



Rethinking Power and Resources: What Can We Do? Summary Report of Breakfast Brief

22 October 2018, 9.30 am - 11.30 am | Bazaar of Ideas, Hoefkade 9, Den Haag

Background

This breakfast briefing is part of a series of gatherings that CIVICUS and the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) have been hosting around this topic with various funding circles and civil society groups in different countries. Two years ago, GFCF initiated the hashtag #ShiftThePower, which has grown into a global movement of conversations around power, resources and how to make development less top-heavy and more people-driven. For the Netherlands, CIVICUS and GFCF teamed up with Partos and the Wilde Ganzen. Together they organized a first meeting with representatives of Dutch development organizations, philanthropic funds and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to start the conversation: Rethinking Power and Resources: What Can We Do?

While resourcing has always been a top challenge for civil society globally, CIVICUS members in the global South - especially the more social change-seeking parts and the smaller, less formal groups - have more difficulty accessing meaningful resources. There is a tendency among donors to make large grants and many Southern CSOs are not able to meet the requirements. Money is channeled through different players and although resources trickle down, power doesn't.

This topic is very closely related to the issue of shrinking space for civil society. While CSOs are trying to meet the criteria of funders and scale up, they risk losing connection with the communities they are trying to serve. And this legitimacy issue is growingly being used against them by state and non-state actors trying to delegitimize civil society and dissent in the name of national interest against foreign interferences.

However, there is no shortage of institutions that have been designed more thoughtfully to address power imbalances and provide meaningful, accessible resources to civil society groups on the frontline.

Main take-aways

- It is important to critically reflect on the systems through which we work. What happens when organizations aggregate too much power? What is the effect of vertical forms of power? How can a hierarchical system be equipped to bring social change, which is typically a bottom-up process?

- The social capital of community philanthropy includes the possibility to build on the assets that are available within a community, and trust: there is a lack of trust around development aid, but people tend to trust organizations that are rooted in the community.
- It is important to look more at blended models, where civil society organizations not only receive funding from large institutions and foreign donors, but also from local groups, incl. the communities they are serving, middle class etc.
- The benefits of domestic resource mobilization go beyond the actual money. It increases the ownership of organizations, brings active community involvement and requires organizations to be accountable and transparent towards their constituency. In addition, it increases the capacity of organizations to make claims towards their governments as both fundraising and claim making require the 'courage to ask'.
- Organizational capacity should not be about what CSOs need to look like for a donor, but capacity should be about rootedness, relevance, trust and ability to deal with complex issues.
- In practice it can be challenging to put communities in the driver's seat. People in marginalized communities often continue to believe they should not have resources: a shift in mindset is needed and that is not something that can easily be addressed through a funding framework.
- Funders often see themselves only as funders. However, as a funder you are part of the network and you can be an innovator, a 'launching customer'. For funders it is important to advocate with other funders: the more progressive work of a funder can be counteracted by more strict requirements of other donors. We need to think of ourselves as a global ecosystem of funders. How can we leverage our resources and build on each other's strengths?
- Northern CSOs / funders have different roles to play. For example, to protect civic space, it is important to engage with Dutch corporates, as they often do not respect civic space and their influence on governments should not be underestimated.
- Relationships between Northern and Southern partners should be about partnerships and complementarity. It is important to foster Southern leadership.

Follow-up

To conclude, there is appetite to continue this conversation in the Netherlands. Initial possibilities discussed include various thematic sessions sharing best practices (more in detail) and connecting various actors - suggestions included a) to further reflect on the role of Northern NGOs, b) more devolved/participatory decision-making processes (piggybacking on southern partners presence in the Netherlands to get their views as well - a possibility in April with Robert Carr Fund's partners has been flagged), and c) creating a sparring partners group to brainstorm with the Dutch MFA on how to embed these considerations in the next Dialogue and Dissent framework and host a dedicated session in a broader linking&learning meeting organised by the ministry. As the private sector plays a critical role, it would be interesting to organize ongoing engagements with it and with private philanthropy. Participants also expressed interest in the next conference on #ShiftThePower. Partos, CIVICUS and Wilde Ganzen will further reflect on this and further ideas will be discussed amongst all those interested in the coming weeks.

If you are interested to join this conversation please contact Partos (Anne-Marie Heemskerk, amh@partos.nl)

Further Reading

[Collection of relevant resources about more direct and democratic resourcing and equitable partnerships](#), by CIVICUS

[Joining Forces, Sharing Power](#), by Partos/The Spindle, The Broker and CIVICUS

[Reflections on two years of #ShiftThePower](#), blog by Jenny Hodgson

[How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power: What Donors Can Do to Make That Happen](#), Jenny Hodgson and Anna Pond