



PART 1: CORE CONCEPTS

UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE WE USE

TIM  Transforming INGO
Models for Equity



INTROSPECTION TO ACTION

TIME is a collaboration-based initiative that seeks to explore how SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) international NGOs can and should rethink how they operate and contribute to equitable development.



Phase 1

COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING

In 2022 we asked the question “what are the current relationship dynamics between SRHR INGOs and CSOs working in sub-Saharan Africa?” [The answers](#) told us that while INGOs will continue to be relevant, they also will need to change.



Phase 2

BUILDING SRHR INGO CONSENSUS

In response, in 2023 18 SRHR INGOs came together to go through a process of introspection. Recognizing that change is required across multiple levels, we developed a model and established three working groups to identify actions that INGOs could take to respond to CSO input and to operationalize LLD.



Phase 3

TRANSFORMING TOGETHER

The next step is to return to our CSO partners and funders and begin a proactive dialogue around whether these changes will in fact shift power to local entities while ensuring that INGO operating models are relevant, sustainable, and legitimate. We hope that in turn this will lead to a sector-wide transformation process that is well resourced and that allows for practical action to shift power, agency, and ownership.

CHANGE MODEL

TIME is a practical test in operationalizing transformation within a complex system. Three working groups explored complementary and interconnected elements of change at different levels. Each working group identified a core change that needs to happen at the individual, organizational, or sector level respectively for transformation to occur. They then worked together to develop practical frameworks and tools.



SECTOR: VISION

SRHR INGOs need a **vision of the role INGOs should play in advancing the field of SRHR** to be more equitable, resilient, and accountable.

ORGANIZATION: ROADMAP

SRHR INGOs need an **adaptable, multi-dimensional roadmap to provide guidance and direction** for organizations seeking to transform how they work for greater equity.



PART 1

INDIVIDUAL: CORE CONCEPTS

SRHR INGO leaders and practitioners need a **common language to be able to discuss and debate the core concepts of why and how they must change** for greater equity.

METHODOLOGY ●



Over the course of six months, SRHR INGO practitioners met to grapple with the importance of the language that is used in conversations about sector transformation.

The intent of the group was **not** to develop a glossary or lexicon for the sector.

The goal was to simplify everyday jargon and identify practical ways to use language to move the conversation about equitable development forward, together.

The group:

- **Prioritized concepts:** identifying a list of commonly used terms, prioritizing those that are either egregious and harmful, or have the most potential for catalyzing change.
- **Generated insights on using language effectively:** recognizing how language can act as a barrier to progress as well as ways to use it as a tool to build trust and provoke change.
- **Drafted definitions:** Discussed, debated, and co-created answers to the three questions on the right.

Note: Building a lexicon that supports hard and necessary conversations rather than contributing to miscommunication is an ongoing, iterative process. This document reflects the work of a committed working group that met from May-October 2023 and serves as a framework for how language is used in TIME. All others are welcome to adopt and adapt as they find useful.

DEFINITION

Guiding questions: What does this term mean, in plain language? How would you describe this term to someone new to the development sector?

Goal: To simplify the jargon.

WE GET STUCK ...

Guiding questions: Where do we get stuck when using this term? What problems should we be aware of?

Goal: To identify how language can create miscommunication and misinterpretation, so that we can avoid it.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Guiding questions: When should this term be used, and in what context should it be intentionally avoided? How can this term be used to move the conversation forward?

Goal: To provide practical and illustrative examples.

CORE CONCEPTS WORKING GROUP

The first objective of the working group was to prioritize, selecting 8 key concepts to focus on out of a co-created list of 36 terms. The first five terms were chosen because when used interchangeably to describe the broader movement for sector-wide transformation, they can cause confusion and misunderstanding. The final three terms were chosen because they have the potential to catalyze change.



THE PROBLEM WITH LANGUAGE

INGOs won't be able to effectively transform how they operate if they don't have a common language to have the deep, meaningful internal debates necessary.

Currently words create problems because:



OUTDATED AND PROBLEMATIC

Words reflect the principles we believe in. Some words used in today's discourse are outdated and problematic for individuals and organizations striving to do better, undermining efforts to increase equity and shift or share power.

MISCOMMUNICATION

INGOs can't grapple with the big ideas required for transformative change if the words we use are not clear. Some words in today's discourse are used as shorthand for complex and nuanced concepts, leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding.

INCONSISTENT USAGE

When people fail to consider the origins of the terms used (why and how the words came to be), it is easy to use language interchangeably and inconsistently.

CORE CONCEPTS IN PRACTICE

We acknowledge and accept that there will never be one definition of a word that everyone accepts.

This means that we must:

**RESIST
JARGON**

Resist using jargon to defend the status quo by being intentional and specific about what we mean.

**EMBRACE
NUANCE**

Get comfortable with nuance.

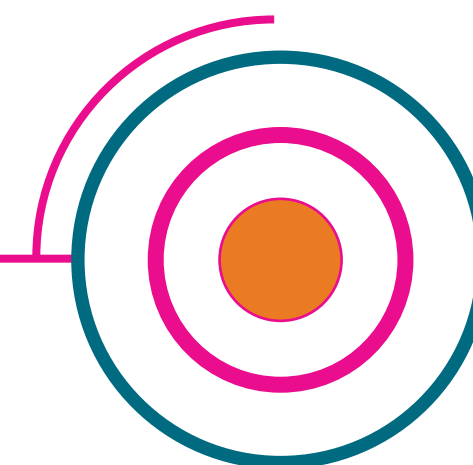
CONTEXTUALIZE

Contextualize the language we are using every time there are different voices in the room. Every space is different.

**CHANGE
BEHAVIOR**

Move beyond just changing our word choice, digging deeper to consider how the language we use impacts behavior change, provoking us to think about doing things differently.

LOCALLY-LED DEVELOPMENT



DEFINITION

Locally-led development (LLD) is development where the ownership, leadership, and funding is in the hands of local communities (the people who are experiencing the issues).

LLD is both a goal, an action, and process. While true LLD would have local communities designing and implementing programs and holding decision-making authority and over the use of the funding, SRHR INGOs can contribute to LLD.

INGO approaches to move toward LLD vary in terms of scope and scale, and can include (but are not limited to):

1. The majority of an INGOs staff are local to the countries where they work.
2. Staff in country or regional offices have the strategic, decision-making, and resource authority, and are committed to engage with and support local community members to determine the agenda and shape of implementation.
3. INGOs engage in equitable partnerships with local organizations, practicing shared leadership.
4. INGOs act as subrecipients to local organizations.

WE GET STUCK ...

... when we don't clearly know or define what we mean by local in any given context. When this happens, we either talk past each other, or the conversation isn't nuanced or specific enough to identify the potential risks of poorly operationalized LLD.

Examples may include:

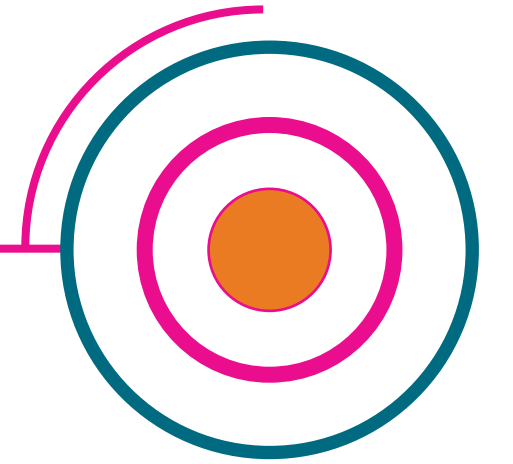
- Depending on the definition of local used, LLD could lead to working with the country elite or government only (vs a more inclusive group), not reaching marginalized groups at all.
- Having a local branch office as part of your INGO is not "locally led development", since the US/ Western "headquarters" still has the ultimate power and retains final decision making.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

LLD should be the primary term used as shorthand to mean a need to design program/research with local experts and stakeholders. It can be an approachable term for engaging those who are new to this concept.

Locally led development can be used when discussing aspirational goals for how best to work **within** current systems to shift power, AND as aspirational goals for **transforming** our sector and changing systems.

LOCALIZATION ●



DEFINITION

Localization is a USAID specific policy concept that has many similarities to locally led development (LLD).

Localization is often used as a generic umbrella term but is more accurately used as a USAID specific approach or policy concept that describes a “set of internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes that we [USAID] are undertaking to ensure our work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities.”

WE GET STUCK ...

... when we use LLD and localization interchangeably but mean different things by them. For example, some people use this term generically while others use it to refer to a specific USAID policy concept. The term localization has the risk of becoming a “buzzword” that has many different meanings.

We also get stuck when other non-USAID use this term, but with inconsistent or ill-defined meanings.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Localization should be used when speaking with or about USAID programs and policies specifically.

Use caution with this term – and seek to be clear on the meaning.

POWER-SHIFT



DEFINITION

Power-shift is both a process and a goal that seeks to intentionally and carefully examine who has the power (e.g. project decision-making, funding decision-making, project design, setting goals) and work to shift power to those who do not traditionally have the power.

WE GET STUCK ...

... when we use the term power-shift as a euphemism for decolonization, because the latter evokes a visceral reaction. Both are about interrogating and undoing power structures, but decolonizing originated in the Global South and is more transformative.

We also get stuck when we are not clear about the scope and scale of the power that needs to shift. Individuals often hold significant power that they can examine and shift themselves. At the same time, no single group can fully realize power-shift alone, because so much power is located outside any single sphere of control. Systemic power shifting represents a long-term and seismic shift which will require multisectoral, bilateral, political, and multinational collaboration.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Power-shift should be used when we are talking about our aspirations and achieving locally led development.

A power shift is needed for true locally led development.

This term signifies a more significant change than power sharing.

POWER-SHARE



DEFINITION

Power-share is the process of moving power, spreading it more widely and fairly. Power-share is one step toward LLD and shifting power.

The aim is for deeper cross-country collaboration, greater flexibility in programming, more avenues for fundraising, and new and diverse voices in the global movement for reproductive justice.

Power-share can look like:

- Sharing power across the organization, rather than holding it in a central body.
- Shared leadership and horizontal leadership. Horizontal leadership is a practical and strategic way to move toward more collaborative and democratic ways of working together, without regard to someone's position within the organization.
- Redistributing resources (human and financial) toward the countries and people closest to the work.
- Fostering ownership and autonomy for all involved.

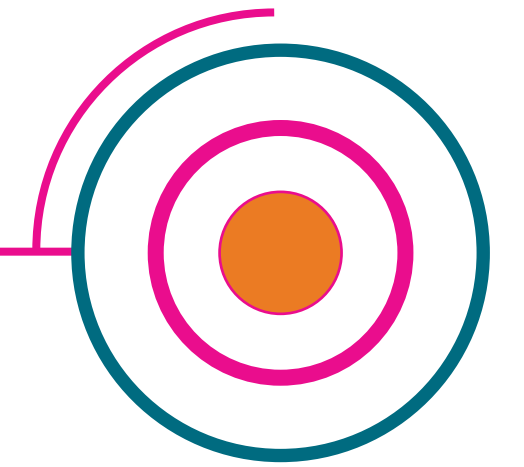
WE GET STUCK ...

... when we fear that this change means a loss in our currently held power or losing our jobs. The term "power-share" is less intimidating to those with power than the term "power-shift". This represents another example of an initial aspirational step within the system. Power sharing must precede power shifting because the alternative is a zero-sum approach.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Power-sharing should be used when describing efforts to operationalize LLD. Any progress towards LLD requires power-sharing. Power-sharing is part of the journey. This is a preferred term, at least for medium term progress since INGOs have more autonomy to share power than to shift it.

DECOLONIZATION ●



DEFINITION

Decolonization is interrogating and undoing systems and structures which have propagated inequities in health and other outcomes for centuries. It means repatriating indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing that were lost worldwide (e.g. theories, genders, religions, languages, other forms of culture, and medicine).

We need to work to become anti-colonial organizations because of the clear link between colonialism and patriarchy, and between racial justice and gender justice. The systems and structures of colonialism like capitalism, racism, and sexism (e.g. colonial matrices of power) have had global impact for centuries and are not about the 'literal' and political-only definition of decolonization.

WE GET STUCK ...

... when the term decolonization is used generically but is interpreted politically which leads to defensiveness and a shutdown of discourse.

We also get stuck when we use this term in conversations about incremental change, whereas the term decolonization represents an aspirational goal outside of the current system, related to transforming or completely doing away with the system as we know it.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Decolonization should be used when there is some shared understanding of goals and an open enough forum to discuss discomfort with the term and the idea of 'our work not being relevant'.

Acceptance of the term decolonization is dependent on the creation of a safe space for dialogue. This is because often the power holder in the conversation must overcome awkwardness about the power that they hold, as it is often not sought after, and be able to objectively interrogate and ultimately recede their power.

EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP*



DEFINITION

An equitable partnership is when two or more individuals/organizations come together consensually and intentionally with a common vision, mutual trust, and respect to achieve a common objective that is greater than what they could do alone.

Partnerships that are truly equitable are characterized by how the relationships are built and managed as much as the collective impact that results. This means working together to design, make decisions, learn from each other and refine approaches towards the shared vision.

** We added the qualifier 'equitable' to recognize a type of partnership that the sector does and should aspire to but has not yet fully realized. This term should be used to indicate a set of behaviors and relationships that are different from standard, status quo partnerships that are often based on unequal power relationships.*

WE GET STUCK ...

... when we use the term broadly to mean many different things. We don't differentiate between transactional partnerships (service agreements and vendors) vs equitable partnerships (that includes shared leadership and shared learning).

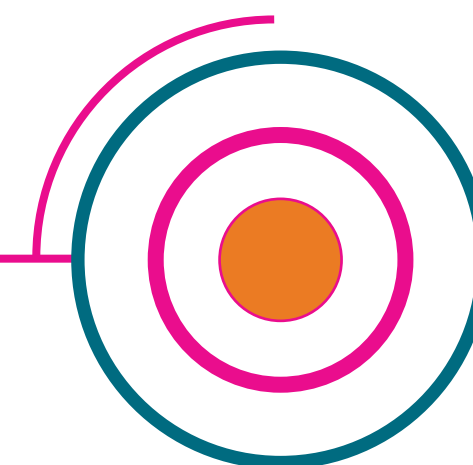
We also get stuck when we don't recognize power differences in the multitude of relationships that exist. Equitable partnerships are also often thought of as long-term relationships, however a one-year project-based sub-agreement, for example, can and should still be developed as an equitable partnership.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Equitable partnership should be used when:

- Talking about a specific way of working with partners in a trust-based, equitable, relational way.
- Working with partners to improve existing relationships.
- Advocating for or addressing issues of equity - power imbalances that are often inherent to locally led development require transformation of partnership equity.

LOCAL ORGANIZATION ●



DEFINITION

A local organization is an organization that is comprised of leadership and decision-making power that is actually from the population it seeks to serve (e.g. youth leaders of a youth RH movement, indigenous leadership of a group advocating for indigenous health).

The goal of locally-led development should be to find or work with a local organization that is as proximate to the problem being addressed as possible. Therefore, what is local may live on a spectrum.

WE GET STUCK ...

... when we use the term local organization to justify the status quo. This can look like:

- Staying with the same regular, accepted, and easy to access partners instead of looking for organizations that are closer to the challenge being addressed.
- A mindset of local only as defined by meeting minimum funder requirements and minimizing risk.
- INGOs that seek to define themselves as local to receive funding.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Local organization should be used when:

- We feel we have gotten as proximate to the issue as possible.
- We have had an open and honest conversation, with agreement, about what we mean by a local organization in the specific context we find ourselves in.
- Describing equal partnerships with local organizations.

SHARED LEADERSHIP ●



DEFINITION

Shared leadership broadly distributes authority and responsibility within and across organizations, as applicable. It empowers individuals to take leadership roles in their areas of expertise and increases the amount and variety of voices that are involved in decisions.

The shared leadership approach is a process instead of a destination and continually moves the organization towards shared responsibility and authority, strategic distribution of resources, and mutual accountability.

WE GET STUCK ...

... because this is a relatively new term, and not everyone knows what it means.

We get stuck when we use the term to signal equity, but there are not clear and fair division of roles, responsibilities, accountability and decision-making authority.

We also get stuck when we use the term to signal a process of consultation but take shortcuts because of a bias towards expediency (often sacrificing effectiveness).

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THIS TERM?

Shared leadership should be used when power-sharing is actually intended – and those who are affected most by decisions are invited to participate in the decision making.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

INDIVIDUALS

Share this work within your organization.
Promote clarity of terms within your organization and work circles.
If you are not sure about what someone means by the word they are using, ask them to clarify.



ORGANIZATIONS

Use this tool as a starting point to have reflective conversations about what language your organization will use, and why. Adopt or adapt as you see fit!



FUNDERS

Define and clarify the terms you are using.
Reflect on your own policies, terms, and conditions to ensure they are really promoting the needed transformation.



TIME PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS



Ibis Reproductive Health



EngenderHealth





TIM Transforming INGO Models for Equity

For questions or comments contact Kim Kucinkas at kim.kucinkas@humentum.org

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