

EDITORIAL

We talk about shifting the power, but are we really shifting the practice?

By Kate Newman, Suzanne Hammad, Charles Vandyke, Logan Cochrane and Naila Farouky

Introduction

This Special Issue explores the experiences of those working to *#shift the power* in international development. In this introduction we reflect on what it means to translate the rhetoric of power shifts into lived practice and institutional change.

Our intention in this Special Issue was to amplify the place-based insights of development actors who are actively navigating and reshaping power relations in their daily work. We wanted to particularly learn from the practical experiences of people across various regions and countries within Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. It is these voices and perspectives who must be at the forefront of what ‘shifting the power’ means, determining its value, limitations and transformative potential within their specific context and to what extent that narrative is meaningful in practice, or not. We saw the Special Issue as a learning opportunity for the sector, a time to pause and reflect on whether we are walking the talk of *#shift the power*.

The articles in this collection aim to create a space where lessons could be distilled from lived experiences and grapple with how to move the agenda forward. In curating this Special Issue and in writing the introduction, we had a collective ambition to de-centre dominant, externally driven models of development and create space for more equitable, just, and locally led approaches rooted in solidarity, not saviourism. We sought to do this by prioritizing voices from the majority world or by encouraging the sharing of joint wisdoms through co-authoring experiences and perspectives. In a sense, we wanted to ‘shift the power’ in the practice of calls for papers, given the distinctly overpowering voices within academia¹.

The movement to *shift the power* in international development has received increasing traction in recent years², with diverse actors are joining calls to think and ‘do development differently’. Our authors bring different meanings and expectations in their calls to shift the power and enrich it, helping us capture a variety of implications for practice. These interpretations range from structural critiques of aid and calls to dismantle neo-colonial architectures – a radical rethink - to more moderate proposals for participatory governance, reimagined relationships, equitable funding flows, and strengthening local agency and leadership. This plurality reflects the complexity of the term and

¹ We deliberately chose Development in Practice for our special issue as we were aware that the editors put such effort and emphasis on publishing papers authored by people from the Global South; which is an ambition we sought to align with and marks a difference from the majority of academic publishing.

² <https://wacsi.org/empowering-communities-through-literacy-a-path-to-shift-the-power-in-international-development/>; <https://www.shiftpowersummit.org/shiftpower-manifesto-for-change>;

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the tensions embedded in efforts to translate vision into action. These different meanings and ambitions create a range of implications for funders, INGOs and civil society at the national and local levels; as each navigates their role, relationships and limitations.

Acknowledging this crucial nuance and context-specificity in what shift the power means, could mean, or seeks to shift, underpinned our invitation to the range of perspectives/papers in this Special Issue, which consists of viewpoints, practice notes, alongside more extensive research papers. We were also concerned that much of the debate is currently held at the conceptual level, and at times appears dominated by those who currently 'hold the power'; with the practice of power shifts lagging behind the calls for action. Without grounding in real-world practice, the language of transformation risks becoming performative and easily adopted without the hard work needed to make it a reality, and these efforts rarely interrogated. DiP is a particularly apt journal to facilitate exactly these kinds of contributions; and we are grateful to the DiP editors for support our call and our approach.

We encouraged contributors to surface the actual strategies, struggles, adaptations, and paradoxes that practitioners face when trying to shift power within systems that often remain resistant to change. We know from our own experiences that it is often more straightforward to call for change than to work through the messy realities of *how change happens*. Acknowledging this can be helpful for others, as it can lead to more openness to experiment and learn from the challenges and successes of change.

To guide this exploration, we identified eight interlinked domains where power shifts are most actively contested and reimagined. We asked for contributions to respond to one of these questions, with a focus on reflections from actors that have made 'shifting the power' meaningful in their context:

1. **Positioning and better understanding what shift the power means** - how is shift the power understood and made meaningful, and what factors enable or constrain power shifts?
2. **Impact on Work Strategies** – how does commitment to shifting the power influence strategy and understanding in different areas of work? (anti-poverty/justice-based practice, research and knowledge generation)
3. **Authentic Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)**: practical examples of alternative MEL approaches that disrupt prevailing conceptions and hierarchies of knowledge
4. **Organisational Strengthening and Effectiveness**: how do organisations support creation of new and diverse power relations in practice and what tensions and compromises are navigated in practice?
5. **Leadership and Partnerships for Change**: what types of leadership and partnership have proven effective, and how are these new relationships established, maintained and made impactful – between civil society actors, or with government or donor agencies?
6. **Collective Change and Its Limitations**: how are multiple actions convened to contribute to wider change and what role do legislative processes play alongside civil society action?
7. **Perceptions of Beneficiaries (a loaded word, used deliberately) in Power Shifts**: what do the individuals or communities affected by the changes consider to be the most important outcomes, and do they identify potential losses as well as gains? How does language challenge or reinforce power configurations?

8. **Power Shifting and Decolonisation:** how aligned are the different narratives - do discourses of localisation, decolonisation, and the #stp movement ultimately lead to different outcomes, and do theory and practice remain distinct in these domains?

We had an overwhelming response to our call (nearly 50 abstracts submitted), however, developing this issue itself has not been a straightforward process. Both because of the evolving context we have been working in, and because of the challenges of developing practitioner led articles (see below).

Over the two years between when we issued the initial call, and the publication of this Special Issue the context for international development has shifted significantly. Cuts to official development assistance have been a constant back-drop, which intensified at the start of 2025 with the axing of USAID, with huge repercussions on the Global South³ and locally-led initiatives that were beginning to flourish⁴. There were also cuts to aid in the UK, the Netherlands, France and Germany, which means that ODA will have dropped by a quarter from its peak by the end of 2025, and there will be further falls in 2026⁵. These shifts are not just fiscal, they are ideological. They reflect a broader questioning of the legitimacy, role, and future of aid itself.

As traditional funding streams contract, the need to develop resilient, accountable, and locally sustained ecosystems becomes more urgent. Furthermore, the backdrop of the continuance of the Gaza genocide⁶ well into its second year and its vast implications on global civil society and agency, cannot be ignored. The lack of accountability and unwillingness of the international community to put in place firm measures to put a stop to the incessant killing of civilians and attacks on all Gaza's basic health, educational, media, and civil society institutions, combined with the lack of accountability of powers-that-be including international law and courts of justice, have also raised equally significant ideological discourses within our sector. More importantly, there have been grave repercussions across the globe through increasing clamping down on the agency and space of civil society actors, unions, academic institutions and student bodies, restricting their voices and ability to hold those in power accountable. We cannot talk about a shift in power without addressing that elephant in the room, regardless of one's political or ideological stance.

Global trends resonate throughout the sector and are felt in reshaping donor priorities, approaches, and practices. The future remains uncertain, but one thing is clear: reimagining development in the face of systemic contraction will require courage, experimentation, and a renewed commitment to equity. It will require concerted efforts to bridge gaps and capitalise on commonalities and collective yet disparate power that we hold yet do not fully utilise, together.

The contributors to this Special Issue offer hard-won insights, not only into what must change, but into how change can actually unfold—through dialogue, disruption, and collective learning and a

³ We acknowledge that there is extensive debate regarding terminology used to describe countries that have fewer resources and are aid recipients. We have used the term Global as advised by Development in Practice, as their preferred terminology.

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/locally-led-development-in-a-time-of-disruption/>;
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/full-report.html

⁵ <https://donortracker.org/publications/budget-cuts-tracker#what-are-oda-projections-in-2025-and-2026>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/genocide-as-colonial-erasure-report-francesca-albanese-01oct24/>;
<https://mondoweiss.net/2025/08/why-it-took-palestinians-starving-for-many-to-finally-admit-israel-is-committing-genocide-in-gaza/> ; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250818-gaza-tribunal-calls-for-armed-un-intervention-to-halt-most-lethal-phase-of-genocide-in-gaza/>

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commitment to the idea of abundance and growth. It remains unclear as to what the impact will be on civil society as a whole, as different actors navigate the new space, innovate and develop their practice, but we are hopeful that some of the aspirations of this power shift that is already clearly under way will underpin the new relationships and practices that emerge. This is a Special Issue of optimism, affirmation of a wonderful range of positive practices emerging from our sector, and faith in our collective power and ethics compass. It will distil and build on learnings from the strong contributions of papers, viewpoints and praxis notes, to propel the momentum that has already begun.

What does this issue contain?

This Special Issue consists of twelve contributions bringing together academics and practitioners across the globe to share their reflections on different dimensions of shifting the power.

The first article, by **Munro and Rahman**, challenges the very foundations of the #shift the power movement, arguing that it 'overestimates the importance of the development industry for everyday life' and that in fact power has already shifted. They suggest that the focus of attention should rather be on the institutions of the Global South that currently repeat old colonial practice rather than responding to their own national priorities and value systems or delivering for 'those belonging to the periphery of the periphery'. By focusing on the development industry rather than south-south cooperation and national institutions there is a risk of romanticism of current practice and of perpetuating the rent-seeking practices of rogue elites in the Global South, rather than creating the enabling conditions for sustainable development.

The next article, from **Mathur and Franchi** offers a reconceptualisation of development relationships, based on an exploration of 'relational needs-based organising' in India, which shifted the NGO team role from providing solutions to facilitating deep conversations. The team focused on asking the right questions to enable participants to make sense of their collective experiences of challenges, needs, responses and resources, working as facilitators with a deep commitment to process rather than outcome; and grounded in Batliwala's 'practices of solidarity' that enable power to be generated, not conferred. The focus on process and relationship, embracing the messiness and complexity of experiences and contexts enables a fundamentally different development approach – generative over linear problem solving, thus creating new and different power in practice.

The question of who defines development and whose knowledge counts has long been explored within development studies and is the subject of multiple publications, conferences, discourses and practice across the globe. The next three articles build on these broader ideas in different ways to provide insight into how power shifts in knowledge generation. Firstly, **Hyma et al** reflect on a Cambodian community-based approach to re-telling research, grounded in a radical change in the definition of a researcher. Four community researchers led the research and produced knowledge about their own lives, using their own words, creating knowledge that is 'contingent, subjective and shaped by relationships of power' not only changing how and what we know, but the positionality and identity of those doing the research. **Ahmed et al** also raise the question of who can be a researcher and where they can do the research. Scholars from the Global South are often expected to do research in and on their home country; and yet western researchers are encouraged to research elsewhere, as outsiders. This expectation of Global South scholars not only limits their ability to become 'experts' elsewhere but also raises challenges of security and psychological 'toil' of the researchers. The authors argue that through enabling Global South scholars to research elsewhere we expand the plurality of positionalities in fieldwork as a key step towards shifting the power in knowledge creation in development studies itself. Finally, **Margaux and Suzuki** argue that

research on ODA itself needs to shift as a key enabler of the impact of ODA funded work. Through interrogating climate related funding in Vietnam, the authors identify how research on the effectiveness of ODA is dominated by global stakeholders and funders. As a result, it misses the importance of local ownership and empowerment as a key dimension of climate justice and reducing the impact of the ODA itself. By focusing on the local dynamics in research, local ownership becomes a tangible and measurable outcome of climate aid, not just a superficial commitment.

The next five articles unpack the relationship between global and local actors within the development industry, providing insight into how different practices can enable or constrain more equitable relationships, decision-making and action. While the focus of each article is distinct, there are common themes that emerge through them, most significantly perhaps is the importance of intentionality, mindset and commitment to equity.

The conversation between **Ademolu and Crombie** explores the dynamics of communication and storytelling within humanitarian contexts, drawing on the perspectives of two groups – black diaspora communities in the UK and ‘subjects’ of humanitarian narratives from Africa and South Asia. Both groups are impacted by the communication practices – which influences how they perceive themselves and others perceive them. By reflecting on their own positionality and motivations Ademolu and Crombie share their understanding of what power shift means and how this influences their practice. This leads them to conclude that practice needs to shift on three levels – personal, practical and cultural – if we are to shift power in representational practices. This includes prioritising listening and seeking out the voices of diasporic groups and humanitarian crisis-affected populations arguing that this is crucial for INGOs to do if they are to stand by any claim of shifting power.

Bond et al reflect on an experience within CARE International where certain CARE country offices were transformed into local NGOs, asking whether this transformation provided the new organisations and the CARE confederation itself greater legitimacy. Reflecting on initial research which took place between 2017-21, and later workshops in 2023/4 where the initial researchers considered what had changed since the initial research, the authors highlight interesting dynamics between an increased legitimacy and power at the local level among those country offices that became independent members of the CARE confederation accompanied by a decrease in influence over the global organisation. This suggests that legitimacy, accountability, power and influence operate very differently at each level; with one bearing little relationship on what happens in the other. The authors argue that internal INGO changes in policy and behaviour only deliver ‘small steps on an indirect path to change’ given the multiple audiences and influences on INGO practice who hold diverse and often contradictory understandings.

Rana et al offer a tool designed to explore power dynamics in partnership. The Power Awareness Tool is designed to facilitate structured conversations throughout the partnership cycle – moving beyond the identification of power relations to responding to these and rebalancing power. They reflect on experience of using the tool, noting that while it has potential to shift power this depends on skilled facilitation, integration into broader organisational and system reforms, and commitment to its fundamental principles and a wider vision of decolonised development.

Doane and Fomunjong share lessons from the ‘RINGO’ Project, a systems change initiative that sought to challenge the dominance of INGOs in the sector, and redefine their role in practice. The authors share the process of discovery (creating a collective understanding of why the system was stuck), defining (identifying innovation challenges for key leverage points in the system) and delivering (a series of eight prototypes were developed and tested in practice). They reflect on the outcome of the process, noting that while the RINGO community has grown, and several INGOs have

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drawn on the work and adopted decolonising strategies, the system-wide changes needed will progress further only if the demand side becomes louder.

Finally, **Smith et al** reflect on their experience of reimagining their role as intermediaries moving from a transactional relationship to viewing their role as ecosystem builders, advocates, amplifiers, co-conspirators and learners. This moved beyond participatory grant making to actively investing in relationships and consciously using organisational power and position to influence a notoriously bureaucratic donor. Sharing reflections on how the collaboration was based in a shared commitment to collective critical thinking, finding complementarity and balance, and reframing and sharing risk, the authors explore their experience and generate a set of recommendations for intermediaries to ensure that solidarity and trust become more than just buzzwords.

The final two articles focus on key aspects within monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Kimambo and Shallwani focus their discussion on the terminology of ‘beneficiary’. While they emphasise that collecting data about who has been ‘touched’ by the funding provided by their organisation they also emphasise the problematic nature of the term beneficiary, which implies passivity and overlooks agency; and does not speak to true progress or impact. The authors suggest that while data collection processes should align with the learning needs of the community, that such data must be thoughtfully collected and reflected on, and that we should be intentional in choices of words, and meaningful in what we collect. **Salman and Ramis** focus their article on the use of participatory action research (PAR) to enable equitable, responsive and reflective MEL practice. They identify nine steps within PAR which can shift power dynamics in how MEL is designed, developed and responded to – leading to shifting relationships between project participants, implementing organisations, local communities and donor agencies. Both articles suggest that MEL has a strong role to play in power shifts, but only if we shift the practice.

Positioning the issue - The challenges in shifting the power in the practice of developing a Special Issue

In coming together as an editorial team and putting out the call for articles, there were a few key principles that grounded our approach in, that we think are important to share, as part of our own understanding of and commitment to ‘shifting the practice’.

Firstly, we value the **democratisation of knowledge production** and support equity-based approaches to addressing imbalances in whose voice is heard. Our editorial team, comprising five people, is drawn from different geographic and institutional contexts, each sharing a commitment to power shifts. We are located in the Middle East; west Africa and Europe; at a university, in a funding body, a ‘pracademic’, and within civil society organisations. We wanted to ensure that the editorial team was largely located in the Global South, and largely located as practitioners. This was important given the claims that we made in designing the call and our intentions in really centring perspectives from practice, from the Global South.

Secondly, we purposively encouraged submissions that included among **lead authors at least one person from the Global South, and prioritised those** whenever possible. We did this because of our belief that there are inherent inequalities in access to knowledge production and dissemination in the academic machinery – which act to exclude knowledge generated through practice, and privilege knowledge generated in the global minority. Choosing Development in Practice for this collection was an intentional decision given our common concern with bridging theory with practice within the development sector. We noted in the call that the practice of collaborative writing – engaging participants situated in diverse settings and collectively contemplating shared experiences from

distinct vantage points and contexts – was something that we were particularly interested in. We also commented that the process of writing serves as a platform for introspection, knowledge acquisition, and the systematic organisation of experiences; which provided further rationale for this investment in producing the special issue.

By prioritising contributions from authors based in or working extensively in the Global South world or in teamed co-authorship across regions and perspective, we hoped to overcome such inequalities such as institutional access, linguistic limitations, and challenges of ‘speaking and writing academic’ among a whole sector of highly professional practitioners, and redress potentially lost wealth of practical knowledge that could hugely enrich theory and practice.

However, in finalising this editorial we note that while we had clear aspirations, this was more difficult to deliver in practice. Each article that was accepted in the Special Issue includes someone whose heritage is in the Global South, but for many they are now resident in the global minority. Even those individuals based in the Global South often have a university affiliation in the global minority. This has led us to reflect on both our own assumptions in designing the call and accepting abstracts, as well as the challenges of the peer review process.

This brings us to our third point, whereby **we tried to encourage more practitioners to come forward and contribute their voice and experience** to this conversation, alongside the academics. This influenced how we distributed the call and assessed the articles, but it was not without its challenges. The articles still needed to pass through the traditional process of an academic review process, including editorial reviews and external peer reviews. Practitioners do not have the same incentives to produce academic journals as researchers do. Publication is rarely linked to career development within civil society, and the long delay between authorship and publication, may be unattractive, especially given there are alternative options – such as various blog platforms – which may be more immediate and benefit from wider followings. Practitioners may also bring different practices and understandings of evidence, and concepts of validity, and work with different assumptions regarding the extent claims can be made on the basis of what evidence; or the how questions and insights are framed to be relevant for wider practice.

We had to navigate the process of developing and submitting the articles, considering the type and nature of the feedback and the expectations of our contributors. We have more ‘viewpoints’ and ‘practice notes’ than a standard issue, but we believe that our contributors have a lot of value to add both to the debate and the practice. We still had to depend on many of the same processes (and people) for peer review, a time-consuming role which is not recompensed, and is dominated by academics. Through the process we have been challenged in how reviewers have engaged with and responded to the ideas of practitioners. We have worked with them, and our authors to negotiate and hold space along the way, at many points becoming more active than editors often are in this process.

While we are proud of the Special Issue and the ideas and articles it contains, we cannot claim to have been fully successful in our ambitions. As we reflect on our final set of 12 papers, we note that the authorship is dominated by authors with an academic association, often in the global minority. Although we initially accepted nearly 50 abstracts, with the majority of those authors being practitioners in the Global South, two years later we are publishing an issue that is less ‘alternative’ than we intended. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the challenges of the process and the realities of international journal publication, a reflection we return to in our conclusion.

Finally, we also made some commitments in the publishing process, to ensure that the articles could be accessible to those who do not have institutional affiliations to universities and thus navigating the challenges of the paywall. We agreed that pre-print articles could be published as open access version on INTRAC’s website. We hope that this means that the issues are widely engaged with.

What we have learnt from the articles

Our starting point for this Special Issue stemmed from an understanding that to shift the power and shift the practice in the work that we do, we must be ready to work through the messy realities of how change happens. We also felt that in much of the narrative there has been less focus on the power and control we each have, and what it might mean to shift our own practice. The articles show us how the practice of shifting the power links analysis to mindset to daily practice; drawing from a collective vision, made meaningful in different ways in different contexts. In this section we reflect on the key ways shifting the practice is conceptualised by our authors, and draw out some underpinning principles we have distilled from the contributions which could be worked with to enable the practice to spread more widely.

Where do power shifts need to happen?

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the majority of the articles in this issue identify the challenging nature of global/national relationships within the international development sector. Shaping how development is conceptualised, where and how decisions are made, the role people living in poverty play in any development process, how 'impact' is assessed and who is responsible for knowledge generation. The articles give a wide range of experiences and ideas to challenge dominant practice and provide insights, strategies and examples of how 'development' can be done differently – responding to the aspirations of power shifts. In fact, our starting point in thinking about this issue was the increasing attention within civil society on 'shifting the power' and an interest to understand what was happening in practice. And yet as the range of articles show power shifts are not limited to civil society, they include shifts in practice in academia/research practice, funding and with government.

One article stood apart from the others, arguing: 'For most of the Global South, decolonising the development industry is a mere sideshow'. By arguing that power shifts, to the Global South, have already happened, Munro and Rahman lead us to look elsewhere – at national level. This forces us to consider the role of government in the shift the power debates, and pay attention to issues of good governance and accountability within national contexts; reminding us that it is not enough for the development industry itself to become more equitable, in fact if there is no engagement with national spaces also, power shifts will not happen.

Practices to enable power shifts

Across the diverse contributions underpinning commitments that enable and support power shifts are evident. These are not necessarily new, but they speak to the day-to-day work and the need to hold the long view if we are to see a reality where we are not just talking about shifting the power, but living it in practice. It is worth revisiting #ShiftthePower: A Manifesto for Change which proposes ways through which we can create genuine alternatives to existing ways of deciding and doing. This Special Issue, through its nuanced and diverse contributions enriches this manifesto with perspectives that embolden this conversation⁷.

Mindset matters. This is an oft quoted expression within the discourse, and the articles speak powerfully to this. It is not only about the intention of doing something differently, but also how you show up every day. Whether the focus is on listening more and speaking less; a focus on deep collaboration, intentionality and honesty and on making space for the uncomfortable discussions,

⁷ <https://www.shiftthepowersummit.org/shiftthepower-manifesto-for-change>

working with and through the messiness. Necessarily, for this mindset shift to happen is an enabling peer community of practice as well as leadership, as changes in enclosed circles may not get the light of day to amplify and make ripples.

Relationships matter. While power shifts involve deep commitment from individuals thinking and working differently, they are enabled through relational practice. This is shown within projects – where those involved challenge the traditional roles expected of them – moving from saviours and victims to partners, breaking down separations and hierarchies and acting together, and beyond with individuals taking a collective action as members of the same ecosystem. Here the focus is less on the delivery of a project, and more on the practice of solidarity in more tangible and intentional ways.

Complexity. Ademolu and Crombie note that the ethical complexities of humanitarian storytelling cannot be dealt with at a theoretical level, but through complex navigation and honest trade-offs in practice. This action of working with complexity, is explored in different ways through many of the articles recognising that power shifts are non-linear and involve a wide variety of powers. In shifting the practice, we cannot afford to only focus on one bit of the system, detached from elsewhere as these practices are interlinked. At the same time, deciding which part of the system to focus on, as Doane and Fomunjong explore, is central in moving power shifts from rhetoric to action.

Patience. Shifting the power requires deep commitment and an ability to stay in the process, and reducing attention on specific outcomes. In an industry focused on the immediate realities of extreme poverty and injustice it can be difficult to hold space for the deep work to shift power, but all the articles in their different ways showed that this is important.

Reflexivity, transparency and honesty. This is not only about doing things differently, but also about being clear and open and owning where we are starting from. In their reflection on relational needs-based organising in India, Mathur et al noted that there is a temptation to step back as experts and just hold space for participants in a process; and yet, expertise exists and is important, the shift here is to be in dialogue, sharing ideas ‘through invitation, not imposition’.

Prioritise the process. This is about unlearning and relearning together, it is about intentionality and investing in the process of doing things differently, which ultimately will contribute to real shifts in power. Many of the articles spoke powerfully to how the focus needs to tilt, from a ‘what are we trying to achieve’ to a ‘how are we collaborating in this space’, recognising that the extent to which ‘shifts in power’ is enabled through the process, will inform the realities of the outcome.

Dichotomies can be unhelpful. In various of the articles there are warnings about romanticising ‘local knowledge and ways of doing things’; a common critique of participatory practice which holds true in this space too. What’s more, while local contextualised knowledge and lived experience brings deep value – as discussed by Hyma et al, in their reflections on being the researched and the researcher simultaneously. Ahmed El Assal et al. warn us that we should not make assumptions that local is best in “ *Why Are You Not Doing Research in Your Country? Dissecting Expectations of ‘Developing Countries’ Researchers*”, arguing that it is precisely the complexity of relationships and positionalities that can interfere with certain research approaches, where navigating existing power relations can limit analytical perspectives and constrain knowledge creation. Finding the right balance and synergies, rooted in respect and equity, through closer engagement from the outset of research and projects could help overcome such dichotomies in our view.

Shifting the power is a journey not a destination. Power is not simply shifted and sustained, it is dynamic and continually contested. While the articles identify ways that action and practice can evolve to enable greater equity and justice, they also provide a warning, that these ways of being and relating need to be invested in if they are to be sustained. Equally, action is important – as Rana et al note – it is not enough to map power and decision making, it is necessary to ‘*catalyse dialogue*

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and inspire action as part of a sustained commitment'; and it is only through ongoing focus that we can collectively ensure that the shifting the practice in different spaces can connect to enable wider power shifts.

What do we continue to reflect on?

While this Special Issue captures rich, grounded insights into how the rhetoric of power shifts is being translated or resisted in real-world contexts, there remain significant gaps in both practice and evidence that warrant further reflection and attention.

Firstly, many contributions focus on power shifts within the established ecosystems of civil society, philanthropy, academia, and international NGOs. Yet, some critical actors and domains remain underrepresented in this collection. Movements such as Pledge for Change, Shift the Power Fund, and the work of the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) have been instrumental in advancing radical shifts in both funding and accountability. Their efforts centred on localisation, trust-based funding, and community-led governance deserve closer interrogation, not only as successful alternatives but as experiments with wider system implications. We also note that the emergent work around alternative metrics of success, such as well-being indices, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-defined indicators, did not feature prominently. These are ripe areas for future inquiry and collective learning.

Secondly and relatedly, we were surprised with the lack of focus on intersectional inequalities and feminist analysis in our articles. Shifting the power cannot just think about organisational form, or geography. We need to understand who the new holders of power might be, their identity markers and in what ways power might be reproduced or reconstructed. Decades of feminist practice reminds us that we need to pay attention to class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and more if we are going to dismantle the inequalities that exclude, create competition and prevent power sharing. There is much to draw from feminist teachings that can contribute to building a more just, more inclusive future.

Thirdly, we continue to reflect on the role of the private sector in power shifts in an area that is both critical and complex. As development financing contracts, especially in light of drastic cuts to ODA, the sector will likely see a growing presence of private capital, philanthropic investment, and market-based approaches. What does it mean to shift the power in a development context increasingly shaped by corporate actors, venture philanthropy, and blended finance? How can civil society resist extractive models while also engaging the entrepreneurial energy, networks, and financial models of the private sector in service of locally led and accountable development? And crucially, how do we ensure that the entry of the private sector does not simply reproduce dominant logics of efficiency, control, and technocratic 'solutions' but instead contributes to equitable power rebalancing?

A related area of reflection concerns how power shifts are integrated or fragmented across levels. Several articles in this issue draw attention to the importance of grassroots organising and community leadership. Others engage with national policies, funding mechanisms, or global discourse. But how these layers connect remains an open question. What does it mean to build *collective practice* that spans from the hyper-local to the international, ensuring that power shifts at one level are not undone by stagnation or capture at another? How can grassroots voices inform not just programme delivery but global norms? And are we doing enough to build bridges across these scales in meaningful, sustained ways?

We are also left reflecting on the temporality of power shifts. Many contributors emphasised that shifting power is a journey, not a one-off achievement. Yet much of the sector still operates on short

project cycles, shifting donor agendas, and funding models that privilege outputs over transformation. What mechanisms whether institutional, relational, or financial can support the patient, iterative, and often non-linear work of rebalancing power? How do we resource and legitimise long-term, slow processes of change in a sector still defined by urgency and quantifiable 'impact'?

Lastly, we reflect on our own practice as editors, conveners, and participants in this process. Despite our aspirations to create a more inclusive and practitioner-centred issue, the final collection of articles still reflects some of the systemic barriers that shape whose knowledge is recognised and valued. Our hope is that this issue, imperfect as it may be, will open more doors for collaboration, deeper interrogation, and renewed commitment to doing development differently from the inside out.

Looking forward and acting together to build on the learning of this issue

In reflecting on the Special Issue and the process of it coming to be, we conclude with three themes that have emerged for us.

Firstly, we note that the challenge we experienced in moving from idea to practice, reflects some of the same challenges as the wider movement. We wanted to work together as an equitable team, throughout this process, but we are all busy in our own organisational lives, with different daily pressures which dominate our attention; and shocks in our external environments which impact on our ability to keep focused and dedicate the time we want to certain processes. We would all argue that we embed the values, mindset and ambitions of shift the power, but the daily practice in this particular space has been challenging. Likewise, while our focus was on curating space for previously unheard voices to shape these wider discourses of shift the power, the outcome looks different from how we imagined.

This shift from idea to practice is felt in other places - you can have an idea that sounds good in theory and is ideologically the 'right' thing to do; but practice involves the messiness of reality. Pragmatism and compromise are necessary. We hope that we have struck the right balance between ideals and practice in pulling together this Special Issue and will continue to reflect on whether and how we could have approached this differently. There are voices we may have missed, powerful stories that did not have access to this call for papers or the bandwidth in their practice or context to submit within the timeframe, and other aspects that perhaps did not give us a full enough picture. We hope that the subsequent conversations to this compilation of perspectives and its ripple effect will attract more voices in new spaces and places.

Secondly, we reflect on what this process has taught us about shifting the power, and ask whether the attention should be more about mindset and less about geography? [Ndlovu-Gatsheni](#)⁸ argues that decoloniality is a way of 'thinking, knowing and doing' and that a process of iteration is needed to unmask and reveal coloniality, challenging in endurance across dimensions of power, knowledge and being. This holds true where-ever you are located. Within shift the power, a fundamental commitment is being made - to disrupt inequitable hegemonic practice and building more equitable just relationships; and this involves challenging current hierarchies within communities, institutions, societal structures and global relationships. Given the interconnectedness of these different realms, and the impact of both historic and current relationships, it feels that a collective commitment to

⁸ <https://blacfoundation.org/pdf/Ndlovu-Gatsheni-14.pdf> - Decoloniality as the Future of Africa Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni* Archie Mafeje Research Institute, University of South Africa

EDITORIAL: We talk about shifting the power, but are we really shifting the practice?

By Kate Newman, Suzanne Hammad, Charles Vandyke, Logan Cochrane and Naila Farouky

shift the power needs to move beyond location to respond to really shift mindset, and therefore practice – the precise details of what this looks like will vary, dependent on space, position and possibility, but the investment in rethinking and unlearning will be shared.

Finally, we take the opportunity to reiterate that the processes of change are complicated and uncomfortable. They involve deep commitment and attention - to navigating and responding in the moment, to being curious and building understanding, to know when to move forward and when it might be better to stand still. This Special Issue has required us as editors to take on these roles and recognise that shifting the practice is not about absolutes, or big ideas, but about meaningful engagement, listening and learning together, and continuing to dream for something different. As emphasised earlier in this editorial, shift-ing the power should be seen as a dynamic verb and process, not as an outcome. It is on-going. We hope we have contributed to the momentum of this process in this limited contribution.