks to govern international partnerships between INGOs and African CSOs, which would re-define and regulate the partnership between INGOs and African CSOs. (See Recommendation 6 below)

### Recommendations

The following recommendations have come from and been validated by the majority of African CSOs:

#### **For Belgian INGOs**

The recommendations are to:

1. Recognize the link between the issue of “shifting power” and effective and equitable partnership approaches, and actively confirm their willingness to work on this issue further with their African CSO partners e.g. by mainstreaming equitable partnership practices within partnership policies, systems and processes and investing in staff development;
2. Commit to discussing the issues raised in this research report with their African CSO partners within the next three months, and identify concrete ways to actively involve them more in strategic and financial decision-making;
3. Compliment this study with a follow-on study on the transfer of power in practice that takes the opinions of local communities and public authorities into account, where feasible.

#### **For African CSOs**

The recommendations are to:

4. Conscientiously develop and build their '*ubupfura*'<sup>1</sup> and empower themselves to weigh in on issues that affect their partnership with their INGO partners.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a word which one of the African CSO partners used to mean “a set of moral, technical and ethical values”

5. Commit to raising the issues that emerge in this research report in exchanges with their INGO partners within the next three months, and ask to participate in decision-making on strategies, budgets etc.
6. At country level, advocate for a national framework that would govern international partnerships between INGOs and CSOs to promote more equitable partnerships, which would re-define and regulate the relationships between different actors. This country specific framework could include national laws, policies or institutions to guide international partnerships. Activities could include: consultation meetings to define and agree on local priorities; promoting local recruitment with equitable local/international salary scales and specifying a fair division of administrative costs between INGOs and CSOs for example.

### ***To Belgian INGOs and African CSOs***

7. The recommendations are for all parties to build a renewed foundation for their partnerships through a series of joint reflection activities with clear Terms of Reference, such as:
  - *CSO-CSO workshops*: These workshops, which would bring together CSO actors from low-income countries, could take place at national or regional level. These would be spaces and opportunities for CSOs to discuss and deepen their understanding of the issue given it's a very new conversation for many organisations. The workshops would enable them to harmonize their points of view on the way forward in cooperating with international NGOs and would equip them with key advocacy points and common arguments for discussion with international actors.
  - *Belgian INGO-African CSO workshops*: These workshops would bring together different INGOs and African CSOs and enable participants to build on this research by further considering the issue of how to shift power in practice, exchange experiences and achievements. The workshops should result in a new common road map or action plan with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each organisation. The workshops may also result in decisions to endorse existing charters of good conduct to guide partnerships between INGOs and local/national CSOs such as 'The Charter for Change' and the 'Shift the Power manifesto', or to create new or modified ones.
  - *Joint training capacity strengthening workshops* for INGOs and African CSOs on partnership and other topics.
8. Create and maintain a permanent framework for exchange and consultation on equitable partnership in the following ways:
  - Explore how to stimulate reflection on this topic within existing frameworks such as the NGO secretariat in Burkina, clusters, the INGO forum, etc.
  - Integrate the bilateral discussions between Belgian INGOs and African CSO partners relating to their partnerships into existing frameworks such as working meetings, mutual visits, evaluations, regular meetings, etc. or create specific meetings to discuss this issue.
  - Establish a "Transfer of Power" Technical Committee to bring together representatives of CSOs and INGOs to facilitate discussions based on agreed timetables or whenever the need arises. This would include facilitating



workshops between Belgian INGO-African CSO indicated in recommendation number 7.

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# Introduction

## About this report

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a study commissioned by ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 in collaboration with Acodev, which investigates the practicalities of shifting the power in partnerships between Belgian INGOs and CSOs in low-income countries, in order to establish more equitable partnerships between them. The research focused on the perspective of 10 African CSOs who collaborate with and receive funding from Belgian INGOs, in seven African countries, which were: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania.

The introduction presents the background to this study, its purpose, scope, methodology and limitations. This is followed by a literature review which presents a selection of key points from recent discussions of this subject.

The key findings section gives a definition of power from the point of view of African CSOs, it identifies problematic aspects of partnerships such as power imbalances, and it discusses how power could be transferred in order to create more balanced relationships. The report also presents some good practices identified by African CSOs from positive relationships they have had with INGOs.

Finally, the report presents conclusions and recommendations both for those commissioning the study and their African CSO partners.

Throughout the report we refer to two types of partners: Belgian INGOs and African CSOs – the latter category also including NGOs and trade unions. This is for the sake of brevity only – we fully recognise that, in reality, we are not dealing with two monoliths and that there is plenty of diversity within each category. The aim of using this terminology is to clarify that the scope of this research is limited to partners from Sahel & Great Lakes regions, and we cannot make any generalizations about 'North'-'South' relationships more generally and that this language is in itself loaded.

## Background to the study

How is power experienced by African civil society organisations working in partnership with international NGOs, and what does 'shifting the power' actually mean in practice? This important, sensitive and formerly taboo subject is now starting to be discussed and debated within the international development community at long last, and the #ShiftThePower movement has emerged over the past decade as a result of dissatisfaction with top-down structures that fail to deliver. The #BlackLivesMatter movement which started in 2013 and subsequent protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 increased awareness of institutional racism in many sectors including the international development sector, and created even more urgency to discuss and address the uses and misuses of power within international development work. But given the complex power dynamics involved, many INGOs still find it challenging to understand the first-hand experiences and perspectives of their partner civil society organisations, or to know how to shift and share power in practice.

Even when most Western INGOs have moved away from sending expatriates and are now working with CSOs partners around the world, forms of domination remain and the distribution of power in partnerships with CSOs in low-income countries is often considered very unequal. This concern led several Belgian INGOs to ask the following questions: **"Can we really talk about partnerships, if Western CSOs control the framework, the organisation and, most importantly, the financial resources in these relationships?" "Does this not subjugate CSOs in low-income countries to the choices of Western CSOs and the demands of their back donors?"**

To enable further reflection, discussion and action on shifting the power in international partnerships, ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 launched a [Working Group on Equal Partnerships](#) in February 2020.

- Ngo-federatie is the professional federation of Dutch-speaking Belgian development INGOs and has approximately 45 members.
- 11.11.11 is the coalition of NGOs, unions, movements and various solidarity groups in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders) and combines the efforts of approximately 60 organizations and 20,000 volunteers.
- Acodev is the federation of 74 French-speaking, bilingual and German-speaking Belgian civil society organizations active in development cooperation.

10 Belgian INGOs joined this Working Group, and made a common commitment to leading positive change and addressing power imbalances within the Belgian INGO sector. This group acknowledged that in order to address global challenges and achieve sustainable results, it is crucial to develop true equal and balanced partnerships. They recognised that this requires a power shift, and to move from the classic donor-recipient story to a paradigm of collaboration and allyship. One of their common concerns was: "How to ensure that CSOs in low-income countries acquire true ownership over processes, resources and results?"

The working group identified the need for a clear framework that proposes what it means to shift the power in partnerships in practice, **from the perspective of CSOs in low-income countries themselves**, and as a result, ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 in collaboration with Acodev commissioned this research.

### Understanding power and system change

Power can be understood as *"the ability to create or resist change seen in individuals and groups and institutions"*, and there are a number of commonly understood dimensions of power - e.g.:

- *power over* – 'the power of the strong over the weak, including the power to exclude others'
- *power to* – 'the capability to decide actions and carry them out: knowledge, skills, tools'
- *power with* – 'collective power, through organisation, solidarity and joint action'
- *power within* – 'personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion or other aspects of identity, which influences the thoughts and actions that appear legitimate or acceptable'.<sup>2</sup>

There are also common 'faces' of power, e.g.:

- *visible* power – 'observable decision-making mechanisms';
- *hidden* power – 'shaping or influencing the political agenda behind the scenes,' or

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<sup>2</sup> Oxfam, Quick Guide to Power Analysis, 2014.

- *invisible power* - ‘norms and beliefs, socialisation, ideology’.<sup>3</sup>

We will refer to these forms of power later in this report when we analyse African CSO partners’ perceptions of the power imbalance between themselves and INGOs.

Within the international development sector, organisations are increasingly talking about ‘equitable’ partnerships as opposed to ‘equal’ partnerships. This acknowledges the implicit power dynamics involved in international partnerships, and that the starting point for many people and organisations is different so treating everyone ‘equally’ is actually unfair.

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*‘Systems are often hard to change because power, relationships, and resources are locked together in a reinforcing pattern according to the current purpose. Systems start to change when this pattern is disrupted and opened up. Then a new configuration can emerge.’ (Green Paper on system innovation)*

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However, another way of understanding the focus of the research is that it is fundamentally about ‘system change’ within the wider context of international development cooperation. One commonly referred to set of ‘conditions for systems change’<sup>4</sup> is that there needs to be:

- **Structural explicit change** (policies, practices and resource flows)
- **Semi-explicit change** (relationships & connections, power dynamics)
- **Transformative, implicit change** (mental models)

Another complimentary perspective on how systems change comes from the Rockwool Foundation’s ‘Building better systems – a green paper on system innovation’ by C. Leadbeater and J. Winhall, that describes how system shifts are unlocked with four ‘keys’:

1. **Purpose** – changing what a system is for
2. **Power** – shifting who has the power to determine how resources flow, what takes priority, who matters and what is counted as a good outcome
3. **Resources** – a fundamental change in how resources flow within a system
4. **Relationships** – changes in the way different actors within a system are brought together with new patterns of relationships emerging.

In chapter 2. *Shifting the power in practice – What needs to change* in this report, we relate what partners have said needs to change to these four keys.

### **Research purpose, scope and primary users**

The purpose of the study was to gather the views of 10 local partners on power within their partnerships with the Belgian INGOs and the associated ethical dilemmas, as well as their suggestions on how to change power relations so that they have more equitable partnerships.

It was carried out between January and May 2022 in 7 African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, DRC, Niger, Rwanda and Tanzania – the countries where the African CSO partners are based.

It is hoped that this study will help guide the discussions and actions of its primary users, namely ngo-federatie, 11.11.11, ACODEV and the Working Group on Equitable Partnerships. It is also

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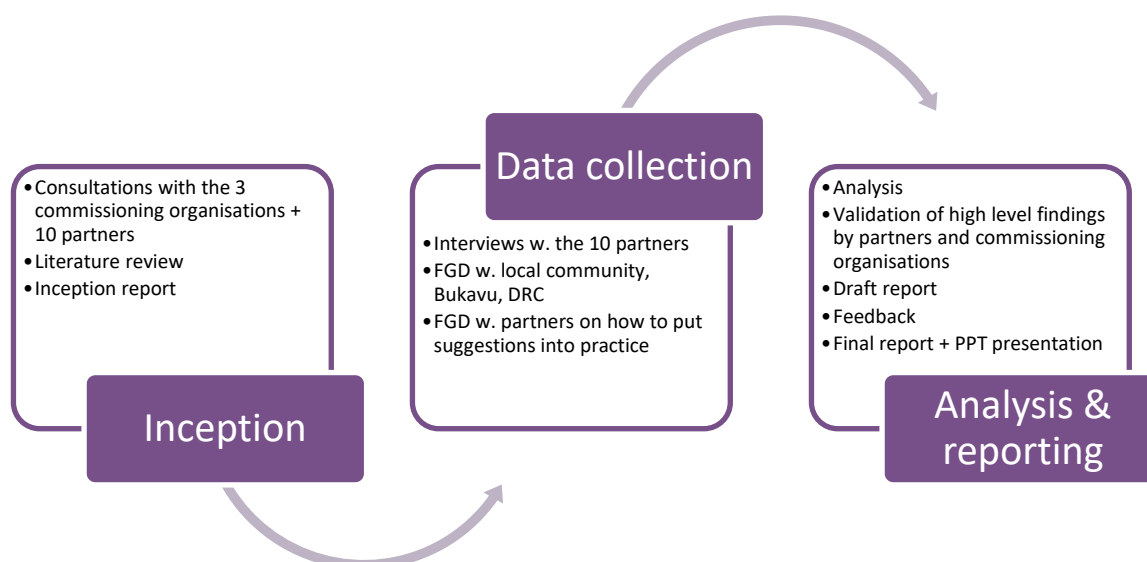
<sup>3</sup> As above.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, U. “Systems Change is a Noun and a Verb” 2019

hoped that it will be used to inform the individual reflections and discussions between Belgian INGOs and African CSO partners.

# Methodology

**Table 1: Overview of the methodology**



For the issue of power imbalances within international development partnerships to be properly understood and realistically addressed, the views of those affected by this imbalance need to be included. As Maha Shuayb notes: **'If localisation is to be more than just buzzwords and symbolic gestures, it must include people from the global South from the conception of an idea to its implementation - whether it is research, programme intervention or policy development'**<sup>5</sup> For this reason, this study has used a participatory, active and iterative methodological approach, and actively engaged the African CSOs in the framing of the research questions and process, as well as shaping the conclusions and recommendations.

Attention was also paid to the composition and dynamics within the research team. The lead researcher was from the Democratic Republic of the Congo with support from a researcher from the UK, and the research team regularly reflected on and discussed how they were working together in 'partnership' during this study, and ensured there was transparency on the research budget for example.

## Inception

During this phase, the researchers had access to a recent publication called *"Decolonise Now! Practical Inspiration Guide for Equitable International Collaboration"* which was developed by ngo-federatie and 11.11.11 based on discussions within the working group Decolonization (only Belgian NGOs) and interviews with Belgian experts on decolonization. They also spoke to the research coordinator for the guide.

A review of selected literature on this topic was also conducted. (See below: Literature review: key points on the need to 'shift the power'.)

<sup>5</sup> Shuayb, M. 2022 "Localisation Only Pays Lips Service to Fixing Aid's Colonial Legacy" "New Humanitarian"

Two separate consultations were held to help refine the research methodology and give an opportunity to both the African CSO partners and the commissioning organisations to make suggestions. These were integrated into the research framework as much as possible and informed the preparation of the interview and FGD guides. The final research framework is shown in Annex 2 - Consolidated interview and FGD guide. Concerns raised during these consultations and the way they were addressed are shown in Annex 3.

These consultations were followed by the drafting of an Inception Report.

### **Data collection**

Data was collected through a combination of interviews, FGDs and email exchanges.

Taking an iterative approach and, in order to make the process more participatory and inclusive, the African CSOs and the commissioning organisations were consulted throughout. During the data production phase, the researchers returned more than once to the African CSO partners to collect clarifications, additions or comments.

Given that the participants in this study were bilingual, care was taken to ensure that both English and French versions of all texts were produced at all times, so that all key informants had the same opportunity to contribute to the research.

The progress of the research was also shared with them along the way. This helped establish trust in the research and it allowed for the findings to be validated by the majority of stakeholders before completing this report – a process that, hopefully, sets the basis for a more equitable partnerships in the future.

### Semi-structured interviews

Based on the interview guide validated by both sets of stakeholders, semi-structured interviews lasting 90-120 minutes per session were held with each of the 10 partners. Eight interviews were held remotely and two were conducted face-to-face in Bukavu, DRC, the country where one of the researchers is based.

### In person visit

One in-person visit was carried out in Bukavu, DRC to conduct face-to-face interviews with 2 African CSOs: ADED and CAB, as well as one FGD with a local community working with CAB to discuss their perception of power and the way it is shared with their local partner.

### **Data analysis**

During the data analysis, the researchers identified the key themes that emerged, with their proportionate frequency, and produced preliminary and, following consultations with the stakeholders, final conclusions and recommendations.

Four consultations were then held with the stakeholders. The preliminary findings were first shared with the African CSO partners for validation and, after incorporating their feedback, the revised text was shared with the commissioning organisations for their comment. These two consultations generated additional questions to probe certain issues in more depth, which required a follow-up FGD with the African CSO partners. Their feedback was taken into consideration when formulating the conclusions and recommendations, and the updated findings were then shared with the partners for validation. The draft report was also sent to partners and commissioning organisations for review and comment.

### Profile of respondents

The key informants came from the 10 African CSO partners and a local community from Bukavu, DRC (6 members). They are all listed under Sources – Interviews and FGDs in Annex 1.

Most of the CSO key informants were senior staff. In terms of gender, there were 2 women and 11 men. This imbalance relates to the fact that very few women hold positions of responsibility in these organisations. The table below shows the names and countries of the ten partner organisations.

**Table 2: List of African CSO Partners**

Name of CSO partner organisation	Country
1. ADED	DRC
2. AMCES	Benin
3. AMI	Rwanda
4. APIL	Burkina Faso
5. CAB	DRC
6. CADEV	Niger
7. COSYBU/FNTT-SI Burundi	Burundi
8. MVIWAARUSHA	Tanzania
9. PARCEM	Burundi
10. Pro-Femmes	Rwanda

All the key informants from the local community collaborated with CAB. They contributed to the research through a focus group discussion (FGD) in Bukavu, which included 3 women and 3 men. They came from the local development committees of the villages of Nyatende, Nyangezi, Mugogo, Mulangane, Karhale and Mvolaka located in the province of South Kivu in the DRC.

### Confidentiality and key informant anonymity

As this topic is sensitive and there was a risk that some partnerships could potentially be jeopardised if international partners didn't agree with their partners' opinions, the researchers opted for the policy of anonymity to avoid compromising the identity of the research participants. To do this, they anonymised all quotations and references to views expressed by key informants. Interview and FGD notes and recordings have also all been treated in confidence.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this research that are important to highlight, which include:

- A relatively small sample size of African CSOs were involved in the research, compared to the total number of partners Belgian INGOs have. The commissioners made a deliberate choice to focus on 10 African CSOs for two reasons. Firstly because of the available budget which did not cover a large sample; and secondly because this research represents just the first step in opening up dialogue between Belgian INGOs and African CSOs. However, the conclusions should lay the groundwork for future exchanges about equitable partnerships between the Belgian and African partners involved in the study, as



well as potential complimentary studies. 'How' the research was carried out was important particularly given the research topic of 'shifting power,' and having a relatively small number of research participants enabled the research process to be highly participatory, and enabled the researchers to go into more depth than if they had surveyed large numbers of African CSOs on a more superficial level. It's important to note that the findings are specific to this group of African CSOs and not necessarily representative of the views and experiences of all CSO partners.

- Only a very small sample of community members was surveyed. The decision to talk to community members was a direct response to a request made by African CSO partners to include them within the research frame too. Although there wasn't sufficient budget to talk to a statistically significant number of community members in multiple countries, the focus group discussion which took place provided some additional research insights and a starting point for further research.
- The views expressed in this study represent only these African CSOs partners and not their Belgian INGO counterparts, or local authorities. It is not a balanced view, but it is an important one, nonetheless. It was a deliberate choice in order to give space to hear the perspective of African CSOs without potential interference from their INGO partners. It was the first time that many of these organisations had had the chance to discuss this sensitive topic.
- Opportunities for face-to-face data collection were limited due to Covid-19 and the geographical distances involved and available budget. This meant that face-to-face research was limited to two interviews with key informants in DRC as well as a focus group discussion with representatives from a community there.
- The researchers encountered difficulties in reaching some of the African CSO partners through emails and telephone calls initially. This was overcome through a combination of determination, persistence and using WhatsApp instead, and as a result it was possible to engage all 10 partners actively in the process.
- As the topic of 'shifting the power' in partnerships was new for many of the research participants, it wasn't always possible to go into the level of depth or to generate as many tangible action points as expected. But the recommendations should serve as a starting point for further discussion and hopefully the start of a longer process of change.
- One of the African CSO partners chose not to validate the findings, because their experiences of working in partnership had been very positive, and the issue of 'shifting the power' wasn't relevant to them. This is because they already feel fully empowered as an organisation and are financially autonomous thanks to the contributions of their members. While their work is supplemented by training and IT and office equipment supplied by a Belgian partner organisation, they didn't desire any changes to the already positive power dynamics in their partnerships, and therefore didn't relate to the overall conclusions and recommendations from this research. This means that the findings have been validated by 90% but not 100% of the participating African CSOs.

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## Literature review

This research investigated the extent to which there were any existing debates, research, audio-visual material or literature on the topic of ‘shifting the power’ in international development partnerships in the 7 countries where the ten African CSOs were based (e.g. Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania). The key informants weren’t aware of any such discussions or publications at country level, although one African CSO representative mentioned a discussion about ‘equitable partnerships’ having taken place in their country, but only at the political level. The African CSOs partnered with 11.11.11 members confirmed that they had begun to reflect on this issue through a recent series of workshops on decolonising development carried out by 11.11.11. in DRC, Burundi and Rwanda, following the publication of the Inspiration Guide<sup>6</sup>. However, their perception was that there had been little progress with any concrete actions to date.

The dearth of country-level information on ‘shifting the power’ amongst research participants is probably an indication of how new this discussion may be within the countries involved in this research, and that the debates, if they exist at all, are not well known at least amongst the African CSO participants. While these debates are now becoming more mainstream in the Anglophone development community, our findings may also indicate that this discussion is only just beginning in the Francophone development community.

However, our desk review of online sources revealed publications by a number of African authors about this issue, as well as evidence of active international discussions and a substantial body of literature and resources on the topic of ‘Shifting the Power’ which continues to grow. We also found a significant body of resources including literature, pod-casts and initiatives such as time-bound innovation labs about connected issues including but not limited to: ‘decolonising development’, ‘localisation’, ‘the future of development cooperation and international aid architecture’, ‘the future of philanthropy and funding models’, ‘risk management and due diligence’, ‘feminist development’, ‘anti-racism in aid’, ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ and ‘community engagement and accountability’.

Here is a selection of the most relevant initiatives to ‘shifting the power’ between international NGOs and civil society partners:

1. Shift the Power website and accompanying manifesto: <https://shiftthepower.org/>
2. Re-inventing INGOs (RINGO) lab: <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/> including a recent “Fostering Equitable North-South Civil Society Partnerships: Voices from the South” study
3. Partos ‘Shift the Power Lab’: <https://www.partos.nl/werkgroep/shift-the-power-lab-2-0/> plus associated papers
4. BOND ‘Moving from Intention to Practice’ blog: <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2022/01/its-time-to-move-from-intention-to-practice-and-embrace-equitable-partnerships>
5. Time to Decolonise Aid report: <https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/>

Here, we also present a few particularly relevant points made by selected authors:

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<sup>6</sup> 11.11.11 & ngo-federatie, 2021. “Decolonise Now ! Practical Inspiration Guide for Equitable International Development Cooperation”

### Key points on the need to shift the power

In the research report commissioned by Oxfam, Tara R. et al (2015)<sup>7</sup> recognise that local actors are best placed to identify and respond to people's particular needs. However, they receive little funding and are seen as subcontractors who implement INGOs plans. This poses a problem of ownership and creates frustrations that impacts on the effectiveness of interventions. In order to resolve these tensions, these researchers recommend increased direct funding to local actors, more balanced partnerships, capacity building of local partners and the relocation of preparedness and response centres that place responsibility, decision-making and power at national and local levels.

In his article on the identity of international and local NGOs in 2021, Olivier Consolo (2021)<sup>8</sup> argues that NGOs in low and middle income countries are losing their identity by working within the frameworks of values, management, practices and governance provided by Western NGOs that promote international agendas. Despite their expansion around the world, it is noted that partnerships between Western NGOs and NGOs in low and middle income countries still reflect old patterns of relationships where flows of resources and money define power and relationships between partners. Olivier raises the paradox for NGOs in low and middle income countries who criticise this situation and dependency, but live with it. In conclusion, Olivier recommends asking how diversity and respect for other frames of reference and experiences can be encouraged in development cooperation and international solidarity. And to get NGOs to become aware of and engage in the promotion of local traditional democratic values.

While acknowledging examples of successful collaboration, Liliane Bitong Ambassa<sup>9</sup> points out that many local and national NGO actors are not satisfied with their partnerships with international institutions. Insufficient resources, limited access to information, complex procedures, very low salaries, almost no overheads in the budgets of local and national NGOs, lack of decision-making reinforce the feeling of inequality among local NGOs. For the author, strengthening the links between national NGOs and their international counterparts requires greater transparency, honesty, respect for each other's contributions; recognition of comparative advantages and mandates; identification of mutual benefits in interventions; and the courage and willingness of all actors to question themselves and to give up power and resources.

The preparatory global consultations and debates held at the World Summit on Humanitarian Action in Geneva (2015)<sup>10</sup> exposed the tension that already existed between INGOs and national NGOs. While some thought that the subject of debate on the reform of the humanitarian system is about money, principles and institutional change, many of the organisations involved boil it down to 'power'. In this regard, local organisations blamed the imbalance of the partnership in terms of INGO power grab, colonial politics in decision-making, localisation as a symbol of the neo-colonialist approach, sub-contracting instead of partnership, lack of overheads for CSOs, racism, etc. At the end of the debate, which raised fundamental questions about the role of international NGOs and bordered on an existential crisis, the conclusion of the meetings that brought together more than 23,000 people, is categorical: the transfer of power to local actors is not only necessary, but imperative.

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<sup>7</sup>Gingerich, T. R. and Cohen M. J., 2015, "Turning the humanitarian system on its head: saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors", Oxfam International

<sup>8</sup> Consolo, O. 2021, "L'identité des ONG internationales et locales en 2021 : entre tabous et nouveaux défis", Humanitarian Review

<sup>9</sup> Bitong Ambassa, L. 2016, "Improving Relationships Between National and International NGOs in Africa", UN Chronicle

<sup>10</sup> Wall, I. 2015, "Le ton monte entre les ONG locales et internationales", The New Humanitarian.

Although these analyses inform this study on the need to shift the power, very few concretely say **how** power could be transferred. We hope that this study makes a contribution towards answering this important question.

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## Findings

The findings presented here are based on interviews and FGDs with the ten African CSO partners and one FGD with a local community, and prioritises their voices and experiences. The findings are structured as follows: how power is understood and experienced by African CSO partners and what shifting of power would involve in theory and in practice.

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### Perceptions of power and how it is experienced by African CSO partners

#### Meaning of power in international partnerships: mostly a top-down, vertical form of relationship

All of the respondents understood power as the decision-making capacity related to strategic issues and budgets, as well as standards, tools and conditions that INGOs introduce in their partnerships with African CSOs – ‘power over’. This is a form of top-down, vertical relationship whereby INGOs are effectively imposing their priorities onto African CSOs. As one key informant put it: *“INGOs draw up strategies and programs at home without consulting us and come to seek an implementer”*.

Without contesting the existence of this vertical relationship, a minority of respondents (30%) also perceive power in a **new, emerging** paradigm: as a collaboration and a more balanced relationship, moving towards ‘power with’ their international partners and a more horizontal relationship. (See next section.)

#### Effective enjoyment of power by African CSOs is limited and pre-defined by their Belgian INGO partners

The majority of African CSO partners (80%) acknowledged having some power during the development and implementation of projects, but added that this power is limited, because it is within a framework pre-defined by programs and budgets designed by their INGO partners. According to 90% of African CSO partners, the power imbalance between themselves and their INGO partners is expressed in multiple ways of exercising ‘visible’ power: unilateral decision-making, the imposition of programs, budgets, standards and tools, projects without room for errors or failure, and funding according to donors’ requirements rather than community needs. Partners also identified a sense of superiority coupled with a lack of respect or consideration for local values on the part of INGOs - a form of ‘invisible’ power. There is also a sense that their exclusion from the decision-making in Belgium and other Western countries reduces them to mere implementers.

Seizing the space to openly discuss how they felt, several African CSO representatives expressed feelings of inequality in the following terms:

**"Partnership is synonymous with subordination ... all areas are chosen by INGOs."**

**"It is no longer a question of discussing them, but of accepting them as such and carrying out activities in line with their strategic plan."**

**"NGOs from the North come to help, teach, instruct the weak, the poor, the immature, the incompetent."**

Strategic decisions, financial decisions and the political choices made in the INGO partners' are the types of decisions that African CSO partners say they are not involved in.

The majority of partners (90%) said they are not involved in **strategic decision-making**, particularly in defining programs, budgets, standards and certain conditions imposed on them. They also said that they are subject to preconceived guidelines that do not take into account local priorities enough. Some of the views expressed by African CSO partners to describe how INGOs exercise 'power over' them in terms of this type of decision-making were:

**"The strategic plan is drawn up without our participation, whereas we must bring relevance to it and the partner remains with its strategic plan designed unilaterally. This exclusion is not beneficial."**

**"It is the results of Burundi/DRC/Benin/Tanzania... that we must achieve and not the results of the partner, of Belgium or elsewhere."**

**"I play the prostitute, because each time I have to adapt to the change that the partner imposes in his program".**

**"With this policy of impositions and hidden agendas, NGOs in the North are going against the principle of Do No Harm."**

**"Partners often tell us: we are waiting for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to decide on the funds to be allocated to international cooperation. This sentence shows geopolitics and geostrategy in action."**

**"The visibility of INGOs and donors places them above the state and local NGOs. It weakens both our states and ourselves, the CSOs of the South."**

The same partners also say that they lack **financial autonomy**. The financial decisions that they are not part of include the entire financial negotiation procedure with donors, the distribution of funds, partnership contracts and other management tools, and the duration of funding.

Comments by the partners that express this sense include the following:

**"At the level of budgetary decisions, they are the only master on board."**

**"The determination of financial envelopes, the development of frameworks and financing contracts are made without our participation."**

**"Northern NGOs have the power to suspend funding or declare a project ineligible after you have been made to work night and day for its production."**

**"We never participate in decision-making on finances. They don't tell you how much you have or you will have. They let you work and then ask you to reduce the budget you propose. This frustrates us at the same time as it discredits us with the populations with whom we prepared the budget."**

**"Northern partners are asking for huge results with reduced budgets."**

**"The problem is not only the reduction in budget, but all the logic that neglects societal anchoring, including in particular the loss of credibility of NGOs in the South, the loss of partnership, because INGOs can resort to their neighbour (another NGO), the failure to take into account the indicators of local actors, the expectations of beneficiaries..."**

**“The exclusivity of INGOs in negotiations with donors, including funds from cooperation ministries and the exclusivity in the mechanisms and allocations of humanitarian funds, are not acceptable.”**

**“Development is becoming a market where international partners do what they want, whereas it should be a market where the product sells well and everyone benefits from it.”**

One African CSO partner suggested: **“Let financial relations not be a weapon of power domination e.g. You bring the money, you have to comply with the internal and national process. Finances must be a tool in the partnership. ...”**.

There was also a perception among several African CSO partners that their partnership with INGOs can be affected by that INGO’s position vis-à-vis their country’s politics – a ‘hidden’ power. As one partner put it: **“If they don’t agree with our government or in the event of a falling out with them, they block the funding. These types of decisions impact negatively the work and life of communities. Our cries give the impression that we are alarmists.”**

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*"How long will we continue to be accompanied by INGOs from the North? Why more than 10, 15, 20 years later, do we continue to be accompanied?" (CSO partner)*

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Writer Olivier Consolo<sup>11</sup> wants to understand how and why the CSOs in low and middle income countries accommodate themselves within a situation they criticize. Comments by some African CSO partners shed some light to this, where they have stated that they have relinquished certain powers, because they need the money. **“We alienate ourselves by accepting their imposition linked to the demands of donors. For lack of anything better, we lose our identity and the power to say ‘no’ to this or that”**. This shows a sense of inferiority and weakness on the part of African CSO actors who adapt to things that do not suit them.

#### **A minority of partners see their partnerships with INGOs as more equitable than others**

There was one African CSO partner who sees their relationship with their INGO counterparts as a highly constructive partnership, because it relies on institutional support and capacity strengthening. Another partner stated that they are beginning to experience some flexibility and mutual accountability on the part of their Belgian partners and have a secure, useful and long-term partnership. These suggest a process of moving towards more equitable partnerships and enjoying ‘power with’ their international partners.

Finally, in contrast to others, one African CSO partner stated that they are not dependent on external funding and do not have to deal with issues of lack of decision-making powers, and there seems to be a correlation between the equitable nature of this relationship and the relatively low dependency on their INGO partner. This organisation doesn’t identify with being either a CSO or an NGO, and relies on the financial contributions of its members. Their INGO partner only supports with their capacity strengthening rather than with project funds. This is something they see as a win-win relationship: the Belgian partner’s reputation benefits from having helped this

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<sup>11</sup> As above.

organisation to grow while the African organisation has benefited from the capacity strengthening. **“We have a historical link with Belgium. It is a source of pride for the Belgian organizations to have contributed to the development of our organisation,”** declared this partner.

### Positive examples of equitable partnerships

Partners recognise that not all Belgian INGOs have the same approach. **Positive examples of collaboration do exist** and several were mentioned during this research. Effective institutional and organizational capacity strengthening, African CSO involvement in budget development and INGOs sharing information about other funding opportunities with African CSO partners were some of the examples mentioned. Additionally, some Belgian INGOs have involved their African CSO partners in various forms of decision-making. Here are some examples:

- Two partners said that they have grown and can currently operate at a national level thanks to the capacity strengthening supported by their INGO partner.
- Increased involvement in their INGO partner’s decision-making cited by an African CSO partner: **“A partner involved us in the development of its strategic plan with other countries in Africa, Latin America and Europe. This allowed us to agree on common expectations and a common vision in favour of our interventions”**.
- One African CSO partner spoke of a Belgian INGO that is flexible in managing their partnership and favours an approach of dialogue and consultation. For example, this allowed the African CSO to insert a budget line for an extraordinary activity due to a change in the local context.
- Another African CSO partner welcomed its INGO partner’s transparency in financial management. Their INGO partner tells them what funding they use and involves them in the distribution of the funds. The African CSO also consolidates their financial report in collaboration with their INGO partner and sends it to the auditor directly without the mediation of the INGO partner.
- Another Belgian INGO partner intervenes only to support capacity strengthening and, according to the African CSO, everything is done together and by mutual agreement.
- There was also acknowledgement of solidarity by another partner: **“I appreciate the closeness of the relationship that exists between my partner and me. I welcome his involvement in my release when I was imprisoned”**.
- In their new experience of partnering with a Dutch INGO, an African CSO welcomed the responsibility they had in defining the approaches to their interventions while maintaining collaboration. **“This experience is fulfilling, because my partner considers me at my fair value,”** they said.
- According to one African CSO, one of their Belgian INGO partners involved them in their planning and budgeting processes, and took their experience into consideration.
- One international ‘family’ of organisations with offices in Belgium and Germany amongst others was also cited as an example of an INGO taking an equitable approach to partnership. **“They relied on us with their trust and support at all stages of the project. We have rhythms to respect and there is flexibility.”**

African CSO partners reflected on what factors may have contributed to having more equitable partnerships and described certain moments when they felt that their partnerships had that quality:

- When partners approach their relationship in a spirit of transparency and openness.
- When a partnership has been long lasting and it has also had to overcome a crisis or difficult time or celebrate some project successes – **“we had time to get to know each other, to bicker, to discuss, to tell each other the truth and to harmonize certain points of view.”**
- When the leaders of the organisations involved have a management style conducive to equitable collaboration.
- When an INGO realises that certain procedures and tools that they require African CSO partners to follow are obsolete.

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*“My Dutch partner organized an annual meeting with his donors. He invited me to present not only the context in which we are working, the results achieved, but also the prospects for the future as well as the challenges. The contributing factor, in my opinion, remains **the openness / willingness of the international partner** to work differently, **transparency** in how resources will be used and distributed. I know about the funds granted, and the part that remains with the partner and the part that arrives for the work in country.»*

(African CSO partner)

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### **‘Power with’ - African CSO partners say that they share power with the local population**

Virtually all African CSO partners reported involving local communities in decision-making over the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects. **“You don’t make someone happy without listening to them,”** said one CSO representative. The establishment of focal points, local development committees or opinion leaders were given as examples of this. Other aspects of power sharing which were described were signing MoUs or contracts with local communities that define respective responsibilities, and clarify how the CSO partner will be accountable to the local population. Community capacity strengthening also featured in the power-sharing grid. **“The training of focal points, and opinion leaders chosen within the community to be interlocutors, facilitates communication,”** commented one key informant.

Thirty percent of partners acknowledged that they share decision-making powers with the local communities they work with, but, that the criteria for selecting these communities are also defined by INGO partners.

This study consulted with only one local community which was collaborating with an African CSO partner in Bukavu, DRC. Although this sample is too small to be in any way representative, it is worth mentioning here that this community corroborated the view expressed above by African CSOs. They stated that they were involved in all of the CSO partners’ project management processes, including design, implementation and the monitoring of activities, but remarked on the insufficiency of funding they receive.

This issue need to be unpacked further, to confirm the extent to which power is genuinely shared ‘with’ communities as opposed to simply an unconscious form of ‘power over’.



## How this power imbalance affects African CSO partners

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*“Icyo unkoreye ntakogizemo uruhare kiba kindwaya” Translated from one of the partners’ African language<sup>12</sup> this means: “what you do without me is against me”.*

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African CSO partners have argued that these unequal relationships diminish the standing of CSOs and negatively affect their creativity and capacity for innovation. Seventy percent of them also argued that partnerships create frustrations and tensions. Another view expressed by 30% of partners was that lack of willingness to cooperate on the part of African CSOs can lead to funding cuts, which in turn can undermine the prospect of securing future partnerships with other INGOs. Reductions in funding can also create administrative problems such as not being able to keep pace with salary increases required by local legislation as well as demotivation and a slowdown in activities. Direct contact between African CSOs and Belgian donors is limited, as CSOs have to go through intermediaries – the INGOs. This power imbalance also opens African CSOs up to criticism from their own Governments e.g. that with foreign funding the CSOs **“want to impose things on the country. You are a Western/colonial intelligence agency,”** some partners were told.

Ninety percent of partners regarded this imbalance as a cause of demotivation of CSOs, which in turn can cause them to slow down the implementation of their project activities or reduce their scope and potential effectiveness. They argue also that it can limit their relevance, as projects may not be able to adapt to their changing context. **“We don’t evolve, we go round in circles,”** said one partner.

The regionalization or nationalization of INGO offices in partners’ countries was specifically criticised, because it gives Belgian INGOs an additional privilege of being able to act as both a local/national NGO as well as an INGO and it risks replacing local NGOs.

## What lies at the root of this power imbalance?

From African CSOs partners perspective, there are a number of answers to this question:

- The survival of a colonial mentality (70% of CSO partners): the specter of colonization perpetuates prejudices and stereotypes, which still hang over these partnerships. Related to this is the weakness of some African governments, which continue to expect external support many years after independence.
- Another related point is that the prevailing image of African countries as poor and in need of foreign aid in the Western media perpetuates the notion of Western superiority vis-à-vis Africans.
- Continuing dependence on Belgian INGO funding (40% of CSO partners)
- The funding environment in INGO countries (50% of CSO partners): including reliance on donor funds particularly from Government Humanitarian and Development Assistance

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<sup>12</sup> NB: we’ve chosen to use the term ‘African’ here rather than to name the specific country of origin to protect the identity of the research participant that used it.

Departments and particularly funds for crisis situations and their associated donor requirements.

- The lack of trust between African CSOs and Belgian INGOs that exists due to previous negative experiences.
- The perception among some actors in African countries that "*Muzungu* [i.e. white person] *is perfect.*"

### An alternative language?

There were suggestions among partners not to use terms such as 'North' and 'South', 'development aid', or 'beneficiaries,' but there was no consensus on what should replace them. Most partners, however, thought that this is an issue that should be debated in a partnership workshop.

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## Shifting the power in practice

### The vision: what partnerships should look like when power has shifted

The vision is that 'shifting power' would result in more equitable, balanced and transparent partnerships with better dialogue between partners and more consensual decision-making. As one partner said: **"We also need to know what Northern INGOs gain from this partnership."** A power shift would clarify the respective roles of Belgian INGOs and African CSOs and make consultation and learning between them more explicitly mutual, recognising that African CSO actors also have skills that they can transfer to their INGO counterparts.

### CSOs activities and relationships with local communities when power has shifted

The majority of African CSO partners (70%) regarded a potential power shift as a form of emancipation. It would provide them with greater autonomy and flexibility and would give them greater credibility in the eyes of local communities and governments. They envisaged that in such a situation their financial capacities would develop and that they would be more involved in decision-making on their funding and its eventual allocation. It would be a move away from the logic of 'allocated funds' towards taking local priorities into account, which would better support sustainable change. A power shift could also increase staff motivation, their performance and give them a sense of ownership of what their organisations do. It could also perhaps open the door to new funding opportunities. Ninety percent of partners felt that shifting the power could bring greater relevance and effectiveness to their interventions as well as pave the way for new opportunities.

Local realities and needs would be taken into account more and, as a result, the community would be able to take greater ownership of projects. This would be visible through increased levels of participation by the local population and increased trust in CSOs, and even INGOs. Relationships between local communities and CSOs could be more 'organised' through contracts or MoUs, which define respective responsibilities.

The transfer of power will also change the perception of our actions by Local Authorities insofar as they will see them anchored and underpinned by local priorities and strong local community ownership.

### What needs to change for power to shift

Partners identified a series of behaviours, policies as well as perceptions/ mentalities that they believe need to change, in order for power to shift in their relationship with INGOs and donors. Applying the theoretical framework of the “*Green Paper on system innovation*”<sup>13</sup> by the Rockwool Foundation (see Introduction – Understanding power and system change), with its four ‘keys’ for unlocking system change, these are:

#### Purpose – changing what a system is for

Generally, our research found that there was overall alignment between INGOs and African CSOs on the concept and purpose of development/international cooperation. So there are no specific changes to recommend under this heading.

#### Power – shifting who has the power to determine how resources flow, what takes priority, who matters and what is counted as a good outcome

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our research found that this key is critical in unlocking change, and the vast majority of key informants (90%) agreed that African CSOs should be part of decision-making in relation to issues that concern them. This means that African CSOs should become more involved in decision-making on strategies, programs, budgets and approaches to the work funded by INGOs and their donors.

#### Resources – a fundamental change in how resources flow within a system

Again, this key is an important tool in unlocking change and some African CSOs (30%) believe that CSOs should be empowered through the transfer of resources, as well as institutional support and capacity strengthening. ‘Mutual learning and growing together’ was identified by two out of ten African CSO partners as an important area for future investment. However, this should also be accompanied by a recognition that “*NGOs of the South have evolved a lot and that the skills are found both in the South and in the North*”.

#### Relationships – changes in the way different actors within a system are brought together with new patterns of relationships emerging

Perhaps more than any other, this key is critical to unlocking systems change.

Some key informants (20%) called for greater transparency on the part of INGOs on how they manage their own finances, as the use and distribution of INGO funds remains a taboo subject to this day in some cases.

The Partnership Policies of Belgian INGOs could be revised so that there is more equitable sharing of responsibilities in partnerships. This could include drawing up contracts with consensus clauses, where contract clauses would be agreed by both INGO and CSO and not imposed by INGOs. Specifically, some African CSO partners requested that the contracts be elaborated together and take into account some clauses suggested by African CSO partners as well as clauses from the INGOs, which both parties would then agree to (by consensus).

The creation of national frameworks to govern international partnerships between INGOs and CSOs, which would re-define and regulate the partnership between INGOs and local CSOs was also suggested. One partner saw a role for government in this: “**Our government needs to define**

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<sup>13</sup> Leadbeater, C. and Winhall, J., 2020, “Building better systems – a green paper on system innovation”

**the frameworks and oversight mechanisms for INGO action: how do they [INGOs] fund and build the capacity of Southern actors and how do local NGOs deliver quality INGO-funded programs?”**

This country specific framework could include national laws, policies or institutions to guide international partnerships. Activities could include: consultation meetings to define and agree on local priorities; promoting local recruitment with equitable local/international salary scales and specifying a fair division of administrative costs between INGOs and CSOs for example.

But new relationships are only possible if there are accompanying shifts in mindsets and perceptions of roles, responsibilities and capabilities on all sides.

A large majority of key informants (80%) argued that the prevailing colonial mentality needs to change including a perceived superiority by Western INGOs and prejudices about the competence of CSOs in low income countries. INGOs need to consider and respect local values. And on the side of CSOs, one suggestion was that they should build their ‘*ubupfura*’, a concept one of the African interviewees used to mean ‘a set of moral, technical and ethical values’, in order to be able to weigh in on these partnerships.

Adopting alternative terms instead of ‘aid’ to avoid creating a sense of inferiority in relation to ‘the helped’; and shifting INGO perceptions of African CSOs from ‘aided actors’ to genuine ‘partners’ and “doing with” by involving them in decision-making will have more impact and be more empowering than “doing for” them.

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*“It is a question of defining the roles and responsibilities that each party must respect, because INGOs should also benefit from our knowledge and local power.» (CSO partner)*

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#### **Possible barriers to change**

African CSO partner recognise that there will be important obstacles in the way to shifting power: the perpetuation of a **colonial mentality** was identified by half of key informants and the continuing **dependence on INGO funding** was acknowledged by 40% of key informants. They also recognised INGO’s financial dependence on institutional funding and associated donor compliance requirements. Finally, they also recognised that both parties need to be **willing to change and accept engaging in further dialogue**.

To overcome the negative power dynamics that result from dependence on INGO funding, a framework for exchange, dialogue, consultation and reflection on partnership bringing together INGOs and African CSOs/NGOs is becoming essential (80%). Advocacy towards donors was also identified as a need.

#### **African CSO partners’ proposed concrete actions – from ‘power over’ to ‘power with’**

Partners recognise that shifting the power will be a process. A proposal for how it should be undertaken has emerged from this research. This includes three main elements:

- Bilateral discussions between contracted partners (Belgian INGOs-African CSOs) capitalizing on existing spaces of consultation or scheduling meetings specifically to discuss this issue (See Recommendations 2 & 5 below)

- The creation of national frameworks to govern international partnerships between INGOs and CSOs, which would re-define and regulate the partnership between INGOs and local CSOs.
  - A series of steps for collective consultations between Belgian INGOs and African CSOs on what changes they want to make and how to bring them about: (See Recommendations 7 – 10 below)
- A significant majority of partners (90%) suggested that to build a new foundation of partnership the first step would be to organise several reflection activities within a long-term framework for exchange and consultation.
  - However, as a prerequisite, both parties should agree on the need to do so. These activities could be a combination of face to face and online.
  - African CSOs, convening at national and regional level, could discuss and deepen their thinking around this issue - first amongst themselves and then with INGO partners. The discussions among African CSOs could be preparatory for the discussions with INGO partners and help make local actors aware of the issues, allow them to harmonize their points of view and provide them with arguments for their discussions with INGOs.
  - At the same time, a technical committee, which would bring together representatives of African CSOs and INGOs could be established to prepare the joint (INGO-African CSO) reflection on *Shifting the Power* in a workshop and to agree on a framework for this discussion. Facilitation of this committee could alternate between INGO and African CSO partners or be conducted by an external person.
  - The INGO-African CSO workshops could allow partners to interrogate the question of power in partnerships, exchange experiences and acknowledge achievements. They could be accompanied by a roadmap, action plan or a charter of good conduct for INGO-African partnerships.
  - This process should also include mutual capacity strengthening and joint training on issues such as 'partnership management' and it should be guided by jointly developed Terms of Reference and the allocation of necessary resources.
  - Partners considered what might be the role for existing national fora of CSO/ NGO consultation in their countries, such as the NGO secretariat in Burkina, clusters, the National Council of Development NGOs in the DRC, INGO forums, etc. A problem is that these structures are not currently interested in this topic, so partners would need to think about how to stimulate this reflection within these bodies.

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## Conclusions

This study makes a contribution to the debate on shifting the power in international development partnerships by:

- Starting the conversation between these 10 African CSOs and their Belgian INGO partners on this sensitive topic;
- Giving 10 African CSO partners the opportunity to describe a new vision of what a more equitable and balanced collaboration between INGOs and CSOs in Africa could look like, and
- Suggesting a possible path for change.

Whilst acknowledging that some partnerships are more equitable than others, this research also allowed a small sample of African CSOs partners to express themselves openly, without prejudice, and to identify aspects of international partnerships that they appreciated but also that shocked them, and that at times caused them to feel humiliated, alienated and subjected to powers beyond their control.

These conclusions and the recommendations that follow refer to the reflections of 90% of the partners who are aligned on the need to shift the power to improve their partnership with their Belgian partners, and in no way relates to the organization which does not feel concerned by this issue.

Partners recognise that not all INGOs have the same approach. Positive examples of collaboration do exist and several were mentioned during this research. Effective institutional and organizational capacity strengthening, CSO involvement in budget development and INGOs sharing information on other funding opportunities with African CSO partners were some of the examples mentioned.

*The limited involvement of African CSOs in strategic and financial decision-making about INGO-funded projects* means that decisions on thematic priorities, the areas of intervention, the selection of the target population, the duration and approaches of interventions, the standards and the tools are determined by INGO agendas and this sometimes happens with disregard to local values. To overturn this state of affairs, African CSO partners ask to be involved in decision-making, in order to really base interventions on local priorities and values and to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of interventions.

*Policies and procedures* are usually imported and imposed on African CSOs who often find them difficult to understand and adapt to. For example, certain INGO policies, contracts, reporting frameworks and standards. Worse still, these documents are often written in languages which are different to those of the African CSO partners and translation can be a problem. The partners ask that project management and partnership approaches be implemented in a more consensual manner.

*A lack of transparency about INGO's own financial management* as information on how they use donor funds is not shared with African CSO partners - a taboo subject to this day. African CSO partners suggest that they be consulted in the distribution of shared resources.

*A sense of Western superiority, prejudices and denigrating stereotypes*, characterized by the phrase 'the hand that gives is always above the one that receives', makes African CSOs feel that their rights are not respected and that they are reduced to the rank of performers, beneficiaries,

and 'the aided'. A sense of suspicion, police-style control and INGO demands are all denigrating aspects of working in partnership that African CSO partners have named. On this point, African CSO partners recommend reviewing the language of projects and partnerships and ask of their INGO partners to treat them with respect and exercise a fairer distribution of funding.

During the inception phase, we had established that this research would be considered a success if:

1. There is clarity on how power and 'shifting the power' are experienced by a selection of CSOs in low-income countries.
2. There is more insight and understanding of these perspectives by Belgian INGOs and donors.
3. This research is used by both Belgian INGOs and African CSOs as a foundation for discussion, and to create alignment on which aspects of their partnerships are problematic in terms of power balance.
4. Belgian INGOs and African CSOs have some guidance for how to address this issue in practice.
5. Belgian and African CSOs are inspired and excited to act.

This study has provided the clarity identified under #1 above and the guidance described under #4. We recognise that this is only the beginning of a long process and we hope that, following the final report, it will also fulfil the criteria identified under # 2, 3 and 5.

We wish all sides the courage and conviction to continue with this important and sometimes uncomfortable conversation, which are key to making changes in practice in their partnerships.

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## Recommendations for empowerment in practice

Among the recommendations that emerged from this study, there are those that are addressed individually to INGOs and to African CSOs; and there are some that apply to both partners. While some of these recommendations are short-term, others are for the medium to long term.

The following recommendations have come from and been validated by the majority of African CSOs:

### ***For Belgian INGOs***

The recommendations are to:

1. Recognize the link between the issue of “shifting power” and effective and equitable partnership approaches, and actively confirm their willingness to work on this issue further with their African CSO partners e.g. by mainstreaming equitable partnership practices within partnership policies, systems and processes and investing in staff development;
2. Commit to discussing the issues raised in this research report with their African CSO partners within the next three months, and identify concrete ways to actively involve them more in strategic and financial decision-making;
3. Compliment this study with a follow-on study on the transfer of power in practice that takes the opinions of local communities and public authorities into account, where feasible.

### ***For African CSOs***

The recommendations are to:

4. Conscientiously develop and build their '*ubupfura*'<sup>14</sup> and empower themselves to weigh in on issues that affect their partnership with their INGO partners;
5. Commit to raising the issues that emerge in this research report in exchanges with their INGO partners within the next three months, and ask to participate in decision-making on strategies, budgets etc.
6. At country level, advocate for a national framework that would govern international partnerships between INGOs and CSOs to promote more equitable partnerships, which would re-define and regulate the relationships between different actors. This country specific framework could include national laws, policies or institutions to guide international partnerships. Activities could include: consultation meetings to define and agree on local priorities; promoting local recruitment with equitable local/international salary scales and specifying a fair division of administrative costs between INGOs and CSOs for example.

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<sup>14</sup> This is a word which one of the African CSO partners used to mean “a set of moral, technical and ethical values”



### ***For Belgian INGOs and African CSOs***

7. The recommendations are for all parties to build a renewed foundation for their partnerships through a series of joint reflection activities with clear ToRs, such as:
  - *CSO-CSO workshops*: These workshops, which would bring together CSO actors from low-income countries, could take place at national or regional level. These would be spaces and opportunities for CSOs to discuss and deepen their understanding of the issue given it's a very new conversation for many organisations. The workshops would enable them to harmonize their points of view on the way forward in cooperating with international NGOs and would equip them with key advocacy points and common arguments for discussion with international actors.
  - *Belgian INGO-African CSO workshops*: These workshops would bring together different INGOs and African CSOs and enable participants to build on this research by further considering the issue of how to shift power in practice, exchange experiences and achievements. The workshops should result in a new common road map or action plan with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each organisation. The workshops may also result in decisions to endorse existing charters of good conduct to guide partnerships between INGOs and local/ national CSOs such as '[The Charter for Change](#)' or '[Shift the Power manifesto](#)', or to create new or modified ones.
  - *Joint training capacity strengthening workshops* for INGOs and African CSOs on partnership and other topics.
8. Create and maintain a permanent framework for exchange and consultation on equitable partnership in the following ways:
  - Explore how to stimulate reflection on this topic within existing frameworks such as the NGO secretariat in Burkina, clusters, the INGO forum, etc.
  - Integrate the bilateral discussions between Belgian INGOs and African CSO partners relating to their partnerships into existing frameworks such as working meetings, mutual visits, evaluations, regular meetings, etc. or create specific meetings to discuss this issue.
  - Establish a "Transfer of Power" Technical Committee to bring together representatives of CSOs and INGOs to facilitate discussions based on agreed timetables or whenever the need arises. This would include facilitating workshops between Belgian INGO-African CSO indicated in recommendation number 7.

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## Annex 1 - Sources

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## Interviews and focus group discussions

### Interviews

No	Organisation	Country	Date	Location
1	APIL	Burkina Faso	22.03.2022	Online (FR)
2	AMI	Rwanda	08.03.2022	Online (FR)
3	ProFemmes	Rwanda	23.03.2022	Online (FR)
4	CAB	Democratic Republic of Congo	16.03.2022	Face-to-face (FR)
5	CADEV	Niger	09.03.2022	Online (FR)
6	AMCES	Benin	11.03.2022	Online (FR)
7	ADED	Democratic Republic of Congo	16.03.2022	Face to face (FR)
8	COSYBU/FNTT-SI	Burundi	11.03.2022	Online (FR)
9	MVIWAARUSHA	Tanzania	10.03.2022	Online (EN)
10	PARCEM	Burundi	17.03.2022	Online

### Face to face FGD with focal points from CAB’s local community partners, held in Bukavu, DRC, 16.3.22

1. Victor Zihindula
2. Barabara Kalihira
3. Jeanine M-Kaliala
4. Mushagalusa Kibe
5. M’Hyamubwira Riphine
6. Chantal Bifuko

## Further Consultation with Partner Key Informants

No	Organisation	Country	Date	Location
1	APIL	Burkina Faso	20.04.2022	Online Focus Group Discussion (FR)
	CADEV	Niger	20.04.2022	Online Focus Group Discussion (FR)
	COSYBU/FNTT-SI	Burundi	20.04.2022	Online Focus Group Discussion (FR)
	CAB	Democratic Republic of Congo	20.04.2022	Online Focus Group Discussion (FR)
2	MVIWAARUSHA	Tanzania	20.04.2022	Separate online interview (EN)
3	ADED	Democratic Republic of Congo	23.04.2022	Written communications
4	AMI	Rwanda	25.04.2022	Written communications
5	PARCEM	Burundi	27.04.2022	Written communications

## Apologies received from:

1. AMCES in Benin
2. ProFemmes in Rwanda

## Annex 2 – Consolidated interview and FGD guide

*Questions in italics have been included in response to comments made by partner CSOs.*

Focus Area	Key Questions
<b>1. Definitions of power</b>	<p><b>How do CSOs in low-income countries define power and at what levels or areas of interest?</b></p> <p>1.1. What does power in international partnerships mean to you?</p> <p>1.2. How do you know when you have it within your international partnerships?</p> <p>1.3. How do you know when you don't have it?</p> <p>1.4. <i>To what extent do you share your power with the local population?</i></p> <p><b>Which aspects of partnerships do you identify as problematic in terms of power imbalances?</b></p> <p>1.5 <i>How would you define your partnerships with Belgian INGOs?</i></p> <p>1.6 <i>Which (if any) aspects of your partnerships do you identify as problematic in terms of power imbalances?</i></p> <p>1.7 <i>What do you think is causing any power imbalance?</i></p> <p>1.8 Which of these power imbalances or dynamics do you think needs to change in your partnerships?</p> <p>1.9 What is the impact of these issues on you/your organisation?</p> <p>1.10 What is the impact of these issues on your activities?</p> <p><b>How do you understand 'shifting power imbalances'?</b></p> <p>1.11 What does shifting the power look like in practice?</p> <p>1.12 What impact would shifting the power in this way have on your organisation or on other CSOs in your country?</p> <p>1.13 <i>What impact would shifting the power have on your development activities?</i></p> <p>1.14 <i>What impact would shifting the power have on the population?</i></p> <p>1.15 How important do you feel it is, and why?</p>
<b>2. Shifting the power in practice</b>	<p><b>Where do CSOs in low-income countries see opportunities to shift the power and move from a donor-recipient relation to a partnership of allies, which also delegates more power to target populations?</b></p> <p>2.1 What is the basis of your partnership with target populations?</p> <p>2.2 Which decisions that affect you or target populations are made without you or target populations having a say, and in which you would like to have a say?</p> <p>2.3 What practical actions can be taken, in order to expand the power of CSOs and shift to a partnership of allies with international organisations? (Who would need to do what, and why?)</p> <p>2.4 What practical actions can be taken, in order to shift more power to target populations? (Who would need to do what, and why?)</p> <p>2.5 Which is the most critical issue to tackle overall?</p> <p>2.6 What's the first step?</p> <p>2.7 What might be a barrier to this change and how could it be addressed?</p> <p><b>Which good practices or lessons learnt (of self-development) already exist, within and/or outside the partnerships under study?</b></p> <p>2.8 Do you have any positive examples of collaborations or partnerships that have left a good impression?</p>

<b>3. Context Analysis</b>	<b>What is the current state of affairs concerning discussions or research on the topic of equal partnerships or decolonisation? (one per country/region)</b>
	3.1 What conversations or literature are you having or are aware of on the topic of decolonising development or equal partnerships in your country?
	3.2 Who are the main stakeholders that are involved?
	3.3 Have there been any summits or high-level meetings that have dealt with the topic of equitable partnership and what decisions or recommendations have emerged from them?
	3.4 Are there any reports or videos about these that can be shared?

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## Annex 3 – Stakeholders’ suggestions and how they were addressed

During the two consultations of the inception phase concerns and recommendations were raised by partner CSOs and the commissioning organisations. These were addressed by the researchers as follows:

1. **Understanding the country's history and colonisation to understand power:** To avoid guiding the investigation, this issue was taken into consideration during the analysis phase, in order not to allow it to influence the data collection.
2. **Include the local population and authorities in this research:**
  - a. This research is only a first step. It is important to stay focused on its main objective, namely the power relations between INGOs and their local partners;
  - b. We can include local people where possible, in order to gather some initial information that could feed into future research;
  - c. Given the sensitivity of some of the issues, it was agreed not to include local authorities in this research, as they may be involved in a future monitoring phase, should this emerge in the recommendations of this study.
3. **Further explore issues related to partnerships and collaboration:** A specific question was added to the research framework on this topic.
4. **The North-South framework is already divisive, problematic and exclusionary:** The issue was explored during the research.
5. **Concerns that research does not lead to change:** Question added to gather partners’ suggestions on how to transfer power in practice.