TIME ☰ Transforming INGO Models for Equity

Navigating Collective Transformation: Four Hard Won Lessons from a Year of TIME

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Exploring the TIME initiative's journey over the last year has provided as many valuable insights and lessons about the process of operationalizing sector-wide transformation as it has built clarity around changes that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) international NGOs need to make to remain fit for purpose, sustainable, and legitimate.

It's also raised a lot of questions about the future of SRHR INGOs and how we as a development community – and SRHR specifically -- have a responsibility to reflect on our history, celebrate our successes, examine the structures and systems that govern our sector, and assess our value and purpose.

TIME is a collaboration-based initiative that seeks to explore how SRHR INGOs can and should rethink how to operate and contribute to equitable development. Research findings from 2022 on the current relationship dynamics between SRHR INGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) indicated that while INGOs will continue to be relevant, they will need to change to be fit for purpose. In response, in 2023 18 SRHR INGOs established three working groups which met twenty-two times in total to identify actions that INGOs could take to align on and operationalize locally led development.

This past year has been one of introspection among INGOs, which is just one important part of sector-wide transformation. Going forward, we know that INGOs, CSOs, and funders must come together to define a common vision for where we are headed and a plan for how we reimagine a future that is more equitable, accountable, and resilient. While there is still much work to be done, it is important to pause and reflect on what we've learned from this past year of co-creation and collaboration.

The lessons extracted from TIME extend beyond its immediate context, providing valuable insights for the broader movement advocating for equitable, locally led development. While more hard truths are outlined here, four main lessons learned stand out from this year of collective work.

Lesson 1: The process is the project. Collective action requires collective understanding.

Within the first two months of TIME working group meetings, it became clear that the process of questioning and reassessing the purpose, process, and participants of the work was as important as the outputs of the working groups themselves. All three groups actively engaged with the following process related challenges:

- Identifying the exact problem to be addressed, which impacted decisions on who should participate in discussions and why.
- Ensuring that the way the work was done didn't perpetuate existing problems and power imbalances, requiring careful consideration of the project's approach.
- Language posed a barrier, leading to significant time being spent on clarifying meanings and interpretations during discussions.
- Acknowledging that INGOs need to do internal work before they can effectively engage with other stakeholders, while at the same time recognizing that those involved with TIME are only a subset of a larger community.
- Working to build a safe space for participants to feel comfortable about expressing themselves, especially critical given the subject's ambivalence.

Recognizing that TIME is in a pilot for the process of sector-wide transformation has given us the permission to not always have the answers right away and to linger in the uncomfortable and messy places, because that is often where the root answers lie.

What we'll do differently next time: Recognizing that TIME is in large part a pilot for the process of sector-wide transformation has further underscored the need to invest time and resources for documenting and transparently sharing our lessons learned along the way. It has also given us the permission to not always have the answers right away and to linger in the uncomfortable and messy places, because that is often where the root answers lie.

Lesson 2: Finding the balance between introspection and action is necessary.

The Visions working group, comprised of CEOs and leaders tasked with creating a vision of the role SRHR INGOs should play in the future, struggled the most with striking the right pace for collective action. The group continually asked itself "When is introspection valuable and when does it create stagnation? When is talk necessary to build a common understanding and framework and to bring the collective along, and when does it become counterproductive?" It was difficult to take the time for this introspection period, recognizing that it was a privilege in and of itself to have the opportunity for reflection – one that others within our organizations, as well as partners, often didn't have. Many participants were motivated to move more quickly or felt that our process might come at the expense of direct action, noting that the wider discourse on locally led development, localization and decolonization has been gaining ground for years.

What we'll do differently next time: This is an area where there is value in living in the tension between two truths. Collective introspection and reflection enable a group to develop trust, align viewpoints, and avoid rushing into ineffective initiatives. Delaying action for too long risks the group becoming a performative talk shop. Acknowledging this tension and building safe spaces to debate the process increases the chance of finding that necessary balance.

Lesson 3: Who is at the table versus who should be at the table is still a struggle.

Deciding who is at the table is a critical aspect of fostering meaningful collaboration and avoiding tokenism or top-down approaches. All year, TIME participants engaged deeply with the question of who should be included to achieve their respective group's purpose, debating whether they should be exclusively comprised of INGOs or include a mix of INGOs and CSOs, as well as how country office voices within INGOs were represented.

Through these discussions, several important tensions rose to the surface on how to live the shared principles of equity and inclusion, including:
1. Perpetuating the INGO-CSO divide by not having everyone 'in the room' vs. the potential of being extractive by inviting CSOs to the conversation too early before INGOs had had a chance to do their own reflection.
2. Creating space for dialogue between INGO-CSOs (which was a key finding of the 2022 TIME research) vs. not having enough time and funding resources to authentically and sustainably create the spaces that are necessary to build meaningful trust and create truly meaningful engagement.
3. Integrating lessons learned from other initiatives similar to TIME was desirable but not always easy due to timing and other factors.

The groups also raised the issue of legitimacy, questioning what additional processes need to happen for outputs of TIME to be representative and legitimate, since working groups were made up of the unique perspectives of individual representatives of INGOs – with some but not full involvement of country staff perspectives - not the INGOs themselves.

What we'll do differently next time: There was broad understanding and acknowledgment that this year of TIME programming should focus on INGO introspection, because INGOs needed to have a common language to use, a viewpoint on the role they could play in the future, and a growing understanding of the organizational changes that will be required to get there. It is important to note, however, that the groups did not come to full agreement on how that process should be achieved, and perhaps there is no one consensus on how to do transformation fairly. Participants continually raised concerns and engaged in difficult conversations, challenging each other. As a result, at times the scope and purpose of the groups were narrowed or redefined. The Core Concepts working group, for example, decided to reduce their scope from developing a common language and understanding of shared principles to identifying practical ways to use language to move the conversation about equitable development forward.

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Today, the TIME project team has a much more realistic view of what it takes to contribute to systems level change. We know, for example, that meaningful consultation, collaboration, and trust building

across the sector are the essential next steps, and that this important work will need to be resourced by funders accordingly.

Lesson 4: Change must happen at all levels, and it must be interconnected.

As the respective groups started to delve into the substance of their work, participants continued to get stuck in the scope and scale of what TIME was designed to accomplish. Transforming INGO models for equity is such a complex and vast problem that it is easy to get caught in tangents and circular thinking. The Visions and Roadmaps working groups, for example, ran the risk of spending all their time debating word choices, which was not their mandate. The Roadmaps working group, who were tasked with operationalizing change within organizations, would often get stuck contemplating where the sector was headed (which was the aim of another group). Introducing the panarchy framework helped to create a lens through which to look at how change at different scales can be connected, and how change should cascade throughout all levels. This also helped situate each working group in their respective level of change.

What we'll do differently next time: This year's set of working groups dove deeply into the question of how INGOs will need to transform within their unique ecosystem. Asking the hard questions and developing frameworks for further thought at the individual, organizational, and sector levels has resulted in increased INGO alignment and agency. The next obvious step will be to broaden the scope and scale of the discussion by listening, coordinating, and collaborating with CSOs, funders, and other key stakeholders. It will also be to align on collective action that can respond to the complexity of challenges that we currently face – helping the SRHR community meet the moment of transformation that is on the horizon.

Continuing to Work Out Loud

TIME is a pilot for a process that could easily be adopted and adapted across the development sector. To that end, the outcomes of this work could serve as a framework for a broader multisectoral approach.

The initiative continues to learn and face hard truths about what it means to operationalize transformation in an ecosystem that has upheld rigid ways of working, faulty incentives, and unbalanced power structures for too long. And while the working groups focus may have been on reimagining INGO roles, developing operational roadmaps for change, and developing clarity around how language should be used, perhaps the real work was in continually questioning and acknowledging individual limitations, being willing to engage in hard conversations, sitting in messy tensions without clear answers, and ultimately daring to reimagine how things might be.

These four hard-won lessons—embracing the process, balancing introspection with action, navigating inclusion and exclusion, and recognizing interconnected change—are not just applicable within the

realm of SRHR INGOs but offer useful insights for the broader movement advocating for equitable, locally led development.

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