Lessons Learned from Asylum Access' Equitable Partnerships Tools

About Asylum Access

Asylum Access is a human rights advocacy organisation engaging with forcibly displaced communities to promote and advance the rights, agency, and power of refugees. It provides legal services for refugees, promotes policy change to protect and empower forcibly displaced individuals, and advocates for global systems change in favour of localised, human rights-informed responses to displacement. The organisation is headquartered in the United States, and has a national presence in Malaysia, Mexico, and Thailand.

In 2021, Asylum Access launched its first Position Paper on Building Equitable Partnerships, outlining key elements of equitable partnerships and methods for operationalising them. A few years later, the organisation commissioned an independent review of its partnerships with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including refugee-led organisations, between 2019 and 2023, with the aim of better understandings strengths and areas of improvement in its partnership approaches and ways of working. Consultations with partners and lessons learned from this exercise informed the development of the following products:

> Asylum Access defines equitable partnerships as:
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> *"Partnerships where systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion."*
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> It recognises the following core elements of equitable partnerships:
>
> 1. shared understanding of context, culture, and power;
> 2. shared ownership and voice;
> 3. trust and transparency;
> 4. flexibility;
> 5. mutual learning and accountability.

- A new Position Paper on Equitable Partnerships, including updated equitable partnership elements, as well as lessons learned, reflections, and case studies from the external review.
- Three organisational tools to promote self- and collaborative assessments of partnerships, included in the Equitable Partnership Accountability Toolkit (EPAT),[1] and described in more detail below.

This case study provides an overview of Asylum Access' work on equitable partnerships, including tools developed, and lessons learned from these efforts. It was informed by a review of publicly
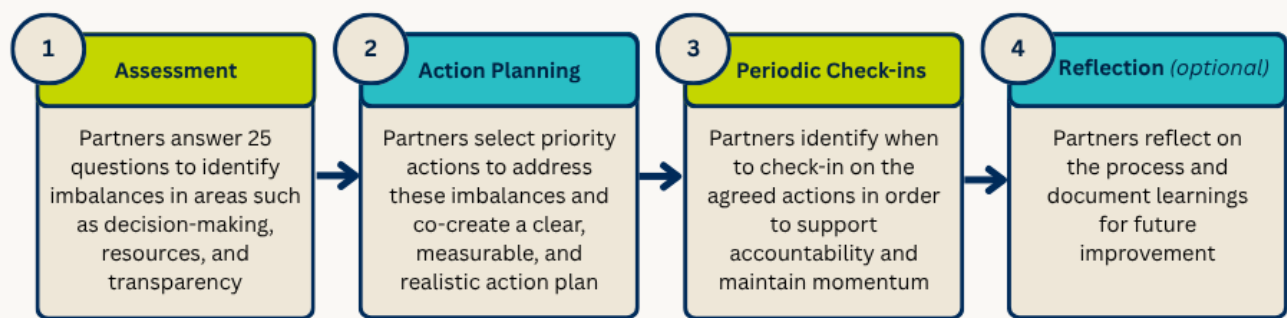
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[1] The toolkit was first developed in January 2024 and later redesigned based on the feedback received from a cohort of organisations and networks involved in testing the tools within their partnerships.

available documents and a discussion with Baqir Bayani, Global Partnerships and Refugee Participation Lead at Asylum Access.

The Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit (EPAT)

The toolkit developed by Asylum Access includes three practical and adaptable tools.

1. **360 ReACT** *(Reflection on Accountability, Co-ownership, and Transparency)* – This joint assessment tool is the central tool within the toolkit. Using a series of questions that explore key aspects of partnerships, the tool guides partners through structured reflection and collaborative planning with the aim of building more sustainable, trust-based collaborations. The implementation of the tool follows four successive steps, described in the figure below. Key conditions required to support the effective implementation of this tool include a shared recognition of power imbalances, mutual trust and openness, and a joint commitment to action.

2. **Lite ReACT** – A lighter-touch joint assessment tool designed to support partners at different stages of their equitable partnership journey. It is a versatile tool that can be used as an entry point for partnerships that have not previously engaged with equity discussions, or as a periodic check-in tool for partnerships that wish to understand their progress and revisit priority actions. These check-ins are recommended every six months.

3. **Donor-grantee ReACT** – This tool follows the structure of the Lite ReACT but adapts the questions to reflect the specific characteristics of donor-grantee relationships. Similarly to the Lite ReACT, it can be used for both initial assessments and regular check-ins.

Lessons learned from efforts to advance equitable partnerships

Lessons learned from the implementation of the tools

The following learnings have emerged from the implementation of the tools:

- **The use of the tools has been conducive to self-reflection** within partnerships and improved organisations' joint understanding of areas of equitable partnerships that are more frequently overlooked, such as co-ownership. The tools have proven especially beneficial in the context of

long-term partnerships. On the other hand, implementation challenges have included reconciling differences in organisations' levels of experience in promoting equitable partnerships, and balancing principles of co-ownership and co-design with the resources and time available within partnerships.

- **There is no 'one size fits all' approach to implementing the tools**. Inequitable power dynamics can be found not just in collaborations between international and local organisations, but also among local organisations, for example in the case of host community-led organisations working with refugee-led organisations. Partnerships can also serve different purposes, from project-based work to advocacy and research. It is important for the structure and language of tools to be adaptable to these different types of actors, activities, and implementing contexts.
- **Donors play an important role in either facilitating or hindering equitable partnerships**. For instance, donors establish where the funding is directed and how it is disbursed. There is a need to better define and integrate their role in guidance and tools intended to support the process of building more equitable partnerships.

Lessons learned around advancing equitable partnerships

The following learnings have emerged from the external partnerships review commissioned by Asylum Access:

- **Shared understanding of context, culture and power in the partnership** – It is important for international organisations to invest time and resources to better understand the political, economic, social, and organisational structures within which local partners operate. Based on this understanding, international organisations should seek to identify their power in relation to other partners, and initiate discussions with donors on adapting programme approaches, processes, and language to local requirements. This approach should be underpinned by a shared recognition of the value of contextual expertise offered by local partners.
- **Shared ownership and voice** – Co-design and co-ownership are fundamental elements of equitable partnerships and should be considered from the inception of projects. Accountability for these principles can be supported through policies and procedures developed collaboratively within the partnership. International organisations can further strengthen co-leadership by promoting more representative engagement with donors and decision-makers and ensuring inclusivity in external communications.
- **Trust and transparency** – Building trust between organisations requires time, energy and resources. Understanding each other's values, priorities and ways of working, and operating transparently during the course of the project, are important elements of the trust-building process. Collaboratively discussing and formalising the ways of working, values, expectations and goals of the partnership can also support this process.
- **Flexibility** – Partners should seek to learn about and adapt to each other's ways of working, including writing styles, language and translation, communication formality and frequency. It is important to ensure that the pressure to adapt is not disproportionately carried by local partners.

- **Learning and accountability** – Shared learning opportunities, underpinned by formal and informal accountability methods, can help to foster a mutual understanding of the intervention and its goals, and ensure that a commitment to equitable partnerships is embedded in every stage of a partnership, from design to implementation and close-out.

Annex: Asylum Access' equitable partnerships framework

Elements of equitable partnerships	Characteristics
1. Shared understanding of **culture, context, and power** in the partnership.	**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**	**a.** The co-design of joint efforts, which requires that local partners be 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 be 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**	**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**	**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**	**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.