Power Awareness Tool

A tool for analysing power in partnerships for development

PARTOS samen werkt.

The Spindle
connecting innovators for development

Colofon

'The Power Awareness Tool' is published by The Spindle, the innovation platform of Partos.

Partos (partos.nl) is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in international development.

The Spindle (thespindle.org) connects Dutch and global innovators as part of an online and offline movement for inclusive development.

The idea of establishing the Shift-the-Power Lab and to develop a tool for analysing power in partnerships for development, emerged from a series of workshops organised by Partos, Wilde Ganzen, CIVICUS, and facilitated by The Spindle. It happened at a time when new partnerships were being formed under the framework of the Power of Voices Program, of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Organisations that contributed to the Shift-the-Power Lab and to the development of this tool: Amref Flying Doctors, Choice, Cordaid, Hivos, ICCO, Mama Cash, Mercy Corps, Kenya Community Development Foundation (KCDF), Oxfam Novib, RNW Media, Simavi and Wilde Ganzen.

Facilitators of the Shift-the-Power Lab: Anne Marie Heemskerk (Partos) and Heinz Greijn (Learning for Development).
Panel of experts: Willem Elbers and Alan Fowler.
Text: Heinz Greijn (Learning for Development) and Willem Elbers (Radboud University).
Editing: Kate Hawkins (Pamoja Communications).
Graphic design: Gijsbert Raadgever (Akimoto).

Published by The Spindle, February 2020

Power Awareness Tool

A tool for analysing power in partnerships
for development

Introduction

Relationships between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local NGOs are characterised by power imbalances. There are several compelling reasons why these imbalances are undesirable and need to be addressed. This document presents a tool that has been designed to make power imbalances more visible, enabling partners to analyse and reflect on power relations. The assumption is that if partners have a better understanding of the way power works in the partnership, they will be in a better position to work towards shifting power in accordance with their shared principles.

The remainder of this paper consists of two parts. Firstly, we consider why power imbalances matter and how power operates in relationships between INGOs and local NGOs. This is followed by the tool itself and the guidelines for its practical application.

1. Power in NGO partnerships

Why do power imbalances matter?

Experience and research have shown that relationships between INGOs and local NGOs produce the most effective, efficient and sustainable results when:

- Programmes and projects are tailored to, and based on, local needs, concerns and knowledge
- Local NGOs perceive a strong sense of (co-)ownership of programmes and projects
- Local NGOs can (co-)design programmes and projects and respond to changes in the context during implementation
- The grassroots accountability and credibility of local NGOs is strengthened
- INGOs and local NGOs trust each other and can communicate freely

However, relationships between INGOs and local NGOs not always produce these pre-conditions. For an important part, this is caused by power imbalances in the relationship. The reality is that an INGO (as donor) can do to the recipient (a local NGO), what the recipient cannot do to the donor. In other words, there is an asymmetry of power that no amount of well-intentioned dialogue can remove.

This is problematic because those with the most power, usually donors, and to a lesser extent INGOs, are not always the most knowledgeable about the change that is needed, or what is required to bring about change. For those with less power, usually the local NGOs, and to a greater extent the community-based organisations (CBOs), it can be hard to influence decision-making. NGOs and CBOs are the owners of development results and usually have superior insights and knowledge about what is most needed. Their exclusion from decision-making undermines the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of development interventions.

Moreover, power imbalances can lead to misunderstandings, to feelings of being treated unfairly, to frictions and to lack of trust. They can negatively affect local NGOs' grassroots accountability. All of this may hamper collaboration between partners in the future (Elbers et al., 2018).

It would be a misconception to view INGOs as 'all powerful' and local NGOs as 'powerless'. INGOs depend on local NGOs for their legitimacy: for their knowledge, grassroots credibility, and overall ability to achieve impact. Especially strong local NGOs, with multiple funding sources, are able to negotiate with INGOs. But we have to recognize that in today's aid set up, 'Northern' money has more organisational impact on the South than 'Southern' performance has on Northern legitimacy (Fowler, 2000).

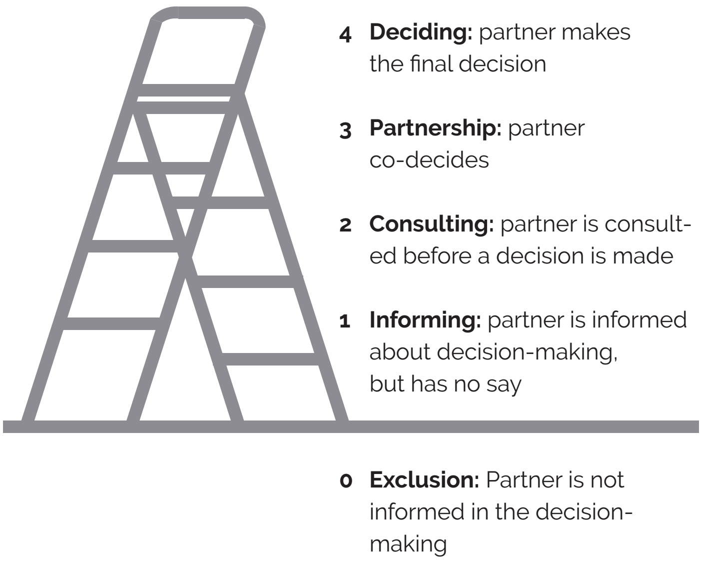
Critics demanding more balanced power relations between development partners, usually refer to a mix of utilitarian and rights-based principles. The rights-based principles include equality, non-discrimination, participation, inclusion and accountability. The utilitarian principles refer to improved effectiveness and efficiency of interventions, and sustainability of results.

While these principles are widely shared, power imbalances persist. The inability to put the principles into practice is called the partnership paradox (Elbers, 2012). An important reason why this paradox exists is because power is in many ways elusive. The tool presented in this document seeks to make power more visible, enabling partners to discuss power dynamics in their relationships and engage in joint analysis. It is our hope that by making power more visible and concrete, partners will be in a better position to shift the power and work towards more equitable and productive relationships.

How does power operate?

To get a grip on what the power imbalance between INGOs and local NGOs concretely entails, three steps are essential. Firstly, we need a clear definition of power. A useful definition is, *'the ability to influence the outcomes of decision-making'* (Elbers and Schulpen, 2011). Secondly, we have to identify key decision-making topics. Examples include the choice of partners, programmatic scope (theme, target groups, strategy), funding arrangements and reporting-requirements. Thirdly, we need to consider the extent of the influence that partners have on decision-making outcomes. This can be concretised using a 'ladder' that indicates the extent of a partner's influence (see diagram 1).

Diagram 1. ***Ladder of participation in decision-making***



Understanding how power is exercised is crucial for addressing power imbalances. In relations between INGOs and local NGOs, power is typically exercised in two ways (see Nye, 2013). Firstly, power can be exercised through persuasion and seduction. This is about winning over the other party using appeal and attraction, for example, by using good ideas and arguments, expert knowledge or charisma. The second way of exercising power is using 'carrots and sticks'. This direct way of exercising power relies on using resource dependence, which includes immaterial resources, to influence decision-making. Partners can use the desire for resources (carrot) or the fear of having them withheld (stick) to influence the other partner. Here, the relative 'leverage' of a resource depends on the extent to which it is needed for survival and goal achievement and whether alternative sources of the resource are available and accessible. An obvious example is an INGO using its control over funds to shape the outcomes of decision-making. Another example is that of a local NGO using its central importance in a programme to exert influence over its INGO partner.

Earlier we noted that power is about being able to influence the outcomes of decision-making. It is important to understand that different decision-making topics are relevant in different phases of the relationship. This implies that the exercise of power by INGOs and local NGOs is dynamic and changes over time. Furthermore, from a power perspective some decisions are more important than others. Typically, the most important decisions are those that are captured in programme design documents and performance contracts at the start of the relationship. Once formally made and contractually captured, these decisions not only clarify mutual expectations but also shape the room to manoeuvre of both INGOs and local NGOs during programme implementation. Unlike most decisions that are made in day-to-day interaction between INGOs and local NGOs, these decisions effectively set the terms of the relationship and influence both partners long after decisions are made.

The ability of local NGOs to influence the outcomes of decision-making differs by topic. Research has shown that INGOs, as they control the funding, can often take the lead on 'design' and 'performance' decisions. In some cases, local NGOs may have little influence. For example, certain programmatic choices may already have been taken unilaterally by INGOs before discussions with local NGOs about a new programme commence. Furthermore, certain decisions about funding arrangements or accountability requirements may simply be presented as a given. On other topics, INGOs may seek explicit input from local partners, even to the extent that the latter end up making the main decisions. This reveals the structural asymmetry of power in the relationship: in many cases the INGO ultimately decides how much influence it wants to 'give' to its local NGO partners (Elbers and Schulpen, 2011).

2. The power awareness tool

How the tool was developed

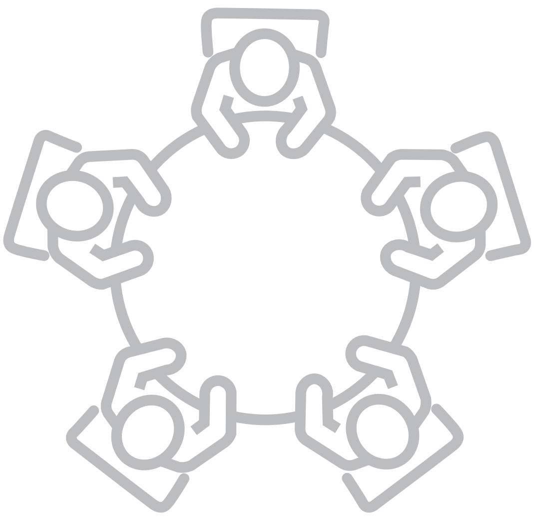
The idea of a tool to analyse power in partnerships for development emerged from the Shift-the-Power Lab, a group of organisations brought together by Partos, in collaboration with Civicus and Wilde Ganzen under the innovation platform The Spindle.

The decision to develop a new tool was taken after a review of existing methods and tools had led to the conclusion that none of these met a predefined set of requirements at an acceptable level. To be acceptable, a tool had to be: 1. a self-assessment; 2. simple to use, without having to hire external facilitators; 3. devoid of complex, unfamiliar or new terminology; 4. not too time consuming; 5. meaningful and a trigger for reflection (not just about ticking boxes); and 6. applicable to newly emerging and existing partnerships.

A prototype of the tool was developed and tested by six organisations (Amref Flying Doctors, ICCO, Cordaid, KCDF, Mercy Corps Liberia and Oxfam Novib) in the period October 2019 to January 2020. The test findings were presented at a workshop, *Rethinking ownership and control within advocacy partnerships,* on 6 February 2020. The test findings and the feedback received during the workshop were used to further develop this tool.

Who needs to be involved?

Preferably, the Power Awareness Tool is applied in a workshop where all partners are represented by someone who knows how their organisation is involved in making important decisions about the partnership.



Preferably, the tool is applied in a workshop where all partners are represented by someone who knows how their organisation is involved in decision-making about the partnership

In principle, a group with adequate knowledge about how decisions are made within the partnership, can perform the entire exercise in a workshop setting, in one day. No external facilitation is needed. Because partners may have different perspectives on the way power works in the partnership, we recommend that the analysis is conducted by a team in which as many partners as possible are represented. There are different ways to do this, varying from resource intensive to light.

The most resource intensive version is to organise a workshop. Alternatively, one person or a small core team can be appointed to facilitate the process remotely using email, Skype or social media etc. If this option is used, the process can be stretched out over a period of several weeks.
The lightest version would be that one trusted person performs all the steps in writing, and then shares the results with partner representatives elsewhere in the world for feedback. After various iterations of drafting, receiving and processing the feedback, a consensus document will be achieved.

How the tool works

The Power Awareness Tool consists of three steps:

- **Step 1:** Identification of important decision-making topics;
- **Step 2:** Scoring the level of participation of each partner in decision-making; and
- **Step 3:** Reflection on the findings from steps 1 and 2.

Before engaging in these steps, it is important that the facilitator establishes the right atmosphere, pre-conditions and expectations. Participants should feel free to talk without fearing that critical feedback will have negative consequences. They will only do so, if they feel that the intentions for organising a power awareness session are genuine and that the aim is to achieve more balanced power relations in the partnership. An introduction to the shift-the-power debate within the development sector can also help to put the exercise in a broader perspective.

Step 1: Identification of important decision-making topics

The first step of applying the tool requires the team to identify important **decision-making topics** that occur within their partnership, or are expected to occur in the case of a new partnership. These should be listed in column 1 of the power analysis framework (see page 7).

What is considered an important decision-making topic is different for each partnership. For example, in a partnership that focuses on influencing politicians or industry, decision-making about the advocacy agenda will be considered very important. On the other hand, if the focus is on providing financial support to CBOs, advocacy may be considered much less important. Decisions about the criteria for allocating funds to community groups may be more important.

Please note: Team members representing different partners may have diverging views on what are important decision-making topics in the partnership. **Make sure that every decision-making topic is reflected in the list even if it is considered important by only one partner.**

There may be various ways to make the list. From practice we learnt that using the partnering cycle, which also reflects the idea that power dynamics can change over time, can provide a useful framework. Annex 1 contains examples of decision-making topics that may occur in a partnership at different moments in time, following the chronology of the partnering cycle.

Power analysis framework

Key decision-making topics **Step 1.** Insert key decision-making topics that are relevant for your partnership here. Examples of important decision-making topics can be found in Annex 1.	**Level of participation** 4 Partner decides 3 Partner co-decides 2 Partner is consulted before a decision is made 1 Partner is informed about decision-making 0 Partner is not involved in decision-making **Step 2.** In these columns score the level of participation for each partner						
	Partner A	Partner B	Partner C	Partner D	Partner E	Partner F	Partner G
Scoping and building							
1							
2							
3							
Etc.							
Managing and maintaining							
1							
2							
3							
Etc							
Revisiting and revising							
1							
2							
3							
Etc							
Sustaining outcomes							
1							
2							
3							
Etc.							
Total	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ

Step 2: Scoring the level of participation in decision-making

For each of these topics the team **scores the relative power of each partner, using the ladder of participation in decision-making outlined in table 1.** If it is a partnership under development, participants will discuss the level of participation each partner should have and determine the scores accordingly. Depending on the level of influence, the score will range between 0 (not involved) and 4 (partner decides).

After the levels of participation in decision-making have been scored for each partner about each decision-making topic, the scores are added up. A very high total score may indicate that the partner has a lot of power, while a low score may indicate the opposite. The verb *may* is important here, because not all decision-making topics are equally important. Some partners could have high scores in relation to the very important decision-making topics and low scores in relation to the topics of less importance. In that case, the total score would be modest while, in fact, they are very influential partners. This will be further investigated in the next step: Reflection.

After the levels of participation in decision-making have been scored for each partner about each decision-making topic, the scores are added up

Step 3: Reflection

After the power (im)balance in the partnership has been made more visible by scoring the level of participation in relation to key decision-making topics, there is a need to reflect. Guiding questions for reflecting are:

- With regard to column 1: Are these all the decision-making topics that are relevant to your partnership, or are there more topics that need to be included in the analysis?
- With regard to the other columns:
  - Is the level of participation of a specific partner fine, or should the level of participation in certain types of decisions be up- or down-graded? Why?
  - If more influence of a partner on a particular topic is deemed desirable, would the partner actually have the ability to be more influential? If the partner is not able to have more influence, what measures are needed to change this?

Applicability and limitations of the tool

The tool can be used for analysing power in existing partnerships, and during the creation of new partnerships. In the case of existing partnerships, the tool can be of help in developing measures to improve the power balance. During the creation of a new partnership the tool can be used to design structures and processes to work towards more balanced power relations. In a partnership it is good to check on a regular basis whether partners are still happy with the way decisions are being made, and to find out where there is room for improvement. Therefore, it is recommended that the Power Awareness Tool is applied in various stages of the partnering cycle.

It is recommended that the Power Awareness Tool is applied on a regular basis in different stages of the partnering cycle

Needless to say, the Power Awareness Tool is only a tool. Just as using a hammer and a saw is no guarantee for crafting a quality piece of furniture, this tool for analysing power will not automatically lead to shifts in power relations. The tool may be simple, but without sound analytical skills to reach meaningful findings, or without determination to act on these findings, nothing will change.

This tool has not been developed to examine the more hidden aspects of power, including the (individual) behaviours and attitudes that can influence decision-making in ways that are not so easy to capture. A discussion about decision-making may provide a base to tease out these attitudinal and behavioural aspects of power relations. We invite users of this tool to help us developing guiding questions to elicit views from partners on the more intangible aspects of power[1].

References:

Elbers, W., and Schulpen, L. (2011). Decision-making in Partnerships for Development: Explaining the Influence of Local Partners. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly,* 20(10): 1-18.

Elbers, W. (2012). *The partnership paradox. Principles and practice in North-South NGO relations.* Nijmegen: CIDIN.

Elbers, W., Frobisher, E., Kamau, P., Kumi, E., Saharan, T., and Schulpen, L. (2018). *Aid chains and advocacy in the Global South: asset, nuisance or necessary evil?* Leiden: INCLUDE.

Fowler, A. (2000). *Partnerships: Negotiating Relationships-A Source for Non-Governmental Development Organisations.* Oxford: INTRAC.

Nye, J. S. (2013). Hard, Soft, and Smart Power. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy,* edited by A. F. Cooper, J. Heine, and R. C. Thakur, 559–574. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1 If you want to share experiences with using the tool, or offer suggestions how the tool can be improved, please contact Anne-Marie Heemskerk amh@partos.nl.

2 These phases in the partnering cycle were taken from the Handbook Brokering Better Partnerships, published by the Partnership Brokers Association in September 2019. It is an adaptation of the partnering cycle presented in the Partnering Toolbook, published by The Partnering Initiative (IBLF) 2003-2011.

Annex 1. Examples of potential decision-making topics

The table below contains examples of decision-making topics that may occur in a partnership. Some decision-making topics may not be applicable to your partnership while other topics may not have been listed.

You can **choose** key decision-making topics that are important for your partnership from this list.
Add, any important decision-making topics that are missing.

Phases in the partnering cycle[2]		Potential decision-making topics
Scoping and Building		
	Scoping needs and options	Decision to start a new partnership
	Identifying potential partners	Decisions on who to approach as potential partners
	Building relationships	Decisions about which potential partners to develop a partnership agreement with
		Decisions about the terms to be included in the partnership agreement
	Mapping and planning	Decisions about the content of the technical part of a funding proposal to the back donor
		Decisions about the financial part of a funding proposal to the back donor
Managing and maintaining		
	Governance and structure	Decisions about who is responsible for what
		Decisions about who reports to whom
	Deepening engagement	Decisions about which projects will be funded
		Decisions about what is on the agenda for lobbying and advocacy
		Decisions about who will represent the partnership at the national level
		Decisions about who will represent the partnership at the international level
	Delivering projects	Day-to-day decisions concerning the implementation of a project
		Decisions about which external advisors and suppliers to hire for the implementation of a project
Revisiting and revising		
	Measuring results	Decisions about what type of indicators will be measured
		Decisions about who is responsible for measuring which indicators
	Reviewing efficiency and value	Decisions about who will conduct a mid-term review of the programme
		Decisions about who will conduct the end evaluation of the programme
		Decisions about the content of evaluation reports
		Decisions about who the results will be reported to
		Decisions about what to report to the back donor
	Revisiting and revising	Decisions about adjustments to project plans
		Decisions about adjustments to the agenda for lobbying and advocacy
		Decisions about adjustments in the agreement with the back donor
Sustaining outcomes		
	Sharing knowledge and experiences	Decisions about lessons learnt that need to be documented and shared
	Scaling and increasing impact	Decisions about which interventions/projects need to be scaled up.
	Moving on	Decisions about whether to continue the partnership programme
		Decisions about which partners to include in the continuation of the partnership programme