Interrogating Assumptions About Power

In 2016, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation launched its international reproductive health strategy to support local advocacy in sub-Saharan Africa. This strategy continued the foundation's focus on ensuring that women can decide whether and when to have children. The strategy's goal envisioned a vibrant sector of local civil society organizations (CSOs) in sub-Saharan Africa that can capably and positively influence the family planning and reproductive health (FPRH) policies and funding decisions of their own national governments and of international donors.

The strategy primarily used an intermediary grantmaking model: the foundation gave grants to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) based in the United States and Europe who then provided sub-grants to African CSO partners. The intermediaries also facilitated access to training, coaching, and connections to funders and CSO peers. These sub-grants and other supports aimed to contribute to CSOs' advocacy and organizational capacity. The foundation also made direct grants to a small set of well-established African-led CSOs with a strong record of FPRH advocacy work. The strategy was grounded in five principles intended to inform the foundation's own practices as well as the practices of grantees and their CSO partners.

The foundation's principles and its expectations about how to most effectively support CSOs' advocacy capacity and organizational sustainability reflected underlying assumptions about power: how power can and should be shifted from funders and intermediaries towards CSOs – and with what result.

This brief focuses on key assumptions the foundation made about power, examining the validity of each assumption and identifying lessons learned based on evidence gathered through a developmental learning and evaluation process that accompanied the strategy's implementation over five years (2016-2021). Lessons from the evaluation informed the foundation's Global Reproductive Equity Strategy for 2022-2026.

Principles Guiding the Hewlett Foundation's Local Advocacy Strategy in sub-Saharan Africa

1. Support local advocacy priorities while seeking opportunities to connect these to global advocacy efforts.
2. Strengthen and provide more hands-on and sustained technical assistance tailored to each organization.
3. Support longer-term advocacy partnerships that strengthen and support local advocacy capacity.
4. Encourage mutual accountability among all parties: funders, intermediaries, and local partners.
5. Measure progress, document, adapt and share what is learned.

Assumption #1

The Hewlett Foundation can *shift power* towards its grantees while simultaneously *using its power* to encourage principle-aligned practices among those grantees and their CSO partners.

This assumption reflects the expectation that the foundation can successfully navigate the paradox of shifting power away from itself while using its power to influence grantees' practices. **The evidence suggests this assumption underestimated challenges in power redistribution.**

The foundation did shift power towards its INGO grantees. This power was primarily in the form of flexible funding that gave grantees control over how resources would be used to support CSO partners. Grantees also noted the foundation's approachability and openness to substantive discussions and mutual learning as another expression of power sharing. However, the foundation found it challenging to pair that power-sharing approach with more directive guidance about the practices it expected from its grantees – particularly the expectation that INGOs would shift power towards CSO partners. Grantees did not have a clear understanding of the foundation's expectations around *how* to shift power. And after five years of strategy implementation, some grantee practices still constrained how much control CSOs had in deciding when and how to use sub-grant money and what kinds of capacity support would be most useful to them.

A lesson learned: Funders need to clearly articulate the power-sharing practices they expect intermediary grantees to use with CSO partners. This means that a funder may need to exercise its own power more strongly – not as a way to retain power for itself, but as a way to *redistribute* power to CSOs.

Assumption #2

Short-term grants constrain power shifting and effective capacity strengthening. Five-year grants are welcomed and helpful for achieving these outcomes.

This assumption reflects the strategy's third principle, which promotes longer-term advocacy partnerships that strengthen and support local advocacy capacity. A 2015 landscape assessment by Sherine Jayawickrama informed this principle. The study, commissioned to inform the strategy's development, underscored problems with the common practice of short-term, project-based, and episodic funding and technical assistance. In advancing this principle, the foundation assumed that longer-term agreements would help shift power towards grantees and sub-grantees and provide the longer time horizon needed to effectively support CSOs' capacity-strengthening objectives. **The evidence partially supports this assumption. But the foundation's expectations did not account for INGO grantees' resistance to offering longer sub-grants.**

Interviews with CSO partners confirmed that short-term grants of 6-12 months constrain their power, forcing them to complete frequent time-consuming grant applications and reports, undermining their financial stability, and weakening their ability to grow and plan long-term. By undercutting a CSO's ability to reliably pay staff, short-term grants also contribute to staff turnover, which forces CSOs to "rebuild" capacities lost when staff leave. This confirms the first part of the assumption.

However, the assumption failed to anticipate the reluctance of INGO grantees to shift towards longer sub-grant agreements with CSO partners. The foundation expected that INGO grantees who received five-year grants would in turn lengthen their sub-grants. But most sub-grants only lasted 6-15 months. A smaller number of sub-grants stretched to two years. One reason for resisting longer grants: INGOs' concern that CSOs had not demonstrated their capacity to use the funds effectively over multiple years. Grantees also sometimes argued that the foundation's funding did not fully cover the costs of multi-year commitments.

A lesson learned: Funders need to be explicit about the length of sub-grants they expect from intermediaries.

Assumption #3

Giving CSOs control over the process of strengthening their capacity and shaping their advocacy work will lead to more effective capacity strengthening – which will, in turn, result in greater contributions to policy change by the CSOs in the long run.

This assumption links power sharing to capacity strengthening. The foundation expected that CSOs would more effectively strengthen their organizational and advocacy capacity if they had more power to shape the work supported through their partnerships with INGO grantees. **The evidence largely supports this assumption, though it's too early to speak to longer-term implications for policy change.**

Practices that shift decision-making power towards CSOs can help improve alignment between CSOs' capacity needs and the capacity support they receive from INGO grantees. In addition, transparency around the INGO's overall grant amount can put CSOs in a stronger position to push back when the INGO says there's no money to cover a capacity strengthening priority the CSO has identified.

The evaluation cannot speak to the last part of the assumption: the time horizon for connecting power sharing, capacity strengthening, and policy change fell outside the evaluation period. This could be usefully explored in future evaluations, perhaps through case studies that follow CSOs over time and trace their capacity-strengthening journeys and contributions towards policy change.

A lesson learned: It is not just about "giving CSOs control," but also about addressing power dynamics that surface in how intermediaries manage sub-grants and how they offer technical support to CSOs.

Assumption #4

Mutual accountability practices will lead to more balanced power dynamics.

This assumption speaks to the strategy's fourth principle, which aims to hold both grantmakers and grant recipients accountable for their commitments. By advocating for mutual accountability among all parties, the foundation expected to see more balanced power dynamics. **The evidence supports this assumption, but with the caveat that mutual accountability is hard to achieve.**

The evaluation confirmed that mutual accountability practices do contribute to more balanced power dynamics – and conversely, an absence of these practices contributes to highly skewed power dynamics. But there was a learning curve for the foundation around defining what it looks like to operationalize mutual accountability. At the time of the strategy's launch, the foundation, its intermediary grantees, and CSO sub-grantees did not have a clear shared understanding of *how* to put the principle of mutual accountability into practice. Over time, the foundation built its understanding of specific practices that support mutual accountability, including: a transparent and inclusive grant application process in which the foundation engages jointly with the INGO and its

CSO partners; meaningful (and at times confidential) feedback opportunities; and contractual terms that state the roles and responsibilities of the INGO and the CSO. Even if grant recipients largely lack the leverage needed to "enforce" the accountability of their funder, these kinds of mutual accountability practices can help reduce the power imbalance.

A lesson learned: Mutual accountability is difficult to operationalize. Organizations need to have a clear shared understanding of the specific practices that will help ensure that all parties can hold one another accountable, especially in the presence of power imbalances.

Assumption #5

It is possible for Hewlett grantees to substantially shift power towards and reshape power dynamics with CSO partners while simultaneously holding the power conferred by their role as the funder.

This assumption expects that intermediaries can meaningfully reduce power imbalances in their partnerships with CSOs, even though they have the power to decide whether CSOs receive funds or not. **Is this possible? The evidence suggests yes and no.**

There are many ways INGO grantees can help reshape power dynamics with their CSO partners. These include ceding control over how CSOs spend sub-grants; removing bureaucratic hurdles that prevent CSOs from making timely mid-stream adjustments to their activities and budget allocations; and encouraging CSOs to push back when they have concerns about the INGO's practices, including abuses of power or problematic power dynamics.

A lesson learned: Even with multiple power-sharing practices in place, it is still difficult to fully overcome the power imbalance between intermediaries, as the grantmakers, and CSOs as the grant recipients.

So long as INGOs hold the "power of the purse strings," CSO interactions with them are informed by an underlying concern about losing funding. One option is to explore shifting the re-granting role from INGOs to a different intermediary, such as an African grantmaker, and retain the INGO's role on helping CSOs access training, coaching, connections, and other forms of capacity support. But substituting an African re-granting intermediary may replicate the same power dynamics with CSOs. Funders also need to closely examine to what extent and how African intermediaries' practices reflect a commitment to power sharing.

The five-year learning and evaluation process was carried out by the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program at the Aspen Institute. The evaluation team included David Devlin-Foltz, Susanna Dilliplane, Rhonda Schlangen, Julie Tumbo, and Coumba Touré.