



BUILDING  
**EQUITABLE**  
PARTNERSHIPS

**An Asylum Access Position Paper**

Updated with New Learnings. Published December 2023



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## A Note on Asylum Access' Identities

Asylum Access is a human rights advocacy organization that partners with forcibly displaced individuals and communities as they reclaim their rights, agency, and power. We are both an *international refugee-led* NGO<sup>1</sup> (registered as a global organization in the United States), and a *family of national organizations* run by host and refugee community leaders in Malaysia, Mexico, and Thailand in collaboration with communities. Asylum Access also houses the [Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative \(RRLI\)](#) (a refugee-led grantmaking and advocacy organization supporting refugee-led organizations around the world) and sits on its Coalition as a member of the governance body. In short, we are many things.

In our Position Paper below, we note the importance of reflecting upon and acknowledging one's power and privilege in relation to potential partners

when striving for equitable relationships. **Given our many identities, that reflection isn't always the same.** Sometimes we are operating from a position of *relative privilege* as an international NGO partnering with local organizations, including RLOs, around the world. Sometimes we are the local organization seeking to embark on equitable partnerships with other international organizations that may or may not acknowledge their relative positions of power. Sometimes we are *a member of the RRLI coalition*, seeking to build equitable partnerships with our fellow Coalition members, all of whom are leaders of RLOs. Each of these identities and positionalities have taught us something about equitable partnerships, and we are excited to share some of those lessons in this paper.

To ease understanding for the reader, we've attempted to note the positionality we are speaking from in any given section, especially when sharing details from the External Review<sup>2</sup> process, explained below, which called on the wisdom of our staff and teams who may have vastly different positionalities and power, and therefore different insights and experiences.

1 Asylum Access' CEO and Board Co-Chair, in addition to other members of the global leadership team (and global Board) who are in major leadership positions and influence the work of the organization, have experienced forced displacement.

2 In 2023, Asylum Access conducted an external review meant to collect feedback from key partners on our partnership practices. The review took place in 2023 by Lighthouse Partnerships. Learn more at: <https://www.lighthousepartnerships.org/>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Research shows that affected communities and other proximate<sup>3</sup> actors are more likely to lead responses that are accountable, legitimate, transparent, effective and impactful. However, due to structural racism and bias, proximate actors, especially refugee-led organizations (RLOs), have been systemically excluded within funding streams, as well as strategy development and decision-making processes.
- International NGOs (INGOs) and multilateral organizations can help address this by building **equitable partnerships** with local actors, including RLOs, which we understand *as partnerships where systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion*. The principles, which we now call 'elements', of equitable partnerships can also apply to donors and host community-led organizations working with RLOs.
- Since Asylum Access first shared its Position Paper "[Building Equitable Partnerships: Shifting Power in Forced Displacement](#)" in 2021, the organization has undergone an external, independent review<sup>4</sup> of its partnership practices by consulting firm Lighthouse Partnerships of our current and previous partnerships with local organizations. This review led to the development of revised elements of equitable partnerships, highlighted the critical role of donors in equitable partnerships, and supported the creation of two organizational tools for promoting and measuring the equity in partnerships. These tools are now enshrined in an [Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit](#),

3 Asylum Access uses the term "proximate" to signal those who are conducting their services while embedded in communities the services are meant to support. Another useful term is "local"; we like the definition in Peace Direct's "Time to Decolonise Aid" report as: "Development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding initiatives and programmes owned and led by people working in their own context." Available in: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/time-decolonize-aid/> p. 12.

4 In total, 11 organizations participated in the review, including our three national offices in Malaysia, Thailand, and Mexico, and eight RLOs and NGOs from Lebanon, Uganda, Egypt, Colombia, and Indonesia. Additionally, the key internal staff of Asylum Access Global were also engaged in the process. For more insights into our review process, including the methodology and findings, please see our blog post on the review here: [asylumaccess.org/ep2023review](https://asylumaccess.org/ep2023review)

which is available to any organization wishing to embrace equity during all interactions with partners.

The **five revised elements** of equitable partnerships are:

1. **Shared understanding of culture, context, and power in the partnership, characterized by:**

- a. All partners possessing strong **knowledge of the historical and current context** where the work is happening.
- b. All partners **understand and acknowledge historical and current power dynamics** in the sector and partnership.
- c. All partners **prioritize and value local and lived experience expertise**.

2. **Shared ownership and voice, characterized by:**

- a. The **co-design** of joint efforts, which requires that local partners are properly resourced and meaningfully involved in designing the partnership with equal or more say.
- b. The **co-leadership** of joint efforts, which requires that local partners are properly resourced and have equal standing and leadership in all areas of the project/partnership.
- c. Shared **voice and visibility**, which requires local partners to be connected to relevant platforms and stakeholders, able to present their views, to be listened to, and given equal visibility in all aspects of the project.

3. **Trust and transparency between partners, characterized by:**

- a. **Relationships and trust** between parties, typically enabled and maintained by an adequate investment of time spent on relationship development.
- b. **Clarity and mutual agreement** between parties, typically born of agreed-upon policies and procedures governing the partnership, including clear roles and responsibilities

and clarity surrounding resource distribution including budget allocations.

- c. Open communication and alignment among partners around **values and expectations**, and appropriate acknowledgment of power dynamics.

4. **Flexibility toward local ways of working and needs, characterized by:**

- a. All partners (especially INGOs) **flexibly adapting** to local partners' preferred ways of working and capacity.
- b. All partners (especially INGOs) **responding to the changing needs** of local partners in ever-evolving local response contexts.

5. **Mutual accountability and learning, characterized by:**

- a. Jointly understood **accountability standards** and processes that enable any partner to hold each other to account, both formally and informally.
  - b. The meaningful inclusion of all partners in **reviewing, evaluating, and learning** within the partnership or project.
- Equitable partnerships should be resourced with time and money, institutionalized in human resources processes (recruitment, interviews, induction), reinforced through ongoing internal training and communities of practice, and built into Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) processes.
  - Donors play a critical role in either facilitating or hindering equitable partnerships. INGOs should encourage donors to directly fund local partners – in particular, RLOs; ensure the success of funded projects is based on transformative outcomes, not outputs; push back on any unreasonable criteria or demands; and support procedures, timelines, and policies that facilitate equitable partnerships.

## INTRODUCTION

Asylum Access understands that institutions led by those most affected and those most proximate are undertaking foundational and transformative work for and with their communities. In our sector, those institutions are local<sup>5</sup> civil society organizations, especially refugee-led organizations (RLOs).<sup>6</sup>

This understanding stems from our day-to-day engagements, where we see these organizations identifying and breaking down the barriers that prevent dignified life and long-term well being in a cost effective and culturally-aware manner. It is reinforced by our review of [available research](#), which shows those most affected are likely to lead

responses that are accountable, legitimate, transparent, and ultimately, impactful.

We recognize that structural racism and bias in our sector have led to the systemic exclusion of local civil society<sup>7</sup>—and in particular refugee-led groups—within funding streams, as well as strategy development and decision-making processes. This exclusion continues to happen even as the international community’s most dominant actors have committed to localization and meaningful participation. As a human rights organization working with forcibly displaced communities, and as a refugee-led international organization,<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, fn 4.

<sup>6</sup> Asylum Access defines refugee-led organizations (RLOs) as “any formal or informal initiative/organization that is founded and run by people of forced displacement background and/or any formal or informal initiative/organization where people of forced displacement are in major leadership positions and able to influence the work of the organization.”

<sup>7</sup> While in this document we refer to host community-led organizations and RLOs as “local civil society,” we know this is not perfect. Not all refugee-led groups are local civil society organizations, and host community-led organizations do not face the same challenges as RLOs. The exclusion of both groups needs to be addressed, though this exclusion is experienced more acutely by RLOs and with additional challenges.

<sup>8</sup> While we feel proud of our journey and of the many internal structural changes we’ve made to become a more inclusive and representative organization, we also recognize that there may still be existing power imbalances that we need to acknowledge and address, especially as a global organization registered in the United States. More details on our internal change process is in Annex 1.

From our ongoing learning, we understand many things must happen to achieve this sector-wide reorientation (for example, realized commitments to representation and inclusion, fundamental changes to funding flows, and the realization of community accountability over donor accountability, to name just a few).<sup>9</sup> This paper focuses on one key element of that: equitable partnerships, which we understand as partnerships where systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion.

Equitable partnerships are crucial because they address the power dynamics that enable international actors to dictate the rules of the game. By shifting power to those most proximate, we expect that projects will be better designed and implemented, work better toward community interests, and ultimately, result in greater impact.

## New Information, New Insights

This paper builds upon Asylum Access' 2021 position paper, '[Building Equitable Partnerships: Shifting Power in Forced Displacement](#)' ("2021 Position Paper") by incorporating new learning. In early 2023, Asylum Access commissioned [Lighthouse Partnership](#), an external independent consultant, to conduct a [review](#) ("External Review") of our current and previous partnerships with local organizations, looking back as far as 2019. The External Review was designed as a learning exercise, and presented an opportunity to develop updated elements in consultation with our local partners and key Asylum Access. The exercise captured reflections, thoughts, and feelings on what constitutes an equitable partnership.

Based on the External Review we have updated this Position Paper in the following ways:

- We have updated the five elements of equitable partnerships. In order to contextualize them, we offer positive practices, lessons learned, relevant case studies, and reflections from our External Review. You can find these reflections in the "External Review Reflection" and "Case

Study" boxes in each section below. Through these reviews and case studies, the reader will find that Asylum Access has sometimes enabled the elements of equitable partnerships, and sometimes has made errors. We humbly share our successes and transparently name our failures in order to normalize the pursuit of growth. In some of these reflections, we share anecdotes and examples of different practices that partners found to be important in the pursuit of each element of equitable partnerships.

- We have captured learnings related to the role donors play in facilitating or hindering equitable partnerships (as well as steps INGOs can take in their engagements with donors in pursuit of equitable partnerships), and tips for beginning to operationalize equitable partnerships within their own institutions.
- Finally, we have developed two new organizational tools for promoting and measuring the equity in partnerships and enshrined them in a new [Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit](#). We hope the Toolkit will be useful for organizations in exploring how to create more accountability and learning in their own partnerships.

While this document may be useful to various organizations and institutions, we specifically hope this updated version will be useful for our peer international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and multilateral organizations. In many places, these ideas can also apply to host community-led organizations that engage in funding relationships or partnerships with other host community organizations or with RLOs, although we acknowledge the External Review and this paper were not designed with this dynamic in mind.

<sup>9</sup> For more resources on this, including experts that can support internal learning journeys of organizations, visit [asylumaccess.org/ep2023experts](https://asylumaccess.org/ep2023experts)



## DEFINING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Asylum Access defines equitable partnerships as:

*“Partnerships where systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion.”*



“Systems and processes” refer to partnership guidelines, SOPs, plans, strategies, and formal and informal processes that relate to, influence, or direct the way external partnerships are carried out in organizations. “Daily interactions” include day-to-day discussions, collaboration and correspondence that create trust and cement practices between partners. When these systems, processes and interactions are done in such a way that power is transferred to proximate actors and inclusion is enabled, the partnership is “equitable” according to this definition.

There are five elements of equitable partnerships. While these elements are presented as distinct, in practice many of them are interconnected. For example, mutual accountability (Element 5) can only be present when there is a foundation of trust (Element 3). Developing knowledge of the context and culture (Element 1) is a precursor to being able to

have the flexibility to adapt and pivot based on the needs of the context and partner (Element 4).

### *Sector Definitions of Equitable Partnerships*

The Asylum Access definition of equitable partnerships is informed by several definitions presented by others. Here is some of our favorite source material:

- **Peace Direct** [explains](#) the nine principles of effective partnerships are (1) Acknowledge and challenge power imbalances; (2) Confront racism and prejudice; (3) Support and invest in local leadership; (4) Strive for mutual accountability and learning; (5) Establish long-term partnerships; (5) Provide unrestricted funding; (6) Be adaptable, and promote adaptability and resilience with your partners; (7) Consider nonfinancial resources as part of any partnership; and (9) Ensure that partnership transitions are a collaborative endeavor.
- **Tomorrow's Cities** [defines](#) equitable partnerships as a partnership which acknowledges principles of equality, mutuality, reciprocity, and respect..., acknowledge[s] and make[s] power differences explicit, including that funding flows affect relationships and create power asymmetries..., [are] built on interpersonal relationships that are built on mutual trust..., [and] [e]ngage with the context that shapes the partnership and create space for mutual learning.
- **BOND UK** [speaks](#) to the importance of evolution in relationships and power dynamics (intrac-table, semi-explicit changes) as well as mental models (implicit, transformative change) to really make a lasting change to how partnerships happen, specifically in terms of how equitable they are.
- **The World Health Organization (WHO)** [speaks](#) to the ‘software’ of equity (“building mutual respect and trust”) and the ‘hardware’ of equity (such as funding procedures and contractual agreements”). *“Tilting relational software towards equity should facilitate attitudinal shifts, while adjusting the hardware should ensure that the structures and systems are increasingly supportive and appropriate.”*

## UNPACKING THE ELEMENTS OF EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

### Element 1: Shared Understanding Context, Culture and Power in the Partnership

Element 1: Shared understanding Context, Culture and Power in the Partnership
<p><b>Pillar 1</b></p> <p><i>Knowledge of context &amp; culture</i></p>
<p>All partners possess strong knowledge of the historical and current context where the work is happening.</p>
<p><b>Pillar 2</b></p> <p><i>Understanding and acknowledging power</i></p>
<p>Understand and acknowledge historical and current power dynamics in the sector and partnership.</p>
<p><b>Pillar 3</b></p> <p><i>Valuing diverse local and lived experience &amp; expertise</i></p>
<p>Prioritize and value the expertise of those who are most proximate to the issues.</p>

### *Pillar 1: Knowledge of context and culture*

As an outsider to any given context, it is incumbent on international actors to invest time and resources to learn about a particular context and culture in which a local partner organization is working in order to support the partnership and partner in a more culturally and contextually appropriate way. This can include understanding the external environment (e.g., political and legal, economic, and social) and the internal environment, (e.g., organizational structures, values, processes, and strategic priorities). This requires both formal research and a learning mindset as the partnership progresses, i.e., being alert to what is happening in any given engagement, regular check-ins with partners (in some situations, it may be appropriate to do so informally as well, e.g., through Whatsapp), and being alert to cultural nuances in communication. An aspect of understanding context includes understanding partners' resource limitations and internal organizational challenges/realities.

Donors also crucially need information about context and culture so that their funding approaches match the needs and interests of various proximate actors and the communities they support. Those with close relationships with donors—often

INGOs—should help to ensure funders receive such critical information. Donors often dictate how international actors define success through application processes and grant agreements that may prioritize quantitative outputs over harder-to-quantify transformative outcomes. Through honest dialogue, international actors can help donors **check their assumptions** about the importance of quantitative data and complex log frames, and instead seek to better understand the nature of outcomes that are important to communities, and measure for those instead. INGOs can use their position of relative privilege with donors to raise these questions and prompt consideration about more inclusive ways to assess impact.

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**External Review Reflection:** *Language choices of INGOs rarely reflect local realities*

Partners in the External Review discussed the need to decolonize terms and concepts developed and subsequently established by donors and INGOs as sector parlance. These terms and concepts—‘jargon’—often are irrelevant to how issues, interventions, and approaches are conceptualized locally, confusing communication and creating a disconnect between what is happening at the local level and how that translates - or does not translate - at the international level. This means that local partners must adapt to specific concepts and terms irrelevant to their own reality. Language therefore becomes an essential component of ensuring partnerships are equitable and, more specifically, inclusive. Local communities should be allowed **to lead the change in terminology**, with organizations deferring to them where possible and re-evaluating where not.

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## **Pillar 2: Understanding and acknowledging power**

International organizations must verse ourselves in the historical and ongoing power dynamics present

in our sector in order to appropriately identify our own power in relation to partners. In order to accurately identify positionality and power, partners may wish to embark on an intentional equity learning journey with the support of experts.<sup>10</sup>

Once international organizations can clearly see their power, it may be valuable to acknowledge manifestations of that power as they emerge during a partnership. It should be the responsibility of the partner who holds more power to name and initiate conversation, as it can be challenging for the other partner to do.

Notably, power dynamics can be present between any two partners. Although this paper has been written with the relationship between international and local partners in mind, it is also crucial to examine power dynamics between RLOs and host community NGO partners in any given context, especially when projects involve both parties.

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**External Review Reflection:** *The Importance of Acknowledging Power*

The External Review showed that Asylum Access needs to be better at acknowledging and discussing the implicit power dynamics with its local partners. Some partners shared that, sometimes, power should be acknowledged but not necessarily fixed, as power is often complex and externally imposed upon us. Partners suggested that it can be useful to name these externalities, clarify how they may impact the partnership, and establish ways to jointly mitigate risks to the project and relationship.

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## **Pillar 3: Valuing diverse local and lived experience and expertise**

All partners must assume knowledge and expertise by those most proximate to the specific experience of displacement being addressed. International organizations often have valuable experience, but our

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<sup>10</sup> For more resources, check the ‘Additional Resources’ page at the end of this document and our list of experts at [asylumaccess.org/ep2023experts](https://asylumaccess.org/ep2023experts)

skill sets and knowledge do not apply within every context. Approaching local civil society with humility and assuming they have important and usually more relevant knowledge, skills, and experiences to offer is a crucial starting point in an equitable partnership. Too often, international organizations wrongly assume that local actors lack capacity or expertise, exemplified by the problematic usage of “capacity-building.” Local actors are not lacking capacity, but rather are systemically deprived of critical resources and access to opportunities. As Arbie Baguios **explains** in a talk on *Decolonizing Project Management*, “The task, therefore, is...to connect colleagues to the resources and power they need to implement successful projects – transforming capacity building, into capacity bridging.”

Secondly, although this paper is not explicitly sharing best practices in representation targets, it is important to acknowledge how partners perceive the legitimacy of their partnerships based on the observable inclusion of people with lived experience on staff. Several partners in the External Review noted that refugee inclusion on staff was one important way to demonstrate they value lived experience. Partners noted that refugee inclusion on staff also has practical value: in addition to promoting trust and transparency, the inclusion of people with lived experience brings cultural and contextual knowledge and supports trauma-informed engagement, which leads to more impactful approaches.

**External Review Reflection: The Value of Lived Experience**

The External Review highlighted that local partners view the inclusivity of people with lived experiences in the INGO partner staff as a useful, practical component of the partnership because cultural nuances, experiences, and issues of local / refugee actors did not require extensive explanation and overture.

One Asylum Access staff member with lived experience of forced displacement shared with the review team why lived experience may be of value to other refugee-led organizations:

*“Because I have been in that situation before... [and have worked] with different other refugee leaders, I know how it feels. I know how people normally behave with these institutions. So, I have been there. I have felt the pain of these people... I tailor my information or communication based on the experiences that I have gone through. So, I might need to invest some little amount of energy and effort as compared to someone who is, who is [an] outsider.”*

**Element 2: Shared Ownership & Voice**

Element 2: Shared Ownership and Voice	
<b>Pillar 1</b>	
<i>Co-design</i>	
	Local partners are properly resourced and meaningfully involved in designing the partnership with equal or more say in project design.
<b>Pillar 2</b>	
<i>Co-leadership</i>	
	Local partners are properly resourced and have equal standing and leadership to other partners in all areas of the partnership.
<b>Pillar 3</b>	
<i>Voice and visibility</i>	
	Partners are connected to relevant platforms and stakeholders, can present their views, are listened to, and are given equal visibility in all aspects of the project.

**Pillar 1: Co-design**

All joint projects must be co-designed by those most proximate. Ideally, INGOs and multilateral organizations offer their services and support based on needs identified by local partners.<sup>11</sup> If INGOs or multilateral organizations bring forth an idea involving

<sup>11</sup> As requested by a refugee leader in Malaysia during the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) consultations in July 2021: “Partner with RLOs and let us do it our way”.

local action, they must identify local partners as soon as possible and before taking action, and support and position them to have equal or more say on all aspects of project design (such as when setting agendas, conducting risk assessments<sup>12</sup>, identifying needs, developing plans and grant applications, etc). Where possible, this support includes ensuring that they are sufficiently resourced to engage meaningfully in all components of project design. In the event that a partner joins a grant application development process or a partnership part way through, it is important to create enough time and space for them to fully understand, critique, and recommend changes in strategic direction. Partners also need the space to ask questions about, provide suggestions, and understand their potential role in the project. Partners should also co-design a plan for the end of the partnership - including exploring future directions, new relationship opportunities, transition possibilities, and other concrete actions when the project ends.

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**External Review Reflection:** *Tone for collaboration is set from the very beginning*

Several consulted partners reported that project design processes that were inclusive from the very start, set the project up for success. Some components of co-design mentioned by partners included regular communication with Asylum Access staff, Asylum Access's regular request for feedback on project design-related matters, and space for transparent dialogue to discuss things such as how Asylum Access was going to contribute to the project.

One partner, however, reported that they were not always involved in all project design details, particularly when this involved conversations with donors. The impact of this oversight on co-design was that the partner did not feel like they were joint leaders with Asylum Access in the project.

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**Pillar 2: Co-leadership**

During the life of the project, all partners should enjoy joint leadership over the implementation of the project, including decisions made around strategy and budget, changes in project activities or outcomes, the incorporation of feedback from monitoring and evaluation processes, and the development of exit or transition plans. Partners should develop and implement policies that hold one another accountable for exercising co-leadership, such as procedures for decision-making and conflict resolution. To make these feasible, local organizations should receive the resources necessary to carry out co-leadership duties.

Those with close relationships with donors can help support co-leadership by encouraging direct funding pathways to local organizations, which would put the local organization in a project leadership seat. This might include working with donors to better understand their concerns around direct funding, working with local organizations to understand barriers to accessing funding, and working with both to jointly agree on ways forward. INGOs can still be co-leaders of a project if selected by the local partners as a key partner.

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**External Review Reflections:** *Donors can enable or hinder co-leadership between partners*

In 2022, Asylum Access collaborated with a local CSO on a five-year funding proposal. Asylum Access had a relationship with the donor and took the lead in coordinating with the donor and drafting the proposal while discussions of the possibility of having the donor directly fund the local partner were underway.

Although we had hoped to have the local partner be very involved in co-design prior to submission, that proved challenging. One Asylum Access staff person reflected that this may have been because the donor wanted to fund Asylum

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<sup>12</sup> Risk assessments for joint projects must be done together with local partners. In many contexts when local partners (especially RLOs) do complex, visible or political work, they face significant risks which outweigh those faced by an international partner. International actors should however not assume levels of risk and take liberties to lead strategies based on that (e.g. around public facing advocacy). While international partners may be able to support with identifying risk levels and mitigation strategies, local partners should ultimately be supported to lead on risk assessments and mitigation strategies.

Access as lead grantee, there was little “impetus for the local partner to take responsibility.” This was frustrating for Asylum Access and the local partner, who acknowledged the power dynamic, but felt largely unable to change it. As a result, the project lacked co-design. This experience underscored the important link between direct funding to local partners and co-design, co-leadership, and ultimately, co-ownership.

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**External Review Reflection:** *A Case Study in Coalition Co-leadership*

RRLI coalition members have significant decision-making roles within the coalition, with each decision to be consulted and each opinion given equal weight. The Coalition practices consensus-based decision making. Partners note that Asylum Access invested significant time and resources at the outset of the partnership to ensure that the RRLI coalition -- not the Asylum Access Board of Directors -- governed the RLO-to-RLO fund and RRLI’s advocacy agenda. Practices that have contributed to this co-leadership include:

- Ensuring members have sufficient time to provide feedback
  - Members make decisions on RRLI grant-making and manage programming with local organizations / RLOs
  - Members being part of the working groups / leading working groups
  - Members regularly meeting and discussing issues, direction, strategy
  - Using a range of communication methods
  - Formalizing operating procedures while also creating significant space for informal interaction.
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**Pillar 3: Voice and visibility**

We must ensure local partners in joint projects are being seen and heard by all project stakeholders including donors and decision makers, and in engagements with media and social media. Visibility is particularly important toward donors and other actors who can be influential in channeling funding, supporting progress or building the credibility of partners. Our sector has long-enabled the visibility of INGOs and multilateral organizations, leading to the tremendous accumulation of contracts, grants, and other opportunities for international actors. Some of the most important ways to ensure shared visibility and voice to shift power include:

1. **Facilitating connections (don’t gate-keep):** INGOs and multilateral organizations often have relationships and access to spaces and opportunities that local partners, specifically RLOs, do not. Centering local leadership means ensuring resources and opportunities are accessible to local civil society. In many instances, there will be opportunities to facilitate direct introductions to donors and other actors without inserting ourselves into projects. Where INGOs or multilateral organizations have to be the channel for funding flows (due, for example, to restrictions on RLOs to set up bank accounts or legally register in their countries), visibility and direct engagement with donors remain critical and should not be a cause to take ownership of a project or to avoid supporting RLOs. Even after the end of a project cycle, international partners can continue to play a role in facilitating and connecting local partners with suitable stakeholders or platforms.
2. **Visibility in external communications:** INGOs often have well-resourced communications departments that support external visibility and communication of impact toward donors and other influential actors, in ways that many local actors—in particular RLOs—do not. Using our platforms and voice to feature the work of local partners, giving credit where credit is due in both verbal discussions and written publications (unless local partners request to stay anonymous), and being mindful to avoid claiming

the efforts of local partners as our efforts will decenter ourselves in the work, while elevating local impact and efforts toward those who can support them.

Ultimately, international actors should leverage their power to push for local partner inclusion in relevant convenings and media coverage; using acquired knowledge to support the local partner to prepare to engage; and sometimes, step back altogether, making space for local practitioners to occupy space and be heard on their own.

When all the above pillars are present, i.e. a project is co-designed and co-led by all partners, local civil society is visible and heard in spaces they need to be, all partners will be invested deeply in both the outcome and the process of the project - ensuring its success.

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**CASE STUDY:** *Rejecting the “gate-keeping” dynamic by facilitating direct funding for RLOs*

One of our partners is [Refugiados Unidos](#), a Venezuelan women-led RLO in Colombia established in 2021 that uses a rights-based approach to support individuals to gain legal status, access livelihood opportunities, and integrate into communities. With our shared interests, Asylum Access was curious about how it could support their work.

One of the priorities of Refugiados Unidos was to identify funding opportunities and donors who would be most suited to their approaches and interventions. At the time, they were not receiving direct funding from institutional donors, and did not yet have the relationships to begin an effective prospecting process.

Asylum Access had an already established relationship with an institutional donor (“the Foundation”) with whom they linked to Refugiados Unidos. One of the aims of the partnership between Asylum Access and Refugiados Unidos was to equip them with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to establish a direct relationship with the Foundation, whereby the Foundation

funds Refugiados Unidos directly, and Asylum Access is the sub-grantee consultant.

Asylum Access and Refugiados Unidos took the following steps to do this:

- Held numerous planning meetings and conversations on how they would collaborate.
- Jointly developed the proposal and discussed ideas “so that we [made] decisions [that were] well thought through” and aligned with the donor’s strategic priorities in the country.
- Shared knowledge and ideas on how to approach the donor, relate the RLO’s work to the foundation’s strategic priorities and interests, and how to establish trust. These discussions established a gradual process, at the RLO’s pace.

As a member of Refugiados Unidos stated:

*“Asylum Access has been the protagonist, not of communicating or implementing the project, but they’ve been a very, very important link so that organizations such as ours we can talk to donors and are involved in spaces where there might be opportunities for us to grow. So when I was involved in the project for the first time, it was very clear that Asylum Access was very open to share and enabling conversations with their strategic partners, with organizations and in other scenarios in order to help organizations to grow.”*

For Refugiados Unidos, Asylum Access was very clear about what support they could offer, how they would provide this, and what their own experience with the Foundation was. One of their leaders shared that Asylum Access was “very interested in our needs” and worked flexibly to meet them. “They’ve enabled and provided us with tools, with conversations, with dialogues that have made this happen” and have been crucial in helping Refugiados Unidos establish a relationship with the Foundation that is “more horizontal”.

As a result of targeted support (e.g., in planning for meetings with the Foundation, in discussing how to respond to their questions and requests,



how to frame the RLO's own questions, and increase reporting capabilities), has increased Refugiados Unidos confidence in liaising with the Foundation. They have now established mutual expectations of their relationship with the Foundation, e.g., in terms of communication and ways of reporting, and have subsequently

established a strong relationship with them built on mutual trust and transparency: "Little by little, we started creating a culture."

The Foundation ultimately directly funded the RLO for an 18-month project, with the RLO sub-granting to Asylum Access for strategic

### *Ongoing Barriers to Equitable Partnerships*

During both surveys and interviews, local partners were asked about the ongoing barriers to equitable partnerships with international actors. Partner responses helped us to identify and refine the elements as they are presented in this updated position paper. We are also sharing those barriers here to support us all in identifying and addressing inequitable partnerships in practice:

- Structural challenges and bureaucratic constraints, like the tendency to tie partnerships to specific projects and project cycles instead of allowing them to naturally evolve.
- The imposition of strict deadlines and specific timelines intensifies pressure on the partnership, especially during the project design phase.
- Resource limitations (time, people, funds). Often funding and resources in general are concentrated in the Global North. Larger players enjoy greater visibility, resourcing, and power, perpetuating the exclusion of local partners.
- A lack of trust in RLOs, especially in their ability to responsibly and efficiently allocate resources means that sub-granting is the norm, and local organizations continue to feel discriminated against, delegitimized, and disrespected.
- Barriers to hiring people of forced displacement due to legal restrictions, disruptions to education and professional experience due to the displacement experience, and the presence of bias and discrimination.
- Mind-sets, attitudes, and prejudices continue to persist. These stem from structural intransigence, i.e., the system is built to elevate the current major players but also rooted in individuals' prejudices and assumptions around whose and what knowledge is valued.
- 'Dramatization of trauma' and co-opting / leveraging refugees' experiences for organizations' own priorities has meant that partners have felt used for other stakeholders' benefit.
- INGO's central offices are often in the Global North, creating physical distance between donors and the intervention they fund. This distance can translate into donors' lack of contextual understanding and limits accessibility/connections between local organizations and donors. For some, it perpetuates hierarchy in relationships.
- Building equitable partnerships can be challenging, given that equitable partnerships represent a relatively new domain of practice. Additionally, individuals hesitant to relinquish power may choose not to participate in such partnerships.

planning, fundraising, communications, and finance strategy support. From the early stages of discussions with the Foundation, the Foundation was motivated to pursue direct funding and was supportive, flexible, and practiced culturally appropriate ways of working in building a relationship with the RLO. This combination of factors likely led to a positive outcome between the donor and the RLO.

## Element 3: Trust and Transparency

Element 3: Trust and Transparency	
<b>Pillar 1</b>	<i>Relationship-building</i>
Adequate time and resources are invested in building and maintaining relationships and trust.	
<b>Pillar 2</b>	<i>Clarity and mutual agreement</i>
There are clear and mutually agreed policies and procedures governing the partnership, clear roles and responsibilities, and clarity on resources, especially budgetary allocation.	
<b>Pillar 3</b>	<i>Aligning values and expectations</i>
There is open communication among partners about values, and expectations, and acknowledgment of power dynamics.	

### **Pillar 1: Relationship-building**

A key ingredient in building successful and equitable partnerships is trust. An important pathway toward building trust is prioritizing relationship building between individuals, groups, organizations, donors, and communities. Forming such relationships often requires an investment of time, energy, and resources, including building rapport over multiple conversations, and developing culturally appropriate processes to ensure that we deeply understand each other's visions, limitations,

expectations, and ways of working. We can also prioritize relationships by practicing flexibility (Element 4), especially around cultural norms, varying time zones, and resource limitations. When building such relationships, international partners should aim to not just be a resource, but also a trusted companion on the journey toward systems change.

Relationship building should also extend to donors, who are often in a position to promote or hinder equitable partnerships. This relationship building with donors should include being willing to have important, sometimes difficult conversations about how their actions impact partnerships and project outcomes.

**CASE STUDY:** *Transparent conversations with donors can support changes in relationship dynamics*

Asylum Access and a local CSO had been jointly working on a lengthy funding application process when the donor emailed both organizations to say that they had changed strategic direction and would no longer be able to consider their grant application. This was following several rounds of written and verbal feedback, reviews, and revisions, and a lack of clarity on the direction of the proposal over a period of 9 months. Cumulatively, Asylum Access and the local NGO invested hundreds of hours of organizational time into the partnership and proposal development.

Following the email, Asylum Access and our local partner issued a joint letter to the donor. In the spirit of supporting internal reflection by the donor, we acknowledged the realities and uncertainties surrounding funding applications and outlined why we believed the donor's approach was problematic. This included what we perceived to be strict, technical, and dominant M&E definitions that were not rooted in proximity or impact, and the lack of internal clarity, transparency, and respect in communication with partners. The letter also reiterated Asylum Access' commitment to direct local funding as

one of the core elements of equitable partnerships.

In a follow-up debrief between Asylum Access, the local partner, and the donor, the donor expressed surprise and gratitude. As an involved staff person described it:

*“They were open, they were surprised... to receive an email like that [as] they’ve never received an email like that from a potential grantee, and they were very grateful. Now, they have picked up the project again, [and] they’re experimenting, piloting this direct funding approach with the local partner.”*

We were positively surprised by the response from the donor, which signaled an openness to listening and learning. Although not every donor might respond in the same way, and there are strong power dynamics and risks to consider, this approach of highlighting the negative impact of donors ways of working can lead not just to improved relationships and trust between the donor and grantee, but also support pivotal mindset shifts and learning in our sector as a whole over time.

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## **Pillar 2: Clarity and mutual agreement**

Trust can be easily built (and conversely eroded) depending on the level of transparency between partners around core issues underpinning the project. Notably, this transparency should include full clarity on budgets, in particular allocations of salaries and core costs attached to a joint project. In addition, transparency includes ensuring clarity on partnership goals, deliverables, respective roles and responsibilities, expectations around time and resource commitments, mutual accountability, dispute resolution, risk mitigation, donor requirements, and when and how the partnership terminates. Formalizing agreements, processes, and policies in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) or partnership agreements can be particularly important to ensure clarity across partners. Importantly, many

of these should be supplemented initially by verbal conversations and, where possible, jointly developed.

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### **External Review Reflection:** *Fiscal transparency generates trust*

Many Asylum Access partners considered fiscal transparency an especially important element of equitable partnerships for local partners; but overall, there were mixed reports about Asylum Access’s level of transparency about finances and budgets in individual partnerships.

One partner who had a high degree of trust in Asylum Access recalled that Asylum Access had transparently shared the full budget for a project. They, in turn, felt trusted to manage project money well. Another partner noted each budget line was made clear to them by the Asylum Access team, with specifics on human resources/wages fully disclosed -- a practice they noted was rare for partnerships with INGOs. This experience of fiscal transparency was particularly strong when Asylum Access and a partner fully co-designed a project.

However, for another partner, there was not as much fiscal transparency as they would have liked. Some partners were also unclear on formal processes to address unclear budgetary practices. Lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities in financial decision making exacerbated this frustration.

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### **CASE STUDY:** *A model for equitable coalition building*

The RRLI Coalition has established a model for coalition-building that is premised on investing time in building strong relationships, clarity of expectations, roles, and responsibilities, and ensuring values alignment. Based on conversations with several RRLI coalition members, the

External Review unearthed some components that led to this including:

- *Robust and transparent operational and financial processes with clear governance structures:* There are numerous SOPs relating to things like grant management, recruitment, calls for proposals, etc.
- *Full transparency with the budget:* All coalition members have access to the budget and any budget changes must be approved by a working group or the full coalition.
- *Clarity of commitments and shared resources:* Members know what is required of them, should they commit to a certain role or working group. There is full transparency on how coalition members share resources, particularly their expertise, through the channels of the working group. Coalition members feel able to state how much time, for instance, they can commit at any given time. There is space to discuss how resources can be leveraged to ensure participation and success of the coalition itself.
- *Documented expectations and goals:* Members can indicate their availability, interests, and goals of being in the coalition with full transparency amongst members of where each member stands about their role in the coalition. This has led to more streamlined and efficient working methods as expectations of each other are always managed and sustainable.
- *Documented shared values:* This values-oriented approach has made programmatic and other coalition activities more streamlined as everyone is on the same page, working toward jointly established and understood goals of disrupting the power dynamics in the system.

Some Coalition members who participated in the External Review reported that this clarity and mutual agreement stemmed from **foundational work conducted at the beginning of the initiative**, which took a year. This included a relationship-building session, led by a skilled facilitator, convened by Asylum Access. According to one RRLI staff member, coalition-building

was also deeply enabled the “commonality of experiences” between and amongst the coalition members.

As a result of a significant investment of resources—most crucially, time—to create clarity and mutual agreement, the RRLI coalition has developed into a space of trusted and transparent relationships. All stakeholders consulted were particularly enthusiastic about the strength of relationships between coalition members.

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### *Pillar 3: Aligning values and expectations*

The importance of aligning values and expectations between partners should not be understated; they support partnered organizations in identifying the parameters within which they can navigate day-to-day decisions on programmatic strategy, activities, and expenditure. These values and expectations should be made explicit through conversations, and also where possible, be documented in any partnership agreement. Ideally, these conversations should be in tandem with those around power dynamics, ensuring local partners feel that they can challenge any unreasonable expectations that an international partner may have, and vice versa.

In some instances, determining shared values is not always straightforward; sometimes values can be best gleaned by observing and extrapolating behaviors during interactions. This is especially important for cultures that may prefer indirect communication.

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#### **CASE STUDY:** *Values misalignment ends partnership*

With one host community-led local partner, a misalignment of values around what refugee leadership looked like in practice led to indefinite pause of a partnership. Over the course of the relationship and proposal development stages for funding, Asylum Access and the local partner had agreed that there should be financial resources allocated for RLO participation

in the project given the projects' emphasis on refugee leadership. However, after successfully advocating with the donor to make the local partner the lead grantee instead of Asylum Access, the local partner did not include compensation for RLOs' time in their draft budget. Asylum Access instead allocated part of its draft budget to compensate RLOs for their time.

Following direct conversations between the partner and the donor, the local partner requested that the partnership with Asylum Access be paused. At that point, it seemed unlikely RLOs would be directly receiving any funds for the project. In light of a clear values misalignment, Asylum Access decided to step away from the opportunity.

The experience reaffirmed the importance of having in-depth conversations to iterate and reiterate values before and during partnership development. Asylum Access also plans to develop a written summary of Asylum Access' values (including on equitable partnerships) for prospective partners, and will be ensuring that values conversations are explicit and thorough, and wherever possible, documented.

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## Element 4: Flexibility

### Element 4: Flexibility

#### Pillar 1

*Adapting to preferred ways of working*

#### Pillar 2

*Responding to changing needs and organizational context*

international partners) emerged as a key element for partners during the External Review, manifesting in almost every aspect of the partnership process. This includes flexibility toward ways of working such as communication channels, language, and processes, but also flexibility concerning adapting projects/partnerships to changing local contexts.

### *Pillar 1: Adapting to preferred ways of working*

Because responding to forced displacement situations is inherently intercultural work, we must have high cultural intelligence to collaborate effectively.<sup>13</sup> To build this intelligence, we try to learn about and adapt to our partners' cultures and ways of working, such as communication and writing styles, language and translation, formality, frequency and preferences around collaboration. We can conduct basic research about cultural preferences where available (see Element 1) but when in doubt, we can always ask our partners what they prefer. Recognizing and adapting to cultural differences not only increases trust but also reduces friction and miscommunication, which is especially critical in the era of remote partnerships. Though all partners should seek to do this for one another, often the burden of conformity is carried by local partnerships, who feel pressure to adhere to international standards. Within an equitable partnership, this will be flipped: the international partner—including donors—should seek to conform to local preferences and ways of working.

Asylum Access has built many successful partnerships, but in one fraught conversation with a prospective partner, we pushed for a culturally-specific way of measuring a project's impact, while ignoring the importance of relationship-building in the prospective partner's culture. The prospective partner ultimately declined to collaborate on the project, and Asylum Access learned a hard but critical lesson about the importance of prioritizing, building, and utilizing cultural intelligence.

While not present as a standalone element in the 2021 Position Paper, flexibility (particularly from

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<sup>13</sup> Cultural intelligence (CQ) is "the ability to relate and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds and it goes beyond existing notions of cultural sensitivity and awareness." For more information on cultural intelligence, please visit the Cultural Intelligence Center [website](#).

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**External Review Reflections:** *How we communicate is key for success*

Both partners and Asylum Access staff emphasized the importance of communication in equitable partnerships. This not only meant the use of interpreters and translators to ensure partners could communicate effectively but also the way concepts, issues, and requests are communicated is believed to deeply affect a partnership.

As one RLO partner stated: *“The way that we communicate, the mechanisms for communicating, as well as the messages that are shared from some organizations to others, or from donors to others can be key for a partnership to be successful, and/or, for it not to work.”*

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## **Pillar 2: Responding to changing needs and organizational context**

Equitable partnerships require all parties to defer to proximate actor’s assessments of the changing needs of the communities and to offer as much flexibility and support to respond to those changes as possible. This can include offering additional resources when internal organizational shifts challenge project success; offering more staff time from the international partner to troubleshoot challenges; and jointly advocating with donors for increased flexibility. One way to protect this flexibility is to ensure internal partnership policies are not rigid and are not limited to prescribed methods and structures; instead, any enshrined partnership approaches should be flexible enough to pivot to changes between and within contexts.

It may also be important for those with donor relationships -- often international NGOs -- to encourage funders to adapt to the changing needs and organizational contexts of local organizations. Partners in the External Review noted that donor expectations and requirements can create a pressurized space, with this pressure often transferred to the local partner. INGOs can help to protect against undue pressure by advocating for longer timelines from donors during design phase, and/or to fund

design phase such that an equitable partnership can be achieved. INGOs can support local organizations by creating spaces for honest and constructive group dialogue on the impacts of various requests and requirements. In some cases, donors may not be aware of the impact of their actions.

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**External Review Reflections:** *The importance of flexibility in resourcing*

For one partner, there was insufficient flexibility from Asylum Access and a lack of appreciation of the partner’s limited resources when designing the partnership. In this case, the partner was required to develop specific documents (e.g., policies, budgetary information) within tight timeframes, which the partner felt unable to do due to competing priorities. Pressure from external donors could have contributed to this situation.

Many partners reported that Asylum Access showed flexibility by supporting the conceptual translation of donor requirements. Some partners note that Asylum Access’ made processes/donor requests more accessible for partners. They shared that Asylum Access provided templates for specific Standard Operating Procedures and policies required by the donor and requested further time/resources for partners to fulfill donor requirements. The support Asylum Access provided in developing the budget was also significant, especially where budget lines were perceived to be rigid and inflexible.

One partner identified that Asylum Access supported them flexibly by resourcing gaps in the budget. As the partners reported, Asylum Access said to them, *“if it stops you from doing the work, then we will try to... get Asylum Access funding to be able to cover that ... They were happy to compensate and kind of fix the problem as much as possible.”* For one partner, providing resources in the initial stages of the partnership, in supporting the partner to develop their project proposal, and in Asylum Access sharing their expertise in this part of the process, was integral to them securing funding.

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**External Review Reflections:** *Flexibility applies to donors, too*

For one partner, if donors do not provide time and space for organizations involved in a funded partnership to build relationships, develop an understanding of context and culture, and to tailor their partnership to their specific needs, this can undermine equity in the partnership and limit the impact of the project.

Asylum Access is making concerted efforts to push for more donor flexibility. For one staff member:

*“If they [the donor] want something within a specific timeframe, it is ok to respectfully say that it’s not possible. Actions are sometimes stronger than words in that donors may feel this push-back and see that the organization is strong and has its boundaries.”*

With one project, both Asylum Access and local partners had full independence on how they would allocate funding, as each organization had separate budgets and was funded separately by the donor. In this way, the financial interdependence - or reliance, which can be the case for some, - was not there. This already established a more level playing field from which the partnership operated. One partner implied that their financial independence (due to their funding covering core costs) impacts the nature of their relationship with any partner or donor, including Asylum Access. This suggests that their decision-making was not heavily influenced by Asylum Access or other partners like it would be for organizations dependent on international donors.

## Element 5: Learning & Accountability

### Element 5: Learning and Accountability

#### Pillar 1

##### *Mutual accountability*

Accountability standards and processes are discussed at the start of a partnership and partners can hold each other to account, both formally and informally.

#### Pillar 2

##### *Shared learning*

Local partners are meaningfully involved in reviewing, evaluating and learning within the partnership or project.

The final element of equitable partnerships is having the space, structure, and culture that facilitates shared accountability and learning during the life of the project.

### **Pillar 1: Mutual accountability**

Mutual accountability is the formal and informal methods that each party has to hold one another accountable during the design, implementation, and review of a project; and as it pertains to visibility and voice. Informally, mutual accountability can stem from creating a culture of open communication, building strong relationships, and the explicit encouragement of feedback on partnership practices.

While important, informal accountability alone is often insufficient. Without formal accountability structures, equitable partnerships elements and approaches can be inconsistently applied across projects. Formal processes for assessing, reflecting, learning, and adapting partnership practices create clarity and consistency in the application of equitable practices. Formal accountability practices include regularly scheduled feedback calls, M&E frameworks, and other review processes that are jointly agreed upon.

**External Review Reflections:** *Listening and adapting enables accountability*

One partner reported that Asylum Access initially approached the relationship in a prescribed way but, following feedback from the partner, we shifted our approach: “[The Asylum Access team] came with a relatively clear agenda that was focused on ‘educating’ our team... A conversation took place to align, and the interaction shifted afterward into a much more equitable partnership from our perspective.”

One partner mentioned the importance of learning and reflection in partnerships. They suggested that Asylum Access should listen and reflect more on the difference between effectiveness and efficiency, focusing on building relationships for long-term impact, rather than trying to achieve short-term goals with limited resources.

Some partners felt they were able to hold Asylum Access to account through informal accountability mechanisms because the trust and foundations of the relationship were there to ensure open communication. For example, in the development phase of one partnership, a partner said they raised concerns that previous engagements with Asylum Access had been problematic in terms of how they were communicated to and subsequently felt disempowered. They were positively surprised to see that Asylum Access took the concerns seriously. This gave the local partner confidence in embarking on a future partnership with Asylum Access and gave them the impression that Asylum Access learned from this experience.

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**Pillar 2: Shared learning**

A commitment to sharing and learning *together* during the life of a project supports project success and partnership longevity. This can include inviting partners to attend workshops together and debriefing, facilitating dialogue to gain more insight into one another’s programs, contexts, and

ways of working. Organizations can also create a “Community of Practice” to share resources, and opportunities, and facilitate learning on thematic issues. These approaches can support shared progress toward mutual goals by creating more common ground and shared understanding, and opening doors for feedback, learning, and collaboration.

At the end of the partnerships, partners should make space for reflections and learnings from the partnership—including on how the partnership could have been improved, strengths and weaknesses—in addition to any assessment of the outcomes and impact of the partnership for communities.



## TIPS FOR OPERATIONALIZING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Realizing the five elements of Equitable Partnerships may require departures from engrained ways of working. We offer the following tips as a starting point for building momentum and instigating change toward these practices.

Asylum Access's top three tips for instigating equitable practices are:

### ***1. Resource equitable partnerships with knowledge, time and money:***

Every element above requires resources. Funding and staff time is needed for equitable partnership at every stage for all partners. All partners may need financing for staff time, facilitation, mediation, power analysis, research, travel, translation, and elongated donor timelines. Local organizations may also need additional resources for core functions given their historic exclusion from funding channels.

Another crucial way to resource equitable partnerships is to finance internal equity learning journeys. This can include making space to have difficult internal conversations with support from professionals,

and/or facilitating dedicated learning on topics such as equitable partnerships, trauma-informed engagement, power and privilege, and antiracism.

Such resourcing can mistakenly be considered "inefficient," in particular to Global North-based organizations who have embraced (knowingly or unknowingly) White Dominant Professional Culture. However, Asylum Access knows from experience that investment in Equitable Partnerships pays off in long-term effectiveness and impact.

Internal advocates for equitable partnerships may wish to work with the leadership of their organizations, and with their like-minded donors, to secure financing for these many expenses.

### ***2. Institutionalize and incentivize equitable partnerships in policies, procedures, and ways of working***

Another cross-cutting theme within the elements is the need to clarify and document the ways of working that enable equitable partnerships. To summarize some of the points made above, equitable partnerships can benefit from guidelines, standard

operating procedures (SOPs) and MEAL frameworks that clarify how to facilitate co-design, co-leadership, mutual accountability, voice and visibility, values, and roles and responsibilities. These guidelines should be developed through participatory processes with internal and external stakeholders to ensure their relevance and applicability across any given organization and its partnerships. The [Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit](#) can also support this process by offering immediate operationalization of the elements presented here.

### ***3. Engage donors to facilitate equitable partnerships***

Nearly all of the elements above acknowledge the role of donors in either facilitating or hindering equitable partnership practices. Partners and staff who participated in the External Review spoke of instances where donors directly funding local partners balanced the power dynamics between them and Asylum Access and enabled more leadership in local programming. In contrast, partners also shared instances where strict donor requirements in funding arrangements, created downstream challenges that negatively impacted the partnership with Asylum Access.

Beginning a dialogue with donors about these dynamics is therefore crucial to enabling equitable partnerships. This dialog can focus on the importance of direct financing of local organizations, educating donors on the historical exclusion of local organizations,<sup>14</sup> especially RLOs, and advocating for more accessible application practices and fewer restrictions.

If donors are in the process of assessing their internal processes and policies to be able to directly fund partners, INGOs can offer to act as intermediaries. However, we recommend that INGOs ensure that there are strong processes and policies in place to support equitable partnerships, including the guidelines and resourcing listed above, before agreeing to play this financial funnel role.

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<sup>14</sup> Donors often prefer to fund INGOs rather than local NGOs (and even less so RLOs,) as they erroneously perceive that INGOs can more easily absorb high amounts of funding, require less due diligence, and have a lower risk of mismanagement. Many of these perspectives are rooted in bias, structural racism, and neo-colonial mindsets that presume local partners are less trustworthy and capable than Global North partners. Tips for overcoming some of these perceptions can be found in the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiatives new [How to Fund RLOs](#).

## CONCLUSION

Asylum Access recognizes the power dynamics within our engagements with locally-led civil society, especially RLOs. We know that these power dynamics are damaging our sector by hindering the resourcing of locally-led, proximate solutions that lead to lasting positive change.

Commitment to change must go beyond verbal and written pledges. As an organization, **we hold ourselves responsible** for identifying and dismantling bias in ourselves; removing structural and systemic barriers in our organization; and building partnerships with local civil society that are equitable, transparent, and sensitive to power dynamics. We hope that this document provides concrete guidance for other organizations to join us on this journey.

While we have already learned and grown a lot in our approach toward equitable partnerships, we acknowledge that we have room to improve, and remain open to constructive critique on how to live out these values better. This document itself is a living document, and we hope to continue to update it as we, our partners, and our sector learn more.

We welcome the opportunity to connect with others who share the commitments and values articulated here and collaborate to make equitable partnerships commonplace within the forced displacement sector.

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### Contact us:

Asylum Access is available to provide a more in depth overview of the equitable partnerships elements listed here and our **Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit**, including guidance on how to adapt them to meet your organizational needs. If you think our experiences and expertise can be beneficial to you and your organization, please reach out to our Director of Partnerships, Deepa Nambiar, at [deepa.nambiar@asylumaccess.org](mailto:deepa.nambiar@asylumaccess.org), or to our Partnerships Coordinator, Baqir Bayani, at [baqir.bayani@asylumaccess.org](mailto:baqir.bayani@asylumaccess.org).

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We have compiled a non-exhaustive list of resources that can be relevant to individuals and organizations interested in learning about shifting power within the forced displacement sector.

1. Alyssa Bovell from the [Racial Equity Index](#) has compiled a wide range of resources on “[addressing racism in development and decolonizing development practice.](#)”
2. Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A. and Pinnington, R. (2021) [Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: models, approaches and challenges.](#) ODI Report. London: ODI.
3. Barbelet, V. (2018). [As local as possible, as international as necessary: Understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action.](#) HPG working paper. London: ODI.
4. Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) [Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: a literature study. HPG literature review.](#) London: ODI.
5. Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative. (2021). Evidence Base for the Impact and Importance of Refugee-Led Organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence>
6. Mustafa, S., Nambiar, D., and Balasundaram, R. (2022) [Shifting power in forced displacement: the need for internal organisational change.](#) Forced Migration Review.
7. DG ECHO Guidance Note. (2023) [Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings](#)
8. Peace Direct Report. (2023) [Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation.](#)
9. Barbelet, V. (2019) [Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action](#)
10. Carter, B. (2018) [Country-based pooled funds for humanitarian financing.](#)
11. Gingerich, T. Cohen, M. (2015) [Turning the Humanitarian System on its head: saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors.](#) Oxfam America.
12. Currion, P. (2020) [The unfinished business of decolonisation is the original sin of the modern aid industry.](#) The New Humanitarian Opinion.
13. D’Arcy M. (2019) [When international NGOs try to “help” local ones and fail.](#) African Arguments.
14. Oxfam (2021). [From participation to leadership: A resource pack on community-based protection.](#)
15. Stoddard, A. Czwarno, M. Hamsik, L. (2019) [NGOs & Risk: Managing Uncertainty In Local-International Partnerships.](#) Humanitarian Outcomes.
16. Peace Direct Discussion Paper (2022) [Localisation and Decolonisation: the difference that makes the difference.](#)

## ANNEXES

### Annex 1: About Asylum Access' Journey

Starting in 2018, Asylum Access' staff and board found ourselves in spaces where the movements for refugee leadership and localization were growing louder and more visible. We listened to leaders at the [Global Refugee-led Network](#), [Network for Refugee Voices](#), the [NEAR network](#) and [Adeso](#), and began to ask ourselves how we were supporting or hindering these movements.

As a starting point, Asylum Access has found that educating ourselves and our organizations on power dynamics, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and trauma-informed practice, and by engaging support from professionals with expertise in these areas, is a foundation for building equitable partnerships. Education and commitment to ongoing learning are necessary pre-conditions for forming equitable partnerships: we cannot engage in truly equitable partnerships unless we have the baseline knowledge that makes engagement safe for all.

Internally, we have invested in refugee leadership and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We re-examined the leadership, governance, and staffing structures to ensure those with proximate knowledge and experience are part of our teams and increasingly dictating the direction of the organization.<sup>15</sup> We achieved better representation and inclusion by changing recruitment practices (e.g., mitigating bias, publicly advertising positions to non-traditional networks, forming diverse hiring committees, and promoting hiring criteria that value skills and experiences of individuals who have experienced forced displacement); holding training on different aspects of DEI for the Global Leadership Team; and building strong structures (e.g.

transparency and inclusive decisionmaking processes, flexible professional development funds) to support and hold our teams accountable to these values.

Some specific steps we have taken over the past few years include:

- At leadership and Board levels, we discussed where we wanted to go and why in terms of committing to refugee leadership and support for local actors, including RLOs, thereby creating a shared vision for the future. We did this with the help of professionals with specific expertise in embedding diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices in organizations.
- We overhauled our recruitment and hiring policies to ensure people who have experienced forced displacement are always in hiring pipelines and that hiring managers understand the unique value of lived experience as they vet candidates. As an example, our headquarters office's percentage of forcibly displaced staff increased from 25% in late 2021 to 39% in 2023.
- We set representation targets:
  1. *Global Leadership Team*: In June 2022, [we hired a CEO](#) with lived experience of forced displacement. As of October 2023, 35% of Global Leadership Team members have lived forced displacement; this represents a 14% increase from late 2021. By 2024, our Global Leadership Team seeks to ensure 40% of its members have lived experience of forced displacement.

<sup>15</sup> In countries where refugees are not legally allowed to work, organizations have found creative pathways for meaningful inclusion of refugees within their leadership and programs. Paid arrangements can be complicated in some national contexts but creative options can keep staff and organizations safe. Please feel free to reach out to Asylum Access if you would like any advice on navigating this process.

2. *Global Board of Directors:* As of October 2023, 40% of our Global Board of Directors have experienced forced displacement. By 2026, the Board seeks to ensure at least 60% of its members have lived experience of forced displacement.

- We utilize simultaneous interpretation and ensure translation as a practice in our internal engagements, ensuring those who do not speak English with native fluency can still communicate nuanced concepts and inform organizational direction. We ensure grant proposals and budgets adequately factor this in.
- We significantly increased professional development funds, giving our team the resources to learn and grow. A new policy designed to promote the flexible utilization of those funds—for anything from DEI training, to language acquisition, to professional coaches—is in development.
- We invested in an independent, external review of our partnerships in order to assess the extent our partnerships were equitable in line with our elements, develop a shared definition of equitable partnerships with our partners, and develop learning and accountability tools, including two MEL frameworks, to provide guidance to staff conducted partnerships to ensure alignment with our elements.
- We worked in collaboration with external experts to develop a Compensation Philosophy that centers on a framework that reflects our core values. This philosophy will be fully transparent, and emphasize equity and inclusivity, addressing historical disparities in compensation. The philosophy has been completed, and we are currently developing plans and timelines for implementation and elaborating the policies and procedures that support the philosophy.
- In 2023, we have launched a Transformative Change Process to ensure our organizational infrastructure, ways of working, and mission and vision are all aligned with our values. During

this process, we are partnering with a number of equity consultants, working closely with our teams, donors, and partners to ensure the new structure is reflective of our learnings, values, and communities.

We believe these efforts have been crucial in our ability to support localization and refugee leadership movements, and with them, the larger movement of decolonizing the forced displacement sector. Of note, we supported the launch of the [Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative](#), the winner of the \$10 million Larsen Lam ICONIQ Impact Award, have instigated the funding of RLOs in Colombia and Indonesia, and our national offices in Malaysia and Thailand, while continuing to explore pathways to unlock opportunities, networks and funding for partners in several other countries.

We have a long way to go to realize our vision of refugee leadership and localization, but we offer some steps we have taken above in the spirit of transparency. While each organizational context differs, we share our initial steps as an example for others wishing to shift power within the forced displacement sector. We acknowledge that many of these processes have been challenging and complex and therefore remain works-in-progress at the time of writing.

## Annex 2: Defining Equitable Partnerships: Comparing, Contrasting and Aligning Perspectives

As part of the External Review, reviewers asked local partners about their definitions of equitable partnerships to determine the relevance and legitimacy of Asylum Access' definition. This annex provides the similarities and disparities between the perspectives on Equitable Partnership held by Asylum Access and our partner organizations.

The diagram<sup>16</sup> on the following page illustrates the key elements that partners and Asylum Access staff emphasized as critical aspects of equitable partnerships. Elements in the center of the diagram are

16 This diagram was not validated by partners and Asylum Access.

elements that both partners and Asylum Access emphasized as critical. The elements on the sides of the diagram are elements that were only raised as critical by one stakeholder group.

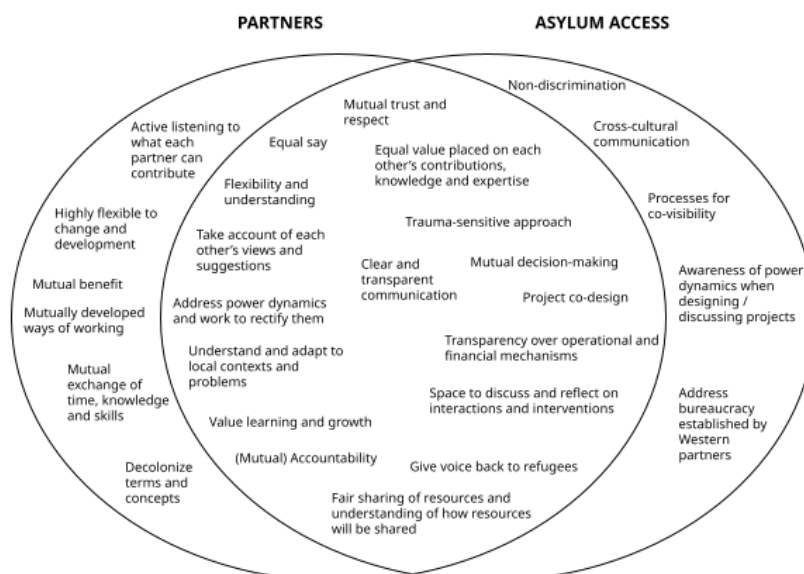
The reviewers found that there is general coherence between partners' and Asylum Access' definition of equitable partnership, in particular around the importance of **flexibility and understanding, mutual trust and respect, transparency, learning and accountability, and communication.**

However, there was a slight difference in the framing of equitable partnerships by Asylum Access staff and local partners in the following areas:

1. **Power sharing vs power shifting?** While Asylum Access staff emphasized ensuring that the local partner is front and center, i.e. through capacity bridging, enhancing local organizations' visibility, and ensuring space for local organizations is created, we learned that for our partners, the concept of mutuality was critical. It was not about them being seen and heard more, or getting specific treatment to prioritize them, but rather this mutuality stems from a desire to have mutual benefit, be seen and heard on equal terms, consider both partners' approaches and practices, and have a mutual exchange of resources where both partners stand to gain. Asylum Access acknowledges there may be an intersection between these two ideas: power

shifting may be required for power to be effectively shared.

2. **Mutual accountability:** This mutuality is also reflected in mutual accountability and ensuring each partner holds the other to account for their own partnership practices. One partner stated, when speaking to flexibility and the 'good-will' of their INGO partners, that this 'good will' cannot be abused: if an RLO required flexibility with regard to a specific project activity, for example, the partner believed it was crucial to explain why and substantiate their request. Though not a pervasive view with all Asylum Access staff engaged for this review, one staff member said, some people feel guilt or apprehension to hold RLOs to account; as they are RLOs, there is a feeling of "fragility."
3. **Power dynamics:** In terms of power dynamics, though both Asylum Access staff and partners mentioned the effect of these, they were mentioned in different ways: For Asylum Access, the emphasis was more on how to disrupt these power dynamics at a systemic level, pushing for a change to sectoral practices more broadly. For partners, they were more concerned with the implications of specific partnership practices or approaches. For them, what this means in their daily work and for the practicalities of the project takes precedence over the broader, systemic implications.





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