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How do we move from rhetoric to action? *Lessons from the RINGO Project*

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Abstract

The RINGO Project has been a systems-change initiative aimed at shifting power from INGOs in order to create a more balanced civil society eco-system, one in which power and resources are more equitably shared between international, national and local actors. Convening a microcosm of the system, the project identified multiple systemic barriers to change which no one actor would be able to address on their own. Systems change and design thinking was adopted to help move beyond these barriers. The project has seen several successes, in terms of inspiring practical changes in INGOs and new forms of collaboration. There have also been some substantial policy change at the bilateral level, in some cases attributed to the work of RINGO. Nonetheless, change in the sector continues to be slow and there is an ongoing need to strengthen the demand-side whilst also leveraging more change to the system through multiple means.

Introduction

For several years, there has been a growing movement in civil society, united under the banner of 'Shift the Power'. They call for a more fair and balanced civil society system, one in which power and resources are more equitably shared between larger civil society actors in Europe and North America, and local and national civil society groups based in global majority countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the start of 2020, the vast majority of funding in the system, estimated at 93%, rested with the INGO sector, in spite of calls for change that had been taking place for many years, most notably the 2016 Grand Bargain commitments.

Local actors involved in the Shift the Power movement argued that they were still being starved of resources and power directly by those who purported to help – namely the INGO community (ShiftThePower Movement, 2024). This reality fails to acknowledge that local actors – at the national or local levels – are not just under-resourced, it is where 'development' really takes place.

Whilst most CSOs do get funding from local sources – through voluntary, commercial or government income, or religious communities, for example, it still falls short of their full need. Both greater 'inward' investment from domestic sources and international resources are an important part of their sustainability. INGOs, meanwhile, can dominate both spaces: in addition to having a virtual monopoly on international funding, when they establish country offices, they compete with local funding sources too.

In addition to the lack of resources, the priorities, ideas, and ways of working in the global majority countries (Global South) are considered inferior to those that have come from the Global North. The Shift the Power movement is united around the idea that knowledge and non-financial assets are based in communities, not necessarily in the hallowed halls of Oxford or Washington and therefore the access to resources and decision-making hierarchies needs to respect this.

The RINGO Project was borne out of this rallying call for recognition. Launched in 2021, the RINGO Project, short-hand for 'Re-imagining the INGO' is a systems-change initiative that seeks to challenge the dominance of INGOs in the sector, whilst also redefining the role of INGOs in practice.

This article looks at the approach taken by the RINGO project to try to address these innate inequalities in the wider civil society system, particularly within the first two years of the RINGO Project. We reflect on the ongoing challenges in ushering in systems change and signpost some further opportunities to drive the catalytic change that is needed in order to shift power.

The RINGO Process

The RINGO Project came together through a collection of senior leaders in the sector, with the

lead hosts being Rights CoLab, a virtual human rights think tank, and WACSI, the West African Civil Society Institute. It was conceived from the outset as a systems-change endeavour. This is because of the fundamental understanding that no one institution could change an entire system; and that the nature of change was a complex interplay between different actors in the system as a whole. Furthermore, the project wanted to move rapidly from thinking about what was wrong with the system, to how change might actually occur in the system.

A 'system' is broadly defined as "an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves something..." (Meadows, 2008). For RINGO, the civil society system that we were concerned with was focused on international development, environment, humanitarian and human rights actors, and was broadly comprised of funders, official donors, INGOs, other national and local civil society organisations, networks, and academics. Systems change processes create a collective space to look at patterns, structures, and mental models that are prevalent throughout a system. The RINGO process adopted systems change and design-thinking methodologies and involved active coaching by experienced systems-change facilitators to assess these patterns and structures, but importantly, to help ensure people could move from ideas to action.

Starting in 2021, RINGO invited, by way of application, a small diverse group of 55 actors that represented the wider system. Diversity was also sought in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality, and were chosen in part, because they had influence or leverage in the areas where they functioned (Right CoLab, n.d.). What became known as the RINGO social lab embarked on a process to establish *how* we could change the system. They sought to identify why the system hadn't shifted, in spite of repeated calls to do so, and navigated a deliberate process to break the apparent deadlock. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group was convened entirely online.

The Project had 3 overarching phases of work: 1) a **Discovery phase** to create a collective understanding of why the system was stuck and starting to identify possibilities for collaboration; 2) a **Define' phase**, which started to define innovation challenges for key leverage points in the system; and 3) a **'Develop and Deliver Phase'** where a series of 8 actionable prototypes were agreed by lab members, and new small teams formed to test these ideas out in practice. Additional participants were recruited to ensure each prototype team had the skills it needed to test an idea out in practice.

Findings

The initial Discovery phase involved a three-month inquiry process to identify the areas of 'stuckness' that was holding back shifting power ambitions and that were, importantly, systemic in nature (Right CoLab & Reos Partner, 2021). These included:

1. **Stakeholders hold conflicting objectives and cultures.** Whereas INGOs derived their culture from 'professionalism' achieving legitimacy through formal structures of management; other actors in the system derived legitimacy directly from their

constituents and networks. This meant that cultures clashed in terms of ‘service delivery’ vs. rights, and people-led change and formal vs. informal change.

2. **Measures of success** were northern defined and did not match people’s lived-realities.
3. **Risk aversion**, partially dictated by the regulatory environment, results in undue control over processes, leading to heavy bureaucracies in INGOs and a commensurate culture of control. Donors may perceive organisations in the global majority as higher risk entities, with alleged concerns related to financial management, accountability, and transparency, ultimately leading to hesitancy in providing direct funding to local actors.
4. **Decision making structures** were considered undemocratic and upward, failing to involve staff or communities. Those chosen to sit on Boards – including people of colour – replicate the existing system.
5. **Personal barriers** such as the risk of loss of livelihoods in the north (fear of losing jobs), influence and power, guided by ego; and lack of self-awareness around gender, race, and privilege.
6. **Knowledge production** is widely controlled by western sources and institutions, and generally extractive of indigenous and local sources of knowledge. Local organisations are not being wholly valued based on their assets and value add to projects and programmes.

And, while no one actor was singly responsible for any of these areas of ‘stuckness’, donors were perceived as having more levers over the system than others; large sums of money entering the system either from bilateral or philanthropic actors, alongside McKinsey style drives for larger actors to be efficient, manage risk, and so on, dominated INGO models.

The second ‘Define’ stage then started to ask provocative ‘how might we’ questions, used as prompts to design solutions. For example: ‘how might we create more bottom-up accountability mechanisms?’ or ‘how might we centre development on indigenous knowledge?’ This involved significant creative thinking from lab members which helped lead us to our next phase which was focused more on ‘doing’.

Here, the final ***Develop and Delivery stage*** identified potential prototypes, and ultimately selected a series of eight systems-level prototypes to address the areas of stuckness, listed above. The prototypes broadly addressed: risk, accountability, funding and power, and culture change. A key characteristic of the RINGO approach is that it forced people to move forward into action through hands-on coaching.

Signs of progress

Teams worked on these prototypes for approximately eight months, with some groups still continuing. The results yielded some initial progress on a number of fronts:

i) Removing access barriers to bilateral funding for Southern CSOs. The ‘Untying Aid’ prototyping team, which sought to end the practice of bilateral funders only giving through their domestic INGOs, to instead shift more funding from bilaterals directly to southern CSOs. It was one of the core solutions to overcome the fact that most bilateral funding still remained largely in the hands of European or North American INGOS (ShiftThePower Movement, 2024). The team tested out ideas and messaging with bilateral actors and strengthened the demand from southern civil society actors. At least one primary bilateral donor officially ended their own practice of ‘tied’ aid, the success of which was partly attributed by the donor to the RINGO project.

ii) Shifting power relationships between INGOs and local Actors. A group which focused on reshaping INGOs to adopt more participatory approaches to their funding resulted in a toolkit for how best to do this but is also starting to generate new ideas for pooled investment models in this space. At least one INGO participant has now reshaped their entire organisation around this participatory model.

iii. Recognising the knowledge base of people with lived experience. Another prototyping group addressed the systemic problem of northern/white consultants being the primary advisors for INGOs wanting to shift practice. They launched an online community called the Decolonising Advisory Community which centres southern expertise and matches this with INGOs and funders.

iv. Reforming donor approaches to risk. A prototype on risk management completely unpacked the risk supply chain that passes mechanisms of control down from funder to local CSOs, considered a major barrier for shifting more funding and power to local civil society. As part of the trial, by changing to a negotiated method of risk management, they mapped out over 40 points of bureaucracy required managed to reduce it to just 1 for the bilateral funder, USAID, involved in the trial. They hope this will be the model for others.

v. Challenging the use of language. A new lexicon was created to address pejorative, sexist, racist or neo-colonial language sometimes used by the sector, with a new online AI system which will scan documents and suggest alternative language, currently in development.

vi. Innovating bottom-up accountability methods. New bottom-up accountability methods have been identified which will soon be tested by the Pledge for Change group of INGOs (Pledge for Change, n.d.).

vii. Building partnerships from the ground up. Finally, a prototyping team is continuing to develop an idea of a ‘Reverse call for proposals’ which puts local actors in charge of deciding what they want and need from INGOs. At the time of writing, they were testing this out in Zambia, also with the Pledge for Change group of INGOs.

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Other experiments also emerged out of this community, such as the new One World Together fundraising platform, built on models of solidarity rather than control.

Are we there yet?

RINGO has sought to catalyse shifting power from INGOs and has made some modest headway. Arguably, the issue is much more firmly on the table than it was prior to RINGO, and we now have multiple Boards and funders engaged in our working groups, collectively looking at areas of change. The RINGO community was broadened out through larger online events and lesson-sharing. The wider RINGO community now stands at about 2000 people.

A number of INGOs have drawn on our work and adopted their own decolonising strategies, for example. And, as we've noted, some funders in the bilateral space are changing processes and behaviours. But there is still some way to go to shift the wider system.

A report issued in 2024 by Dutch development network Partos, shows that progress on shifting power in the INGO sector still remains relatively slow, in spite of there being a considerable increase in attempts to address the issues surrounding power (Banks et al., 2024). For example, the research found that of 247 Northern based INGOs that responded, although 27% are consulting partners on policy decisions, only 4% see their partners taking a leadership position on policy.

On the funding side, biased donor practices persist, with the most recent estimate showing only modest improvement amongst OECD donors, from 93% to 90% (ShiftThePower Movement, 2024). INGO's practice of registering locally to circumvent bilateral donor rules has only further entrenched the bias in funding. As a consequence, little of the funding available for 'local' organisations, actually makes it to local organisations (Local African Organisations, 2023).

Weaknesses in the RINGO project?

RINGO has been the first real system-wide attempt to address the systemic failures in shifting power. But it has been a challenging endeavour, not least because its approach was necessarily designed within the confines of the weaknesses of the system itself. For one, we were conceived of as a project, which involves short-term funding cycles and an alleged end-point. Change is an iterative process requiring learning and unlearning. Funders, who are themselves part of the problem, lose patience with this concept and don't want to fund an open-ended project. The spirit of experimentation, therefore, was often inhibited by the traditional problems in the wider system.

For the work of the prototyping itself, people lacked the time required to engage in prototyping teams, as it competed with their day jobs. Most prototypes got to a point of demonstration, but not much further. Resources and time were lacking. One can only hope that the tools and learning that emerged -- all of it publicly available -- get picked up and utilised.

In order to get the most innovative ideas off the ground, the project specifically recruited people as individuals, rather than having to be sanctioned to participate by their organisations (though we changed this approach in the next phase of follow up work that started in 2023). This was advantageous at the beginning of the work, and enabled people to freely participate and ideate. We weren't hampered, for example, by membership that might limit ambition. However, when it came to prototyping, some had to step back or couldn't bring their organisations into the fold due to competing priorities. Thus, decision-makers weren't always in the room to see wider uptake of prototypes. Many prototypes required multiple actors in the system in order to be implemented in full. This would have required much more longer-term concerted investment in time by organisational leaders, alongside an organisational commitment to change.

Finally, the project was aware that it also may have lacked some key voices in the system – UN actors, for example. And whilst there was some participation from all sub-sectors of INGOs, environment and human rights actors were under-represented, so 'development' always reverted as the primary frame.

Within the wider movement, although some change has been seen, we would argue that by focusing on the 'supply' side of change – the INGOs and funders – insufficient effort was placed on the 'demand side' of change. Whatever the work of the RINGO project – or its sister project, the Pledge for Change, global majority civil society actors will be unlikely to cede power and control without sufficient demand. In fact, when Swedish donor, SIDA, recently 'untied their aid programme, there was considerable backlash from Swedish INGOs (DAC-CSO Reference Group, 2024). And local organisations don't necessarily want to rock the boat if it risks their own funding relationships. There remains a strong pull by all corners to maintain the status quo. So, without more significant work on this demand side, change will remain elusive.

Conclusions

The growing discourse on shift the power continues to give hope that change is possible. RINGO has been instrumental in strengthening awareness and showing some ideas about how to move forward, from negotiating how risk is managed proportionately in the system, to creating a 'reverse call for proposals' as a regular approach to identifying needs. The work of RINGO continues in the meantime.

However, we believe that more progress will likely be seen if the demand side becomes louder. This requires a more concerted effort in building the power of majority world actors who regularly partner with INGOs and funders alike, alongside those who have failed to access funding and resources because the barrier to access is too high. Only when local organisations are prepared to demand what they want and need from the international community, rather than accepting the decisions and systems made and designed elsewhere, will they be able to

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drive the change they want to see. Systems change approaches, like RINGO are critical here, in order to link this demand to the international space, but international actors in the system mustn't dominate this effort, however well-meaning. Of course, further investment by funders and INGOs will still be needed to progress the long-term hard graft of change within organisations. This will involve more experimentation, letting go of old ways of working, and evolving into new roles for so many in the sector, and a more balanced civil society system overall.

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