

### #3: Why Good Intentions Aren't Enough: How Real Change Gets Thwarted by the Aid System



*It's mid-afternoon on a Wednesday. You sit across from a partner in the Global South, both of you animated and hopeful. The project has gone well. Reports with glowing metrics were just turned in, and smiles exchanged.*

*But something lingers in the air. A gap between what was delivered and what was possible. Was this what was really needed for the community, right now? The best approach? The most pressing priority? You feel it: the unspoken weight of knowing that, despite your good intentions, you held the pen and set the frame. And they followed it.*



People working in development today are not evil. They're kind, committed, and values-driven individuals. Often progressive. **But the system was never built for justice. It was built for charity.** This distinction is critical as charity, by its very definition, implies a benefactor and a recipient, inherently reinforcing a power imbalance that still assumes one partner is superior to the other. When individuals with "good intentions"

operate within this framework, their efforts are inevitably warped by the structures they operate in. Northern NGOs (NNGOs) are actors in a system that positions them as **gatekeepers**. They implement programmes *through* local partners, **holding tightly onto the profile, power and purse strings**.

**This is the invisible machinery of global aid, where power hides behind process, and the moral glow of good intentions masks a deeply unequal architecture.** Even when Northern actors "partner" with Southern NGOs, they do so from a structurally privileged position. Their relationships are filtered through donor expectations, reporting requirements, and funding norms that centralise power with Northern NGOs – who gets to choose what, how and how much – often invisibly.

Things are changing...or are they? **There are many good people and organisations putting their best intentions towards doing better.** Building towards localisation and locally-led development. Trying to shift power. These conversations have dominated the global development charity sector for some years now.

**But this system wasn't built to be dismantled. It was built to protect power. As this *Why? Brief* shows, the system and the architecture it is built on is doing a very good job at thwarting genuine change.**

## The Roots of the Problem

The global aid system is often seen as a benevolent force for positive change. But it is the child of an imperial history. A more sophisticated, less brazen version of the colonial project, where the same hierarchies persist, keeping the Global South dependent on its relationship with the North. Southern organisations (SNGOs) are left in a perpetual waiting room for approval and validation.

## Actions on the Ground: Progress and Pitfalls

Global research on 'localisation' – the push to shift more power and resources to Southern organisations – shows the sector recognises the problem. Over 80% of NNGOs and nearly 60% of SNGOs report having discussed these issues internally and with their partners. This reveals a sector-wide recognition of the problem of power imbalances between Northern (NNGOs) and Southern NGO (SNGO) partners and similar numbers have taken 'concrete' steps to rebalance power relations. So far, so good.

However, a closer examination reveals a discernible pattern. **NNGOs are more willing to cede influence at the operational level while simultaneously retaining control over strategic and policy frameworks.** For instance, while 44% of NNGOs engage in co-creation for programming, only 4% report partners leading on policy decisions. This suggests a preference for incremental, contained changes that, while positive on the surface, do not fundamentally alter who holds the reins.

Most NGOs, North and South, acknowledge that significant 'power imbalances' persist across these geographies. But most also believe that their own partnerships are more equitable than the average.

**It's a classic 'the fault's in the system, not me' narrative.** Many NNGOs also quietly accept that the most impactful changes, such as bigger donor regulations, lie outside their control. While that's partly true, it can also breed complacency, making a key set of actors avoid the hard work and accountability of initiating deeper shifts in their own sphere of influence.

## How power reproduces itself

Funding is the pumping bloodstream of the aid system and the most vital organ of this hierarchy. As they say, **'with money comes power,'** and control over financial resources stands out as the most significant driver of these power imbalances. **Northern NGOs receive the lion's share of donor resources. They funnel these to SNGOs through conditional, pre-approved frameworks and on short-term project cycles, leaving them in what has been called a chronic 'starvation cycle'.**

For SNGOs, frustration extends to a pervasive sense that their Northern partners are not truly receptive to their concerns, and that the "shift the power" agenda itself is being co-opted. Flexible funding unsurprisingly remains rare, with only 37% of NNGOs and 26% of SNGOs reporting unrestricted funding arrangements.

Some NNGOs have even used localisation to consolidate their own position, adopting the rhetoric of solidarity while maintaining their authority as intermediaries and gatekeepers. This secures their prestige and control over resources, even as it signals "partnership." For SNGOs, competing on these terms carries high costs. Diverting scarce time and resources away from community work to "fit" donor language means losing something elemental: the authenticity of grounded, community-led causes.

## Why Change Stalls

Where change does occur, it is often through building local fundraising capacity. This is useful, of course. But it doesn't touch the deeper structures that keep power in the North. More often, such initiatives are less about addressing capacities SNGOs truly lack and more about training SNGOs to mirror Northern norms and language so they can be deemed "fundable."

We may be seeing small changes play out, but these cannot overshadow the internal resistance within organizations to deeper change, driven by a deep-seated apprehension and fear about what genuinely shifting power would do for their power and position. Half of NNGOs admit they are afraid of losing donors, upsetting boards, or even making themselves redundant. Smaller NNGOs sometimes feel personally attacked by reform calls, interpreting them as a betrayal of solidarity. These self-preservation instincts act as powerful brakes on radical change.

**This is how power reproduces itself today. Not through overt coercion, but through a quiet, systemic conditioning that reshapes actors to serve existing hierarchies.**

## Moving towards change, not charity

One World Together exists because of these realities. Our Co-Founders met in a Social Lab exploring how to improve the aid sector. But they realised something stark: **real change is not possible within the current system.**

Pouring more money into the same structures will only reproduce the same injustices. While individual reforms towards localisation matter, they cannot 'add up' to the deep, systemic change needed for a truly locally-led future. We will continue to wonder why aid and charitable financing fail to

deliver long-term, transformational outcomes, especially in the context of the deep funding cuts we face in 2025.

While individual programme, partnership, and policy reforms that move in the direction of localisation are important, we must recognise their limits. The sum of these actions cannot add up to the deep, systemic change needed for a truly *locally-led* future.

For decades, development actors have layered outward, adding partnerships, scaling programmes, "building capacity." The real work now is to strip those layers back. Like peeling an onion, we must reach the stinging centre: deeply embedded power imbalances.

## Why the system resists change: The three-horizons

The Three Horizons framework helps explain why the aid system resists transformation, highlighting three patterns of innovation, two of which, at first glance, only *look* like progress.

Most aid sector changes today are *sustaining innovations* – tweaks that actually keep the current system alive. For example, NNGOs opening "local" headquarters may seem progressive, but often end up competing with SNGOs on unfair terms.

Some are *disruptive innovations*, which go one step further to challenge certain norms. We see this in the increasing SNGO involvement in decision-making, for example, or in efforts to make funding slightly more flexible, and in cases where SNGOs are beginning to get a say in their Northern partner policies. While these are all welcome shifts, they still leave the core architecture intact.

Only *transformative innovation* can deliver the genuine change we need: questioning and replacing the system's rules, values, and structures,



and centring Southern organisations from the start. This is the horizon One World Together is working towards: **innovating the system itself rather than innovating within it.** Hand in hand with its partners and supporters laying the foundations for a global funding system that puts power where it matters, at the community level.

## **The aid system isn't broken. It was built this way. Here's how we fix it.**

That's why we're not adding another layer to the system. We're taking layers away. Our **micro-funding model** pools small, monthly donations from many people into significant volumes of unrestricted funding for the most local organisations.

This gives our partners stability from a broad, committed community, rather than dependence on a handful of gatekeepers. It gives them the flexibility to set their own priorities, adapt as needs shift, and invest in what matters most to their communities.

## **Be Part of the Change**

We refuse to keep climbing a ladder leaning against the wrong wall. We believe in change, not charity and together with The New 1%, we're actively building it.

Will you join us to fund transformation from the ground up?

*Did you know that One World Together emerges from our co-Founders' academic research and long work experience in the aid sector? Our Why? Briefs series brings this to life, spotlighting the decades of knowledge and experience that have shaped what we do and why we do it.*

### **This Why? Brief draws particularly upon:**

Banks, N., Bukenya, B., Elbers, W., Kamya, I., Kumi, E., Schulpen, L., van Selm, G., van Wessel, M.G.J. and Yeboah, T. Forthcoming. *Power and Its Discontents: The long road to systemic change in the aid sector.*

Banks, N., Bukenya, B., Elbers, W., Kamya, I., Kumi, E., Schulpen, L., van Selm, G., van Wessel, M.G.J. and Yeboah, T., 2024. [Where do we go from here?: Navigating power inequalities between NGOs in the aid system.](#)

G. van Selm, B. Bukenya, I. Kamya, E. Kumi, T. Yeboah, N. Banks, W. Elbers, L. Schulpen and M. van Wessel. 2025. *Northern NGO-centrism in localisation processes: reproducing power inequalities in the aid field.* [Development in Practice.](#)

---

**Learn more about our solidarity-based giving, and take your first step toward being part of this change:**  
<https://oneworldtogether.org.uk/join-us/>

