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LEARNING REPORT



Building Equitable Partnerships: Phase 4 Learning Report

July 2024 – June 2025

SDDirect/Plan International UK/Plan Global Hub (PII)

Contents

Forward	3
1. Background	5
2. Peer learning with organisations working on equitable partnerships	9
3. Insights from high-level leadership dialogue on equitable partnerships	13
4. Reflections on equitable partnerships in the humanitarian sector	16
5. Dialogue with UK international NGOs (BOND Learning Events)	19
6. Conclusion	22

Forward

In a world of rapid geopolitical change, traditional Northern donor- and INGO-led paradigms of development are increasingly challenged. Across civil society, government, the private sector, and philanthropy, a critical mass of international development and humanitarian actors accepts that locally led development and equitable partnerships – based on country-level, local and community leadership – are essential to achieve sustainable impact. However, while many donors, INGOs and other actors have committed in principle to localisation and more equitable partnerships, we know that significant barriers to modern, empowering partnerships continue to block progress.

We need to be honest: these barriers exist across our organisations and are often deeply embedded in the way we work and how we view the world. Like it or not, how we work with countries, communities and local CSOs is already shifting. The aid system is changing rapidly, influenced by shifting geopolitical priorities, funding pressures and evolving risk environments. We must move faster to ensure positive outcomes for the local communities we aim to serve. That is why Plan International UK, Social Development Direct (SDDirect) and the wider Plan International family remain committed to the global *Pledge for Change 2030*, including sustained organisational change, supported by practical tools and innovation, with more equitable partnerships as a building block for a fairer world – one where every girl can reach her full potential and choose her own future.

Over the past few years, Plan International and SDDirect have undertaken an on-going *Building Equitable Partnerships Initiative*. As part of this collaboration, we have developed and piloted an *Equitable Partnerships Continuum and Tools* package, with guidance. In Phase 4 of our joint initiative (2024-2025), we have actively promoted multi-sector learning and policy dialogue to share our experience and innovations and to strengthen a community of practice and learning on equitable partnerships. This *Learning Report* summarises valuable learning and insights from that process of dialogue.

A key message from the report is that systemic change is required to create an enabling environment for equitable partnerships. The existing development system is still shaped by outdated, rigid compliance cultures and deep-seated power imbalances. We are constrained by short-term project funding cycles, inadequate investment in local civil society partners, and lack of accountability to the communities most affected by global inequality. At the same time, new frameworks for equitable partnerships will only have impact if they shift mindsets, organisational culture and individual behaviours.

We hope that readers of this report and their organisations will join with us to promote practical action and knowledge-sharing on equitable partnerships. A collective effort is

required from us all, including donors, to transform the development sector – and to be the change we want to see.

Rose Caldwell

CEO Plan International UK



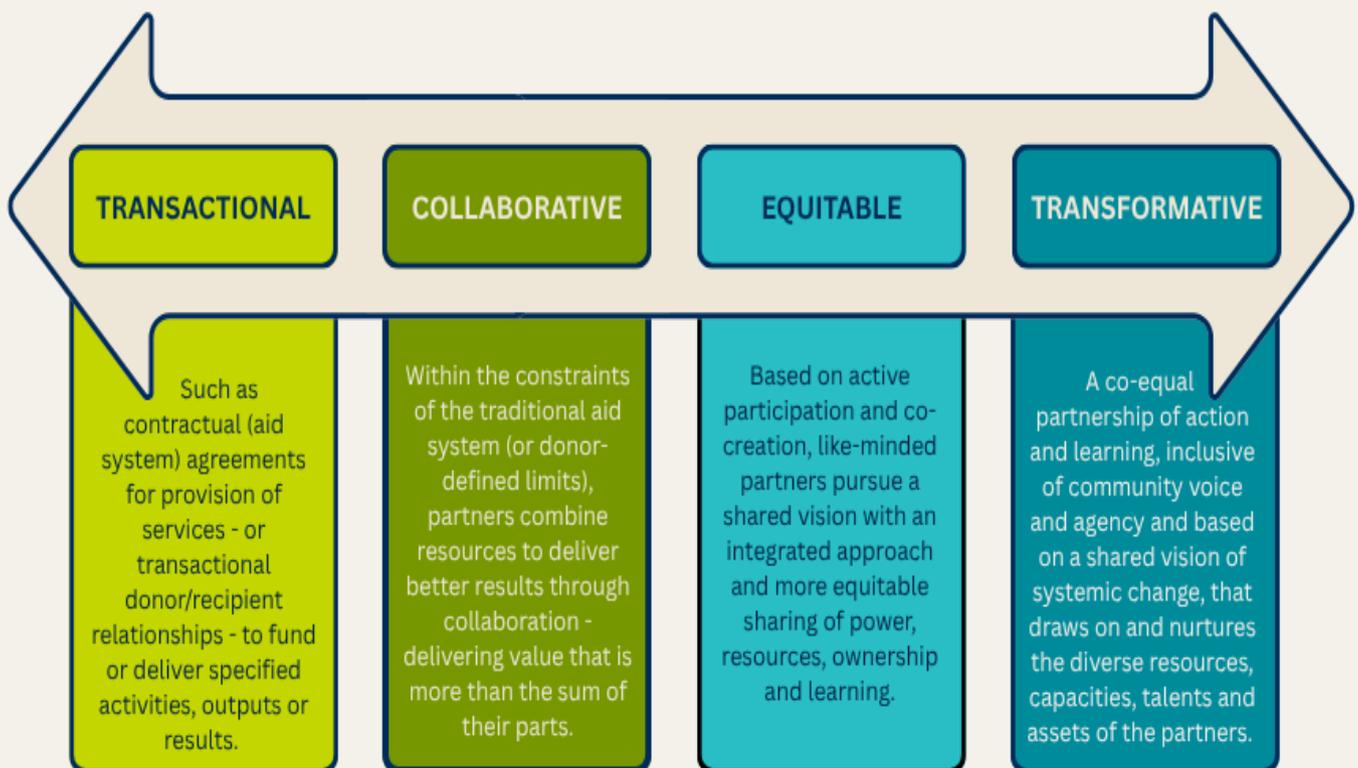
1. Background

The Plan International global family and Social Development Direct (SDDirect) recognise that shifting the power requires **more equitable partnerships**. We recognise that to move beyond rhetoric to reality, **practical tools and collaborative capacity development** are needed to build equitable partnerships. In 2021, Plan UK, PII and SDDirect launched the **Building Equitable Partnerships Initiative**, a multi-year innovation project. The purpose of the Initiative is to:

- Enhance the joint learning of Plan and SDDirect on equitable partnership-building.
- Test practical tools and innovations.
- Contribute to the wider knowledge base on development partnerships.

The Initiative works to realise the global **Pledge for Change**, as well as the Plan International **locally led, globally connected** agenda and to influence wider change in the development system.

At the centre of the Initiative is our prototype **equitable partnership continuum**. The continuum sets out four levels of partnership ambition from transactional to transformational (see figure below).



To summarise these levels of ambition briefly:

- **Transactional** describes many partnerships in the development sector that are quite one-dimensional, time-bound relationships based on contractual delivery of specified services on behalf of a donor or funder.
- **Collaborative** partnerships suggest a more active engagement among the partner in which they combine resources to deliver better social results through collaboration.
- For the purposes of our framework, **equitable** describes a collaboration that pushes traditional boundaries to enable higher levels of participation and co-creation, forging a common vision for social change and greater sharing of power, resources, and learning among the partners.
- At the highest level of ambition, **transformative** describes co-equal partnerships, inclusive of community voice and agency, enabling sustained engagement around a shared vision for systemic change.

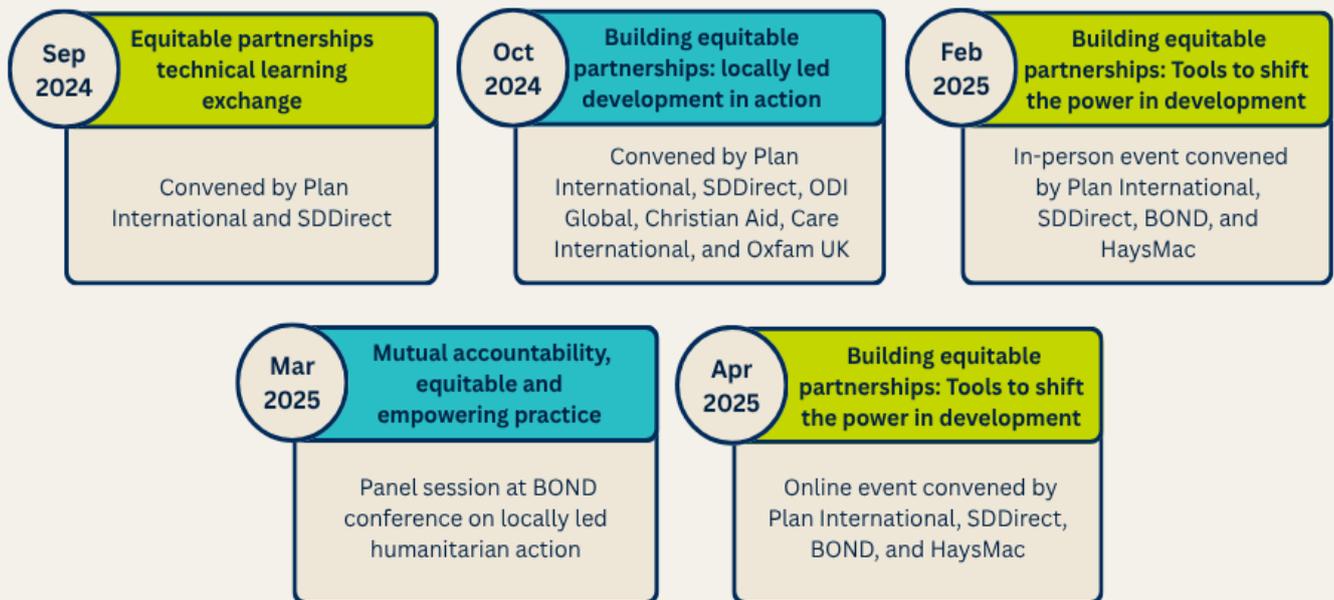
Importantly, the continuum recognises that there can be good, high-quality partnerships at all levels of ambition, if they are underpinned by equitable partnership principles (see, for example, the principles outlined in on Plan's foundational global guidance resource, [Building Better Partnerships](#)) and so long as they are committed to the highest possible level of ambition for equity. We also recognise that partnerships are dynamic and can move up and down the spectrum over time, depending on changing circumstances, resources and time frames.

The continuum is intended to be used to analyse current partnerships; to set an appropriate level of ambition level for partnerships; to help move partnerships towards the best achievable level of ambition as proposed by partners; and to inform the development of related partnership tools and methodologies, especially in the following areas:

- **Making the case** for partnerships (product: **Added Value Case for Partnership Tool**)
- Analysing **partnership readiness** (product: **Partnership Readiness Assessment Tool**)
- Conducting regular **partnership health checks** (product: **Partnership Health Check Tool**)

To access these tools and our previous publication (**Building Equitable Partnerships: A collaborative practice and reflection paper**, October 2023), see the links provided at the end of this report.

In Phase 4 of our collaborative initiative (**Partnerships for locally led, globally connected development, July 2024 to June 2025**), we engaged in a very active schedule of activities, events and stakeholder engagement, summarised in the figure below.



Through convening and participation in targeted dialogue platforms, we are reaching a wide range of audiences, including:

- International NGOs (including the membership of BOND, the UK's umbrella association of INGOs)
- Global South-based NGOs and CSOs
- Private sector development and philanthropy actors
- Partnership resource agencies
- Members of the Pledge for Change Community and other civil society networks
- FCDO and other donor agencies
- Academic institutions and think tanks

Concurrently, we have continued to develop, test and roll out our equitable partnership framework and approach in a range of settings and programmes. As a result, over the course of Phase 4, the Plan International and SDDirect have stepped up our engagement in the drive for more locally led development and equitable partnerships, in growing collaboration with other INGOs and the **Pledge for Change Community**.

Following is a high-level summary of learning from key outreach and dialogue platforms in Phase 4, summarised in the figure below. The concluding section of this report provides links to snapshot case studies of experience and learning from practical efforts to nurture equitable partnerships in the Plan International/SDDirect family and beyond.

DONOR-LEVEL LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Donors play a critical role in building more equitable partnerships. Some progress has been made, but sustained organisational change is needed to shift from transactional, compliance-based models to more equitable partnerships – and to institutionalise equitable ways of working. *Recommendations to donors include:*

- Take on board the need to **shift practice and power** to enable *modern* and more equitable partnerships.
- Promote and invest in more **flexible, transparent and locally led** funding models.
- Reimagine the role of donors as **active participants and co-owners** in partnership design, implementation, learning, and regular partnership health checks.

PARTNERSHIP-LEVEL LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations include:

- Address and manage unequal power relationships through more **inclusive, power-sharing practices**.
- Acknowledge the **experiential, personal and contextual dimensions** of partnerships (there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution) and learn from the knowledge, innovations and adaptive strategies of communities.
- Foster mutual **learning and accountability**, rooted in a shared understanding of equitable partnership as a trajectory, not a static point.
- Support local organisations’ **operational capacity**.
- Consider using **equitable partnership tools** to incentivise action.

SECTORAL-LEVEL LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Equitable partnerships require an effective **enabling environment** to flourish.

Recommendations include:

- Build sector-wide **platforms for collaboration** to learn and drive change
- Contribute to **shifting donor culture**, including by researching and promoting the long-term benefits of equitable partnerships (including through storytelling).
- Re-imagine and re-invent **funding, partnership and leadership models**.
- Ensure that the discourse on equitable partnerships is **not dominated by the global North**.
- Understand and address the barriers to equitable partnerships in **humanitarian response**.

2. Peer learning with organisations working on equitable partnerships

In September 2024, Plan and SDDirect convened and facilitated a rich and well-attended **Equitable Partnerships Technical Learning Exchange** hybrid event, engaging with targeted stakeholders, INGOs and partners active in innovation, methodology development and advocacy around localisation and equitable partnerships). The event drew an in-person and online audience of over 100 participants.

As well as presentations from the Plan and SDDirect team, the event included thought-provoking reflections from colleagues at **Asylum Access**, **RINGO/Impact Works**, the **Synergos Institute**, and the **Pledge for Change Secretariat**. Dialogue at this learning exchange confirmed a growing understanding and consensus across the development sector of the **why** of equitable partnerships, but attention is shifting towards the **how**.

Key insights and learnings

The role and engagement of donors is critical

- While increasing numbers of donor agencies are embracing the principles of locally led development and equitable partnerships, it remains challenging to bring official development assistance (ODA) donors and other major funders to the table in sustained engagement with equitable partnerships.
- In a context of declining ODA funding globally, even when there is willingness to engage in more equitable partnerships, large donors typically find it difficult to share power and decision-making, and to commit the additional resources, time and staff continuity required.
- Donor commitments to local leadership and equity are often at odds with donor requirements, compliance systems and accountabilities – including overriding responsibilities to politicians, taxpayers or individual givers and high-net-worth founders.
- While major donors may welcome better results from locally led initiatives, they do not always take on board the need to shift practice and power to enable equitable partnerships.

Box 1. Examples of donor engagement on equitable partnerships

Various initiatives are underway to engage with donors on the systemic and cultural changes needed for more equitable partnership, such as the **RINGO (Re-Imagining the INGO and the Role of Global Civil Society) Funder Action Pod** and RINGO's convening on the idea of reverse calls for proposals; the **Shift the Power** movement (spearheaded by the **Global Fund for Community Foundations**); IVAR's **Open and Trusting Grant-Making** initiative; the Comic Relief/FCDO **Shifting the Power** initiative; and Peace Direct's engagement around its **Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation** report.

Equitable partnerships will not flourish without an enabling environment

- It must be recognised that much of the existing development funding system (including donor requirements, funding cuts, shifting donor policy and priorities, short term project funding cycles, compliance culture, unequal risk-sharing, and lack of core funding for civil society partners) does not provide an enabling environment for locally led development and equitable partnerships.
- While current instability in the development sector may open up opportunities for a new 'development paradigm', there is much work to be done over time to create an enabling environment, requiring more effective platforms for multi-stakeholder convening, re-visioning, joint capacity development, action on practical systems change, and shifts in mindsets and behaviour.

Address and manage unequal power relationships

- Power in development partnerships is almost always asymmetrical, so equitable partnership tools should go hand-in-hand with power analysis, effective facilitation (including, where appropriate, external facilitation), and creation of safe space for open dialogue.
- More inclusive, power-sharing practices (like rotating chairs for meetings, participatory methods, etc.) are needed to fuel equitable partnerships, to make all voices count and to enable real-time problem-solving.
- The Plan/SDDirect approach and tools are not a 'magic bullet;' they are flexible templates that, like all frameworks for partnerships, must be adapted to context, local languages and cultural (or cross-cultural) settings.
- We need to beware of using insider jargon that alienates, confuses or excludes colleagues, partners and communities.

Acknowledge the experiential, personal and non-rational dimensions of partnerships

- People and leadership are at the centre of equitable partnerships. Movement towards higher levels of ambition requires co-ownership and personal leadership journeys – what the Synergos Institute has called, bridging leadership.
- To build trust and common purpose, people at all levels of the partnership should have space to reflect on their own motivations, purpose and fears. The strongest and most equitable partnerships are built on ownership, co-ownership and co-creation – in which people, as well as organisations, are able to re-connect with their own purpose to forge the wider shared values and vision of the partnership.
- Equitable partnership-building is not a checklist or ‘one-size-fits-all’ process. It is an iterative, adaptive and dynamic process, so useful tools must provide a platform, but not a rigid blueprint, for collaboration.

Beware of the equitable partnerships discourse being dominated by the global North

- Reflecting the asymmetries of the development sector, there is a danger that better-resourced organisations in the global North will dominate the discourse on locally led development and equitable partnerships.
- Organisations in the global South may not have the resources and connections to engage as extensively. There is a need to understand and manage ‘positionality’ in the system.

Storytelling is a powerful strategy to grow equitable partnerships

- The global **Pledge for Change** has recognised the importance of authentic storytelling locally led development and equitable partnerships. We need to ‘re-centre’ the story of partnerships on the local and community-based agents of change.
- Tools, principles, and values for achieving greater equity in collaboration can seem, at times, to be quite abstract. Telling real-life stories of how partnerships have been strengthened, and how results have been improved, by an equitable partnership framework can be helpful to advocate for the approach.

Diverse development organisations must come together to learn and drive change

- Organisational champions and innovators around equitable partnerships, North and South, need to engage and learn together, sharing knowledge and experience on the how question (what works and what doesn’t?) and building on the innovative work that is being done across the development sector.
- As traditional ODA donor budgets contract, it is important to reach out to a wider range of actors in the development space including private foundations, high-net-worth donors, social impact investors, business and corporate donors. Further engagement is needed with private sector development consultancy, research and contracting firms –

what do equitable partnerships look like in the extensive commercial contracting sphere of the development sector?

- Consensus is growing on the benefits of sharing learning and innovations, and of collaborating to strengthen both capacity and demand for equitable partnerships. ‘Multi-directional’ peer learning is crucial, in which the insights and contributions of all actors is valued, and the lived experience of local organisations and communities is central.

Box 2. Examples of cross-organisational learning initiatives on equitable partnerships

The **Pledge for Change Community** has established an Equitable Partnerships Working Group that convenes a range of INGO Pledge signatories and Pledge supporter organisations to share knowledge, learning and peer support to advance the Pledge commitment on equitable partnerships. Inspired by the **Pledge for Change**, INTRAC is convening learning and innovation on a focus group discussion on **Ethical and Values-Driven Consultancy**. The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR), in partnership with ESSENCE for Health Research, hosts an **Equitable Partnerships Resources Hub**, sharing knowledge with the international development research community. In the humanitarian sector, ICVA has recently published an **Equitable Partnerships and Localisation ‘Grab and Go’ Pocket Guide** (April 2025).

3. Insights from high-level leadership dialogue on equitable partnerships

In October 2024, with other INGO and policy dialogue partners, we co-convened a successful leadership dialogue event (**Building Equitable Partnerships: Locally Led Development in Action**). This event was co-hosted by Plan and SDDirect with ODI Global, Christian Aid, Care International, and Oxfam UK (October 2024), with wide participation from the UK development community, including FCDO which was represented on the panel of speakers. The event was well-attended, with a capacity audience of participants at the ODI head office event venue and was moderated by Sara Pantuliano (CEO of ODI Global). Speakers included Patrick Watt (CEO, Christian Aid), Matthew Wyatt (FCDO), Shehnaaz Moosa (Director SouthSouthNorth – Cape Town), Nuria Gollo (ASAL Humanitarian Network and CEO, Marsabit Women Advocacy and Development Organization) and Rose Caldwell (CEO, Plan International).

The high-level dialogue event convened sector leaders to reflect on progress and challenges in building equitable partnerships, with a particular focus on the role of donors—especially the **UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office** (FCDO)—in advancing the localisation agenda. At the event, FCDO reaffirmed its commitment to equitable partnerships, citing the Foreign Secretary’s emphasis on respect in partnerships. Officials pointed to key initiatives including the **START Network**, enabling direct funding access for local/national organisations through five country-based hubs; the **Aid Fund for Northern Syria**, supporting local Syrian organisations; investing in grassroots women’s organisations and partnering with Comic Relief on the **Shifting the Power** programme in Africa; as well as ongoing procurement reform, aimed at increasing transparency and co-creation, and mapping supply chains for better tracking of funding flows.

While these examples are promising, FCDO acknowledged that they remain exceptions to the rule. Systemic change is needed to embed equitable practices across the organisation. Internal listening exercises with women’s rights organisations (WROs) have informed new guidance, though challenges persist—particularly around reconciling flexible funding with traditional metrics like value for money and delivery.

Key insights and learning

It is time for donors to shift from transactional to more equitable partnerships

- Tools like due diligence passporting and flexible funding models were shared as practical steps. However, donor behaviours and contract modalities often hinder progress. Speakers called for:

- Greater donor participation in co-design and shared leadership.
- Recognition of the administrative burdens on local partners, especially around overheads and compliance.
- More storytelling and evidence to advocate for the long-term value of equitable partnerships.

Box 3. Examples of donor-led innovation

Initiatives like the RINGO **Funder Action Pod** and **IVAR's Open and Trusting Grant-Making** community are good examples of donor-led innovation. The former is a forum for donors to come together, discuss, and test approaches to shifting power. Similarly, the latter initiative calls for and supports grant-makers to increase the flexibility of funding models. These efforts aim to rebalance power, promote mutual accountability, and create enabling environments for localisation.

There is some progress among donors, but sustained organisational change is needed

- While FCDO and other donors are making progress, sustained commitment, cultural change, and sector-wide collaboration are essential to move from isolated successes to systemic transformation in support of locally led development.

Institutionalise equitable practices within donor agencies

- Move beyond isolated examples and embed equitable partnership principles systematically across donor operations, including:
 - Scaling up direct and flexible funding mechanisms.
 - Reforming procurement processes to prioritise transparency, co-creation, and engagement with local organisations.
 - Continuing internal reforms such as mapping supply chains and producing guidance for equitable partnerships with women's rights organisations (WROs).

Shift donor culture and incentives

- Address internal scepticism around flexible funding and value for money by:
 - Recognising and communicating the long-term benefits of equitable partnerships.
 - Internal capacity building to align staff mindsets with localisation goals.
 - Encouraging values-driven partnerships and finding ways to scale them up.

Support local organisations' operational capacity

- Fund local CSO overheads and back-office costs, which are often under-resourced. This includes allowing budget lines for non-programme staff and simplifying compliance and contracting processes.

Promote flexible and transparent funding models

- As above, key examples are FCDO's **Shifting the Power** programme with Comic Relief; Christian Aid's **50/50 indirect cost sharing and due diligence passporting**; and IVAR's Open and Trusting Grant-Making Community.

Foster mutual learning and accountability

- Encourage two-way learning and feedback mechanisms within partnerships.
- Use storytelling to illustrate the impact of equitable partnerships and make abstract principles more tangible.

Build sector-wide platforms for collaboration

- Such platforms enable organisations to share tools, experiences, and lessons learned, and to convene around shared values and build collective capacity for equitable partnerships.

Reimagine donor roles as active participants in equitable partnerships

- All too often, donors are remote and inaccessible, or they find it difficult to sustain engagement with their partners (especially in an era of resource and human resourcing constraints). This is a key challenge for building and sustaining more equitable partnerships.
- We should stop seeing donors only as funders but rather see them as peers and active participants in partnership design, implementation and assessment.
- Initiatives like the RINGO **Funder Action Pod** demonstrate how donors can co-create new models with civil society.

The verdict is out on FCDO's capacity to follow through on equitable partnerships

- Given the recent announcement of significant cuts to ODA funding in the UK, the evolution of FCDO's commitments to localisation and *modern, respectful partnerships* remains to be seen.
- However, it is vital that the potential for equitable partnerships to produce better and more sustainable impact continues to be recognised by FCDO and other major donors in an environment where resources are increasingly constrained.

4. Reflections on equitable partnerships in the humanitarian sector

In March 2025, Plan International and SDDirect participated in the landmark BOND conference, **Perspectives on Locally Led Humanitarian Action: Advancing UK Practice and Policy**. Tsungai Mahumucha (Director of International Programmes, PIUK) spoke in the thematic session on **Mutual Accountability, Equitable and Empowering Partnership Practices in Humanitarian Action**, along with fellow panellists, Fiona Tarpey (Humanitarian Localisation Adviser, FCDO) and Martin Irungu, Executive Director, Empower and Serve, Kenya). Close to 100 conference participants from across the humanitarian sector attended this session, which sparked insightful dialogue with fellow panellists and the audience.

In April 2025, Rose Caldwell (CEO Plan UK) spoke on equitable partnerships in a panel discussion at the **Humanitarian Leadership Conference**, hosted by **the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership**. Rose spoke alongside a local partner for the Plan International South Sudan Country Office and Rita Lopedia (Executive Director of **Eve: Organisation for Women Development**). The DOHA Conference engaged a wide spectrum of global leaders and practitioners in the humanitarian sector, providing an influential platform for dialogue on equitable partnerships and locally led development in the humanitarian sector.

Key insights and learning

Barriers to empowering humanitarian partnerships continue to block progress

- We need to be honest: these barriers exist across our organisations, and many of them are deeply embedded in the way we work, and the way we view the world.
- Many humanitarian response relationships can still feel transactional, especially when we are under time, capacity and resource pressure.
- Direct funding partnerships between donors and local groups are still too rare, and, following aid cuts, many local groups are now struggling to survive.
- Donors, including FCDO, could play a greater role in promoting change, including through more ambitious stipulations for the performance of INGOs as intermediary partners.

Shifting the focus of accountability in partnerships is a priority

- Generally, the primary focus of accountability for humanitarian and development partnerships continues to be accountability to donors and Northern-based taxpayers. Locally led development and equitable partnerships require a shift in primary focus towards accountability to local communities.

- In equitable partnerships, donors, INGOs and other more powerful actors must also embrace the principle and practice of genuinely mutual accountability among all partners.

There are encouraging pockets of good practice

- We cannot be passive pessimists or wait for a perfect approach to emerge. We should instead celebrate good practice wherever we see it and build on it.
- More organisations should sign onto to practical commitments like the **Pledge for Change** and the **Charter4Change**.

Box 4. Examples of good practice in building more equitable partnerships

INGO-led initiatives

- Plan International and SDDirect piloted our equitable partnerships tool kit in the Plan Ukraine humanitarian response, with positive feedback on the value of the tools in facilitating dialogue on the health and equity partnerships with local organisations.
- In Sudan, CAFOD, GOAL, Mercy Corps, VCF Suisse and local partners have convened meaningful dialogue and collaboration between local groups, intermediaries and donors, which has incubated the new **THRIVE Consortium** in South Sudan.
- Christian Aid has done pioneering thinking and advocacy work on **shifting power in aid** and is radically restructuring its own practice to shift leadership to local partners.
- CARE International, the START Network and other partners are advocating for, and testing, new funding mechanisms to advance localisation and equitable partnerships, including more equal sharing of indirect cost recovery (ICR).

Donor-led initiatives

- FCDO support to the establishment of the **Aid Fund for North Syria** has been a positive example of donor shifts towards more local leadership in the sector. In the **Syria Education Programme**, FCDO and partner have established community committees to strengthen community participation and voice.
- FCDO is engaged with other donors in the development of new donor guidelines for pooled funds and is moving towards more direct engagement with local humanitarian coordination groups in Myanmar and Ukraine.
- FCDO and other donors are also pursuing options for streamlined contracting, due diligence and accreditation processes, including the idea of humanitarian passporting.

Equitable partnership tools can help to turn commitment into practical action

- Tools, like the Plan/SDDirect equitable partnership continuum and related tools, can be used as a platform for dialogue, learning and mutual accountability from the outset of our humanitarian initiatives. Work is underway on streamlining the tools for application in humanitarian settings.
- Much work has been done by other organisations like Asylum Access, WaterAid, the Partnering Initiative, and others to develop tools for more effective, inclusive and equitable collaboration. The challenge now is to apply the tools more widely, sharing learning and good practices, and to continually adapt our tool kit as we learn from practice.
- Such tools can incentivise and support the exercise of mutual accountability in a habitual way, at every level. We have to bring in people and make them feel like this their responsibility, and that they have agency to positively contribute to change.
- Humanitarian and development actors should be more flexible and open-minded. To take, for example, the issue of capacity: INGOs and donors must start understanding, acknowledging and working on their own capacity gaps on localisation and equitable partnering, and fully appreciating local knowledge and expertise.
- Emerging tools for equitable partnership can help to create the space for safe conversations on difficult topics like budgets, financing, compliance and the wider constraints of the aid system. This is crucial for building solid ground for transparency, trust and longer-term power shifts.

Box 5. Examples of equitable partnership tools

- Plan International and Social Development Direct, [Building Equitable Partnerships Toolkit](#)
- Asylum Access, [Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit](#)
- Peace Direct, [Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation](#)
- WaterAid, [Partnerships in Practice Toolkits](#)
- The Partnering Initiative, [Partnership Support Tools](#)

5. Dialogue with UK international NGOs (BOND Learning Events)

In February and April 2025, Plan and SDDirect collaborated with BOND, the member's association of British INGOs, and its communications and convening partner, HaysMac, in two equitable partnership learning events for the BOND membership and a wider range of international partners. The first session was a 'sold out' in-person learning event for BOND members at HaysMac offices in central London – **Building Equitable Partnerships: Tools to Shift the Power in Development** (Feb 2025). A follow-up online learning event (April 2025) was organized with BOND and HaysMac to accommodate the overflow from the sold-out in-person event in February and to engage with a wider audience in the global South.

Both events were moderated by Tsungai Mahumucha (Director of International Programmes, Plan UK), with presentations and reflections from Jenny Shotton (Civil Society Strengthening and Partnerships Lead at the Plan Global Hub), other members of the Plan/SDDirect team, and guest presenter, Shehnaaz Moosa from global South-based partner, SouthSouthNorth (SSN). The learning dialogue was animated, with much interest expressed in learning more about the continuum and related tools (which have been made available to participants on the SDDirect website). BOND recorded the second event and made it available online, with positive feedback and follow-up enquiries from attendees in the aftermath of the event.

Key insights and learning

Equitable partnership is a trajectory, not as a static point

- Shehnaaz from SSN emphasised that partnerships are dynamic in a constantly shifting landscape and context, especially now.
- The equitable partnership continuum acknowledges this fluidity and interaction with context by showing the various levels of ambition against a double arrow.
- It is not a small task or a straight line to build more equitable partnerships, but it is an essential journey of trial and error, testing and adapting tools and methods, learning and growing together.

Unequal power relationships are not unique to North/South partnerships

- Power imbalances are present across the development sector at the international level, at regional and national levels, and at subnational and local levels. The principles and practice of equitable partnerships should extend beyond relationships of global South organisations with INGOs and major international development donors.

Equitable partnership tools can help to unlock key ingredients of success

- Getting buy-in from donors for an equitable partnership approach can be challenging, but the adaptable equitable partnership tools provide a platform and a framing for practical conversations with donors that can help to bring them along on the journey.
- Some of those ingredients include:
 - Nurture mutual trust and respect.
 - Commit to mutual accountability and feedback mechanisms.
 - Forge shared purpose, values and goals.
 - Agree collaborative ways of working.
 - Embed partnership monitoring in management, governance and implementation systems.
 - Strengthen partner skills in brokering, negotiation, consensus-building, conflict management and finding common ground.
 - Engage in deep listening to communities and each other as partners.
 - Create safe space for inclusive dialogue.
 - Build a culture of peer learning and adaptive programming.
 - Consciously work to shift inequitable norms, behaviours and organisational cultures
 - Apply learning from equitable partnerships to build wider networks and alliance for collective action and advocacy.
- The partnership readiness assessment tool can help to assess partner expectations, combined resources, potential for added value from the partnership.

Equitable partnerships require strategic investments for longer term gains

- The current evidence is that more equitable partnerships need additional investments in the short and medium term (and thus are initially more time and resource intensive) but are likely to yield greater efficiencies and better-quality results in the long term. More evidence and analysis are needed to prove this hypothesis.
- Targeting the right level of ambition (appropriate to the situation, context, time frame, partnership assets and partner capacities) is critical to achieving value for money (VfM) from equitable partnerships.
- The added value case for partnership tool can be used from the start to help frame the VfM case, indicators and assessment process for equitable partnerships.
- There is a need for more research and evidence to assess value for money in equitable partnerships as well as the link between equity, effectiveness and impact. The initial evidence is pointing in a positive direction on the potential added value and return on equitable partnerships.

We should re-imagine and re-invent funding, partnership and leadership models

- As global South organisations take on greater leadership in development partnerships, it is important not to just mimic the style and behaviours of traditional global North-based donors. Southern NGOs and CSOs must re-imagine funding models, from current 'top-heavy' models to something more agile, community-driven and community responsive.
- Locally led development and more equitable partnerships provide opportunities for global South organisations to re-invent the paradigm of leadership in development – and for global North partners to re-invent their roles (as advocates, allies, facilitators, connectors, brokers, critical friends, solidarity partners, etc.).
- Equitable and more inclusive partnerships should be about identifying, mitigating and removing constraints on communities (including unequal risk burdens, compliance demands and funder requirements) that are holding them back from their full potential as change-makers.

Connect better with the knowledge and innovations of local communities

- Equitable and more inclusive partnerships offer opportunities to connect with the lived experience and knowledge of communities, as well as their innovations, adaptations, survival strategies and mutual aid systems.

6. Conclusion

The learning from our stakeholder engagement dialogue over the past year has been rich. In Phase 5 of our **Building Equitable Partnerships Initiative** (2025-2026), we will continue to apply our equitable partnership continuum and tools in a range of programmes and settings, drawing on the lessons that are summarised in this report. We will strengthen our engagement with the Plan International family and strive to embed our equitable partnerships approach as a strategic component of our work globally. We will engage actively with the **Pledge for Change Community**, UK-based INGO allies, and global civil society development and humanitarian networks.

For more information on our equitable partnership framework and tools, see the following links on the SDDirect and Plan International websites:

[Building equitable partnerships | Social Development Direct](#)

[Plan International links to be added]

For practical examples of work underway to apply an equitable partnerships approach, both in our own programme engagement and in other civil society networks, see the case studies highlighted in the box below (also available on the links above).

Box 6. Equitable partnerships case studies

- [Lessons Learned from Asylum Access' Equitable Partnerships Tools](#)
- [FCDO What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale Programme](#)
- [Supporting Survivors of SEAH \(S2S\) Programme](#)
- [Learning Brief: Building Equitable Partnerships \(FCDO CLEAN Helpdesk\)](#)