

Taking a long hard look at ourselves

Addressing power inequalities under the Power of Voices funding instrument

At NIMD, we like to think we know power and power inequalities. You could say it is in our nature. After all, we work in the heart of politics with political actors all over the globe. However, we noticed it is much harder to understand power inequalities in our own organization and network.

With our Consortium under the Dutch MFA's Power of Voices (PoV) funding instrument, we were determined to put in place different procedures to guarantee equal decision-making power. But are these good intentions really enough?

We decided to tackle this question early on, and to take a long hard look at ourselves in the first year under PoV. We wanted to see whether our good intentions were paying off. And what we could do better.

With the support of the Knowledge Management Fund, we hired an independent consultant who applied the Partos Power Awareness Tool. This research helped us to reflect on the inevitable inequalities and to learn from them. Let me address three key insights.

1) Limited operational backbone to deal with reporting requirements

The discussion on reporting requirements is as old as the first grant. Yet, its significance should never be underestimated, because reporting takes place within a highly unequal power relation. Reporting takes time, and time is a scarce commodity – often especially for Southern partners with smaller teams.

As the researcher states on the reporting requirements of the PoV grant; “Reporting data in a IATI compatible format is significantly adding to the burden of Southern partners. This is made worse by the fact that different donors often require different data and formats, vastly adding to the burden. The more limited operational backbone of Southern partners, notably in terms of finance staff, means that the same staff are now required to do more.”

2) Insufficient time for inception

Our Consortium makes shared decisions – at least, that is our aspiration. In practice, like with reporting requirements, time pressure brings out the worst effects of unequal power relations in decision-making as well. Tight deadlines make it much more challenging to truly mitigate power inequalities via relatively lengthy shared decision-making procedures. As the researcher states; “A longer inception phase, allowing for more time to finetune the program, develop workplans, and attach budget figures to concrete activities may have allowed partners to negotiate and resolve differences in a more organic and incremental way, particularly at a time that travel was not an option due to Covid-19.”

3) Lead role undermines shared decision-making

The requirement that one organization leads the consortium, NIMD in this case, unevenly distributes the responsibilities for financial accountability and control. Moreover, it has a negative impact on our Consortium's shared decision-making procedures. Again especially under the pressure of time, questions and requests by Consortium partners on issues that fall directly under

NIMD's responsibility, as lead organization, are dealt with quicker in bilateral exchanges. However, that directly undermines our Consortium's shared decision-making procedures and does not empower our Southern partners.

Looking ahead

At NIMD, we are committed to better understand and address our own power and power inequalities. This first research brought much needed insight in these dynamics, and it contributed to awareness and a commitment to do better within the PoD consortium. This is not the end of it. We will keep investigating and addressing the power inequalities that exist in our network and between colleagues and partner organizations. NIMD is committed to continue taking long hard looks at ourselves, and invite others to look with us too.