

Accelerating Inclusive Power Shift

An aggregated benchmarking study

December 2022



About this Report

Dear colleagues,

For those of you unfamiliar with the work of the [International Civil Society Centre \(ICS Centre\)](#), welcome! We hope this report finds you well. We hope that the content provides some insightful nuggets of information as we ourselves have been questioning '*how are we doing in our respective and collective work to shift, share and balance power?*' Finally, we hope that this report creates a springboard for future learning, monitoring and action within your organisations, among your networks, and in hearts and minds.

Who are we?

The ICS Centre exists to support international civil society organisations (ICSOs) to maximise their impact for a sustainable and more equitable world. Amongst its many renowned initiatives which span futurism, innovation, global perspectives and leadership, sits the ICS Centre's dedicated labs on Governance Power Shifts which have been running since 2018.

These labs have brought together a growing community of ICSO members who are steadfastly exploring how to overcome barriers and lead necessary transformational shifts in power imbalances, organisational intent and governance reform.

The ICS Centre has a strong desire and intention to contribute to the current energy on shifting the paradigm and is scaling up this existing work which is now part of its [strategic cycle for 2022 –2024](#). At the core is a commitment to foster more inclusive governance models, create more equitable partnerships, and to support ICSOs in revising their future mandate while intensifying structured donor dialogues to achieve a meaningful power shift in the sector. Through the project and this study, the ICS Centre wants to facilitate powerful learning and exchange, acting in synergy with existing initiatives and movements such as the Re-Imagining the INGO initiative (RINGO) and #ShiftThePower.

The Accelerating Inclusive Power Shift project pursues four key objectives:

- Accelerate ICSOs' uptake of more inclusive governance models by developing guidance and expanding engagement
- Strengthen ICSO-donor collaboration to enable more equitable partnerships with Global South-rooted actors
- Support ICSOs in their ability to commit to more equitable partnerships
- Support ICSOs in revising their mandate and future role

Power Shift Benchmarking: Why now and why it matters

Following four years of Power Shifts Labs, the ICS Centre wants to build on all of its collective work through analysis and deeper engagement around progress made. In February 2022, it commissioned a benchmarking study where its members were invited to discuss what shifts are currently underway within their organisations, as well as their challenges and next frontier ambitions.

The results of the study were discussed and shared with study participants in the hope that it would feed into their future exchange and learning while allowing them to benchmark their own progress, over time, and also with each other. The full version of the benchmarking study drills down more concretely into the different forms, types, faces and spaces of formal and informal power. It also looks at how those power shift attempts play out at a more granular level through the lens of decision-making domains and functions. All of this matters, especially at a time when anti-racism and decolonising aid have rightfully taken a front seat in power shift fora across the sector.

The ICS Centre is presenting this aggregated version of the Power Shift benchmarking study as it believes that it will be both relevant and interesting to a much wider community outside of its member base. It also hopes to create a springboard peer-to-peer learning and observation among ICSOs, perhaps even implementing trials and methods based on practices mentioned here.

Methodology, definitions and context

Here we outline some important notes which apply to how this study was conducted, including limitations and definitions.

The benchmarking study was small in data set¹ and focused largely on shifts in the last 3-5 years. However, it did consider varying dynamics: Northern and Southern; large and small; (con-)federated, networked and differently-sized ICSOs, to name a few factors.

The definition of power used during Power Lab activities is as follows: **“Power is the ability and capacity to make and execute relevant decisions”**. In addition to this, we acknowledge both the formal understanding of power and decision rights, as well as the varying manifestations of informal power, which can be the ability to²:

- ***Influence and shape priorities and decisions, whether formally or informally***

1. Important limitations to this study: This benchmarking was based on only a small number participants. Of those organisations, none of the participants interviewed were from organisations 'headquartered' in the Global South. The 20 ICSOs concerned had been selected by the Centre's leadership because of their past interest to participate in past Power Shift Labs. One could argue this automatically introduces a bias in the data towards those most motivated to go through power shifts. The survey yielded 19 organisation responses. The data sources comprised a survey completed by all of them, with interviews of (60-90 minutes) with 22 mid to senior level executive leaders of 17 ICSOs. In the full report, we also occasionally reference other, broader, inquiries that are ongoing on similar topics, such as the [RINGO Project](#), which the Centre has partnered with.
2. For these definitions, we are indebted to Taaka Awori, former consultant to ActionAid International and well-known leadership development expert, as well as several study respondents who informed the following set of additional definitions

- *Sway decision making to one's advantage, or to block a decision or its execution*
- *Shape resources, processes, selection of leadership and determination of directions, whether formally or informally*
- *Do what you want the organisation to do, and/or influence the decision of others*

On the definition of Governance - for the purpose of this study the ICS Centre refers to the domains of *decision rights, processes and structures* within organisational strategy setting, programming and finances.

Finally, a note that not all ICSOs resonated with the term 'power shift' – but rather used other concepts such as 'inclusion', 'equity', 'locally-led partnership', 'localisation', 'internationalisation' or 'anti-racism' to motivate their change processes on decision rights, processes and structures.

Current progress and power shifts already underway

In this section we take a look at what participating ICSOs fed back in terms of areas of progress in the last 3 – 5 years. For this input we asked a number of questions e.g. To what extent had power been shifted – be it the *power to agree, recommend, provide input or make decisions*? Participants were also prompted to comment on where they have seen a shift – in location, functional domain and so on.

The most notable area of current progress has been in the organisational strategy setting and particularly on **voice, inclusion and participation**. Over half of study participants reported

shifts between community partners and the ICSO in their 'power to recommend'. It was even more significant regarding community partners and their power to provide input on strategy – 70% of ICSO respondents reported good shifts in this area. Overall, the study found that in the last 3-5 years, the voice of Global South stakeholders has become more prominent inclusive, representative and diverse. This extends to country and regional level staff, leadership, and to some degree partner organisations, programme participants and the public.

”

“We went from having strategy processes that used to involve 40 people, most of them sitting in global offices in the Global North to consulting 250 people, most of whom were actually working in countries...and people coming from those countries. So it was a big shift, maybe not a radical one but it was the first time we've done it like that.”

What are ICSOs actually doing to shift these power imbalances across various functional areas?

While some ICSOs said that their progress had been underway more than 5 years ago, their efforts were spurred and accelerated because of (re)surfacing debates around decolonisation aid and anti-racism. In a way, it was certainly not the time to be meaningfully shifting power or even having conversations about it without the presence of those to *whom we want to*

shift power to, in the room. The world of virtual connectivity then expanded due to the global pandemic thus providing a refreshed opportunity to meaningfully share the platform with a wider selection of people than before...another barrier to participation (albeit a technical one), removed.

In terms of progress made and shifts in organisational strategy setting, this is what they are doing:

- Getting a broader range of voices around the table particularly those who have not previously been involved in high-level strategy processes e.g. National / Regional Directors in governance Boards or Members Assemblies.
- Setting up strategic steering groups, large-scale gatherings and conferences and decision-making mechanisms. A great example is from an ICSO who introduced 'direct democracy' – a new mechanism for them where all participants are asked to vote on the issues they want to discuss, or on the top strategic priorities - even if it may ultimately be down to a smaller committee to refine and translate strategic goals into practice.
- More practice around increasing the representation of key groups that are centred in their mission e.g. youth on boards within youth-led causes. Similarly with women-centred missions.
- Extending extra support to, again, remove barriers to participation. In a good ICSO example, community members have been exercising their power to organise their own consultations (to input into organisational strategy processes) but with the ICSO providing translations, resources and reimbursements for more meaningful engagement.



“We wanted to signal a wholesale shift from our past which was a very top-down approach, and instead focus on our values which are at the heart of our strategy - pursuit of locally led, authentic partnerships, accountability to the movement and the shifting of power both within the organisation, in the way decisions are made and in the dynamics between country offices, ‘HQ’, fundraising members and with our local implementing partners.”

On decision making in other functional areas, while there were less shifts recorded here compared to strategy setting, there were some notable observations, practices and progress:

In programme design...

- Calling upon the subject matter expertise of Global South based colleagues and partners at the country or regional levels. Not only does this help for quality control but it can counteract possible and intense donor interventionist tactics.
- Greater involvement of primary programme participants in actual programme design, implementation and evaluation e.g. volunteers, marginalised and vulnerable groups, women and young people. In addition to this, stronger input into processes - to drive programming, target setting, management and evaluation.

- Shifts towards more equity-based partnerships, through collaborative frameworks among members of an ICSO, or between an ICSO and its partner organisations.
- More tracking around engagement levels and satisfaction among country programme staff. A good example is where an ICSO had undertaken a survey and reported positive results where staff said that they felt significantly more involved in programme strategy and operations, and to the right extent. To paraphrase: *“It is a big change from you telling us what to do vs now being asked for our views”*. That said, those same staff report feeling less involved in funding and business operations-related decision making.
- Questioning validity or the value add of having Global North based colleagues in a HQ/Global Centre/Secretariat involved at all in programme level decision making.
- Looking at funding allocation models differently - shifts to scoring mechanisms to award programme funding or scholarships, which creates more objectivity. Also, re-modelling and reassessing Child Sponsorship funding allocation models.
- Shifts to more to a locally-led, partner-led approach (instead of automatic-basis allocation of large budgets to country programmes, with resulting dependencies)
- Building more widely shared (less northern HQ-centric) competencies around cost structures, centres and cost benefit analysis so that partners and members can assess value for money.

In financial decision making ...

For many, shifts around financial decision making (and accountability to a extent) is very much on their horizon. However, in a few cases, some progress includes changing the composition of key groups due to the critical financial decisions that directly impact the sustainability of southern located country programmes. A few specific examples are having more inclusive, transparent global fundraising strategy processes; Re-imagining investment committees for pooled and/or unrestricted revenue to include Country/Regional Directors or Member Associations who previously had not been part of the discussions; Finally, having national Member Associations, partner organisations or groups of programme participants making decisions around resource allocation (through block grants etc.) and based on authority devolved to their level. A number of other interesting initiatives and practices include...

Key challenges in accelerating inclusive power shift

Many of the challenges we mention here are very familiar and have troubled the ICSO sector for many years. The full benchmarking report details more exhaustively how deep those challenges run, as well as the enabling and disabling factors contributing to power shifts.

Do changes in governance structures lead to more power shifts?

No, not necessarily. While the composition of formal governance mechanisms does matter (here we mean national or global Boards, advisory councils, international assemblies etc.) – it certainly has its limitations. A change or diversification informal structure does not necessarily lead to other types of power shift. Even

when a board, for example, does become more diverse, they can still stop more far fetching changes in strategy, mandate, ways of working or behaviours of executive leadership – they remain the final voice and ultimately the board can either approve or reject further shifts in power across the organisation. Rejection has happened. Thus, the power of Secretariats, global centres and headquarters – including when it comes to agenda setting, the shaping of final draft documents etc. – continues to be significant.

That said, good things do happen - renewed leadership attention on board composition can stimulate leaders to get a more diverse array of voices at the table, as well as at other levels in the organisation, including in programming and in finance – the areas where we are seeing less speed around power shift. Finally, a note here is that there are interdependencies between shifts - some ICSOs report that the speed with which programmatic decision-making can become more inclusive is dependent upon broader organisational restructurings that have yet to happen.

If we shift the power, what's our purpose?

For any organisation, that sense of drift in 'value add' and identity – and the discomfort that this question brings must be addressed openly, especially considering the North/South dynamics and decolonisation debate. If power is shifted from global 'centres' to country level actors, then what – beyond grant-making – do we do that adds value? This unravels many implications on the centre's size, required skills, competencies, culture and behaviour etc. which can be quite substantive.

Over and beyond organisational identity, the power shift movement can disrupt some NGO staff's own sense of identity who may consider themselves deeply aligned with the direction of travel and values behind power shifts, yet their own professional future, role, budgets, positional power and jobs are impacted as well. This can create great internal dissonance. An instance of this was noted by respondents where people profess to be great champions of the cause of decolonising aid but when it comes to their own ceding of power or of giving up jobs with positional power, there was a stepping back from that aspiration. Equally, the mental model held by those who currently have positional power in ICSOs matters; if there is a scarcity mentality (vs an abundance mindset), focus remains on what will be lost in a power shift.

Does money always equal power?

In the case of (con)federated organisations, members who traditionally have extra voting rights in governance bodies, due to weighted voting systems based on income generated, continue to show signs that they are not necessarily keen on giving up such privileged relationships to a central fundraising unit, and may wield justifications for doing so based on the need to be accountable to their individual and/or institutional donors. The ability to raise money from institutional donors was described as "an enduring form of power".

- Some confederated ICSOs noted that power continues to be tightly held by the executive leadership of its member associations along with that of its Secretariat, while country and regional unit still have difficulty "muscling their way in".

- Not surprisingly, money continues to equate power in quite a few ICSOs, and those ICSOs who have tried to loosen this tightly-coupled connection have found it to be quite tricky to change, even if efforts to shift to investment pools that are governed by diverse and representative teams have helped somewhat. *Importantly, when money gets behind power shift, it can be a big help; when it is not, it continues to form a big hindrance. And this form of championing can also shift back, as we have seen in some ICSOs.*

”

“Donors are not necessarily interested in funding work involved in long term power shifts, inclusion etc. Their project models still are 3 years or less, frequently”.

- When it comes to equal decision rights among those associations within (con) federated organisations that provide most of the financial funding and those that provide primarily other types of (non-financial) resources and assets, several ICSOs in the sector who have intentionally pursued this for 10+ years, have found this issue to be particularly sticky, as well as divisive.



Informal sources of power and their impact on power shifts

Clearly, informal sources of power continue to have a formidable influence on the extent to which power shifts can happen. While some can be a hindrance, other types can work to support power shifts if they are used in intentional ways. Here are some of the manifestations of informal power mentioned by participating ICSOs.



EXPERT OR TECHNICAL

- Intellectual firepower and functional power.
- Having in-depth knowledge of the organisation and/or culture, e.g. knowing the movement and culture well enough to know what is feasible and how to get there.



PERSONAL

- Someone's personal persuasiveness, likeability, charisma or other qualities which make them admired by others.
- Whether a person is considered trustworthy (someone can be in a lower hierarchical position within the organisation and be powerful nonetheless).



RELATIONAL

- Cliques and proximity to leadership, as well as people's relationship with leadership.
- "Relationships are currency". Sometimes, to build influence intentionally, you have to build your friendship network.
- Lack of clarity of process and undocumented processes creates opportunities for people to leverage their relationships.



TENURE

- Length of tenure (also linked to expert/technical, personal and relational forms of power)



SYMBOLIC HERITAGE

- Symbolic power e.g. volunteers in a traditionally volunteer-driven organisation
- Seniority or being the oldest member in a team.
- Being based in a long-established location (or in a physical place which has symbolic as well as status power).
- Someone with a lived experience linked to the organisation's cause e.g. person with a disability, which means they may be less likely to be challenged or contradicted.
- Historical knowledge that allows a person to envisage what the future could look like and what to carry forward.



STATUS AND INFLUENCE

- Specific groups which have power because they are connected to and lead on core themes, a strategic focus area, or values. They can be powerful in terms of resonance and influence.
- Councils and Steering Groups with negotiation power.



CONVENING POWER

- For global centers in particular: The ability to assemble and bring together, but with that a perception that you have an overview of the whole world.



FUNDING AND FINANCIAL POWER

- "Money is power": Certain National Associations/Members have more money.
- Awarding grants as a form of power shift, or exercising power over a Country Office who is in need of funds and accepts but at a compromise of their own strategic plans and priorities.



FOUNDING / FOUNDER POWER

- Power of certain (dominant fundraising or founding) National Boards over others.



COERCIVE POWER

- A suppression of voice for fear of money not being awarded or being withdrawn. Linked to financial power.



GENDER

- Gender as a form of power, inclusive of sexual power.



REGIONAL

- Regional offices who have power within regions because they can block some global initiatives.



PEOPLE POWER

- Leaders in the community who could make or break the organisation.
- Specific groups centred in the organisation mission, e.g. Young people in a youth-focused organisation.



POWER TO INFUSE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND NATIONAL CULTURAL ORIGINS

- Power to either inform or infuse the organisational culture: e.g. in the case of American or UK-centric ICSO cultures or founder-centric cultures; the infusion of non-global North based leaders can make such cultures less US or UK-centric. However, this is not necessarily the case, depending on what paradigm of diversity the organisation is in.
- Having credibility due to being of the same nation/region as those held as 'heroes' in the organisation.



WORKAHOLISM POWER

- Those who put in extra hours sometimes have extra power, often seen to be possibly 'saving' the organisation during times of crisis. They tend to be at senior level. But it means that those who cannot / don't want to work long hours are disadvantaged (from a feminist lens perspective).

Ambitions and next frontiers

Next frontier power shift ambitions

Several statements and sentiments emerged from the answers by participating ICOSOs to the question ‘what is your ultimate goal in regard to power shifts?’ Mostly these goals are incorporated within existing strategy documents and frameworks versus a standalone ‘power shift’ statement per se.

Some of the more common ambition statements and sentiments are:

- Being progressively more locally-led, ensuring that decision-making sits closest to where the programmes take place
- Centering leadership with the people whom organisations serve and within the

countries where they operate e.g. or those who focus programmatically on people with disabilities, the inclusion of more leaders with disabilities in their ICOSO senior level leadership

- Collect more disaggregated data on who is hired, promoted into leadership, gets choice stretch assignments, trends in staff that exit, etc.
- Greater efficacy as well as internal transparency when it comes to the calculation of true cost effectiveness and value add of global centres, as well as Members/Affiliates
- Tackling imbalances within, between and externally among partners
- Programme participant-focused accountability frameworks; also the granting of block grants to communities, as well as enabling communities to not accept NGO funded projects in their community
- Offer support to offset the true costs of programme participant participation
- The collection of more systematic disaggregated data on diversity of staff



- In some participating ICSOs, the global strategy is not yet driven by country teams or by/programme participants, even if they may be in the process of trying to get there
- Only a few participating ICSOs reported that they had managed to strengthen their accountability systems to include programme participants. For some, this was explicitly mentioned as part of their 'next frontier' (e.g. the inclusion of a social audit). This is an obvious element of any power shift, and it is of interest that while the 'downward accountability' movement started approximately 15 years ago, quite a few ICSOs appear to have gotten somewhat 'stuck' along the way and need to resume this journey.

Recommendations and moving forward

In this final section we sum up some recommendations and opportunities for sector wide learning that go even beyond what ICSOs participating in this inquiry consider as their 'next steps'.

- **Definitions of power** – Have open conversations with organisational leaders and staff about the full array of power definitions presented in this report. Flush out what people really believe about power so that the sources, locations, behaviours and culture are more openly addressed.
- **Unpacking informal power sources and locations** – Conduct more conversations dedicated specifically to how and where informal power thrives – and which sources of informal power could be used to *propel* desired power shifts. The privileged must be ready to give up on some of their privileges and empower marginalised communities in a more concerted and more visible way, including the sharing of resources, knowledge, voices and leadership spaces. Some ICSOs also stress a focus on trying to discourage back door communications and hidden conversations. The latter, of course, is not easy to achieve if this had become an ingrained habit and part of the culture in the past.
- **Opening up spaces for the centering of certain forms of leadership** – to move from intent to reality, look systematically at the whole organisational arc incoming people go through: Not just hiring processes, but the actual pools or networks from which people are hired (sourcing)? How inclusive are your onboarding systems? Do you create systems so that people have more opportunities to actually flourish as well as influence the organisation? What are your procurement policies? How you allocate special projects with high visibility, your stretch assignments? Do you track who you retain – as well as reasons for leaving (who is 'spit out' by your culture)? Do you ask questions on how power was experienced during your exit procedure or interview? Do you track your workforce composition?
- **Fixing it vs breaking it** – are we are ready to acknowledge that parts of our system(s), structures, policies and ways of working may need to be broken rather than be fixed? In order for that to happen, ICSOs may need to redefine their attitude to risk (what it is, how to manage and what to accept/ embrace/seek) and accept that they have to much more radically shift the microphone (without negative judgment on what/who was and has been, but acknowledging that was brought us here will not get us there).

Closing thoughts

What does all of this signify for us as a sector?

When we commissioned this report, we aimed to highlight some of the steps that organisations are already taking (and their hurdles, too) at a time when there has never been more noise around decolonising aid and shifting power. However, we deeply acknowledge the huge strides and systemic changes needed to disentangle deeply embedded ways of working. We need to be prepared to move boldly and relinquish some of the practices that got us here. We need to work together, listen deeply and learn from those who are doing it well, doing it differently and setting brilliant examples. Here are some further final thoughts on areas that are important for dialogue, mindset shift and action:

Changing the belief that shifting power is risky – this means entrusting and embracing partners, colleagues and communities, not only seeking input but expertise and execution, allowing the space if things don't go as planned. Or is there an overriding scepticism that some aspects of power shifting are unrealistic or may

not lead to good results? In other words, for power shifts to happen, we cannot go further unless we decide to go further.



It's about scarcity. It's not about what do we gain. It's about what do we think we lose? And as long as that's the dominant mindset, this stage will be very hard to overcome.

The money issue – the belief that with some funding we could go even further. While this may be the case, does a shift in mindset have to cost money? Is this also about having the courage and committing /shifting the resources to start doing things differently?

Shifting the platform – the need to step aside so that new and different types of change makers can thrive. Handing the platform to generations who will create and area creating movements unlike anything we've seen before. Finally, recognising with radical awareness that now is the the time for a generation of much greater diversity – especially in leadership – who will shape the future to come.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Esther Kwaku, Independent Consultant. The report aggregates the findings from the ICS Centre Power Shift benchmarking study, co-authored in April 2022 by Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken and Esther Kwaku. We thank the study participants for their time and open reflections.

Accelerating Inclusive Power Shift

An aggregated benchmarking study