



## **So, Your Organization Wants to be More Equitable: The Journey to Creating an Operational Roadmap for Change**

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So, an INGO wants to become more equitable. How do they do that? This was the question our working group, part of the TIME initiative, was tasked with answering. Specifically, the goal of our group was to create an [adaptable, multi-dimensional roadmap](#) to provide guidance and direction for organizations seeking to transform to more equitable models. Models that support decolonization of global health by working towards disbursed power, shared leadership, and locally led development.

Over the course of six months, we had some challenging and meaningful discussions that were action oriented. Being that we are all operations people thinking about *how* to actually do this was exhilarating, but also overwhelming at times. With varying perspectives from thirteen different organizations, many of whom had different operating models and structures, funding bases, and various levels of progress towards more equitable models, we sometimes struggled to find common understanding.

### **Getting Started**

At the outset of our discussion, we recognized the challenge of getting INGO leadership commitment to take concrete action, and also the difficulty of having genuine and frank conversations with donors on what is required to operationalize change. We learned that organizations with larger amounts of unrestricted funding were able to move down the road more quickly than agencies with predominantly restricted funds. We also acknowledged that while we were all committed members of our organizations and to the SRHR cause, we were also competitors. This is a hard truth that has often stood in the way of collaborative approaches that places the ‘greater good’ above our organizational interests.

The group also grappled with whether and how to engage more national stakeholders in the discussions. Many of those in the room were associated with global INGO offices and we had more limited representation from INGO country offices. Similarly, we also recognized that for the roadmap to be truly valuable, it needed input from national NGOs and CSOs. We acknowledged that it was a luxury to even be able to engage in these types of progressive discussions, particularly when you are country-based program staff that are driven by donor deliverables. Yet, we didn’t want to be extractive, we weren’t quite sure what we were asking, and the project resources were scarce. We worried that a surface-level ‘consultation’ wouldn’t be sufficient to build the trust that was necessary to have meaningful conversations.

People's busy schedules also meant it was sometimes hard to dedicate enough fresh brain power to this initiative's working group among other competing priorities. There was general consensus that the health and development landscape is running at a high pace that is going to be hard to sustain, particularly in a financially constricting environment. That said, we were impressed with people's commitment to attending the working group sessions and contributing when they could.

### **Designing the Roadmap**

When it came to roadmap design, it was interesting to hear from the group members about which key operational areas organizations should focus on to begin their transformation. In the end, we shaped a process that could look different for each organization, based on their unique needs. The process included developing guiding questions to help organizations reach the most relevant answers for them. More specifically, we:

- Outlined and brainstormed what aspects of operations need to be evaluated and acted upon (e.g., institutional architecture - structure, leadership, governance, and partnership; funding and financial systems - procurement, funding, finance).
- Brainstormed and prioritized guiding questions that INGO leaders should ask themselves as they evaluate each operational area. This helped organize what sometimes feels like a jumble of necessary actions into a more strategic and aligned process.

One key lesson is that the roadmap is really an expedition with many entry points. While the end-goal is to be a more equitable and inclusive organization, where you start doesn't matter – what matters is that you start at all. But then how do you know where to begin? The working group struggled to develop the most pertinent guiding questions to help teams analyze what needed to change within their specific context. We had long brainstorming lists and prioritizing was challenging. For example, in large INGOs with many country offices, understanding office "culture" is not easy; it can depend on the team, country or level that employees work at.

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Another key area we discussed was language! It became clear that different organizations use different terms to describe things, and that had an impact on how we thought about the work that needed to be done. For example, is it decentralization, decolonization, localization, or shifting power? We recognized that language and terminology played a critical role in common understanding and communication and were glad that this was the [mandate of another one of the working groups](#) – and we hoped to utilize their learning to inform our own. We also realized that consideration would need to be made to translate the roadmap into other languages (when we get to that point) so that the model is accessible. This was echoed in the findings from the [original TIME study](#).

## Moving from Talk to Action

Interestingly, almost nothing that we talked about had to do with sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). We truly talked about international NGOs writ large and believe that the TIME experience is a potential prototype for how the health sector, or even international development more broadly, might think about tangible change.

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It was reassuring to see how many colleagues from the participating organizations wanted to see and make change.

This progress, however, hinges on leadership. The reality is that some INGO leaders are not having these conversations with their staff and, even if they are, may not be truly committed to change. Our role as operations people, then, is to push decision makers to have these conversations, taking the extra time to advocate and engage leadership and find the correct pathways to educate others about what must be done.

Together, we developed a change roadmap, a clear process which has the potential to spur productive conversations and help inform organizations that wish to embark on the journey of shifting power. Our hope is that it will be useful and adaptable enough that it can be taken up by a variety of organizations with different sizes, funding makeups, and structure, etc.

In the spirit of decolonization, we are keen to see the next phase of TIME, where we hope we can broaden the conversation with full participation and inclusion of national NGOs/CSOs to join the conversation on what SRHR INGOs should be doing to shift power. Ultimately, we are hoping that these efforts will lead to positive change through increased equity.

*This blog is part of the TIME Working out Loud Learning Collection. More stories and publications can be found [here](#).*