



Flattening Hierarchy between Partners

A joint initiative of CARE Nepal and WOREC Nepal for equitable partnership: Practice on power sharing



WOREC

Overview

An equal partnership between organizations stands on equal footing and shared leadership. Feminist values that are based on the practices of empathy, acceptance of vulnerability, humility, respect, flexibility and expressiveness open doors for more equitable and collaborative leadership. This way, we can imagine and strive for a flat hierarchical partnership.

On the contrary, vertical hierarchical cultures and practices create and promote unequal and unjust power dynamics. This dynamic is widely and deeply experienced in a partnership between international donor agency, intermediary organizations and local partners. Such culture and practice strongly hinder the very actualization of values like equality, dignity, participation, inclusion and respectful co-existence, mutual accountability that the partner organizations strive for.

For organizations, with development and humanitarian assistance mandate, that aim to put local actors in the lead role, strengthen local systems and be responsive to local communities, it is crucial to reflect and transform their perception of local actors and the roles they play. Localization, at its core, is about shifting relationships and power dynamics placing local actors at the center. Nevertheless, stringent vertical hierarchal culture, mindset and practices act as barriers to actualize the spirit of localization. Organizations must value knowledge of local actors, respect their commitment and integrity, and build a partnership which emphasizes trust-building, mutuality, and long-term commitments to a shared vision. A change in attitudes and behaviors of people holding different positions in an organization is essential for this, in addition to changes in their organizational practices and procedures.

CARE Nepal and WOREC Nepal are both active in advancing values of equality and social justice in Nepalese society through various campaigns, programs and projects. Therefore, it is natural to raise question if these ideals are reflected in their partnership too. The answer is yes, albeit with a need for some tangible improvements.

Hence, CARE Nepal took a step towards transforming the ways in which its partners, including women led organizations (WLOs), women's rights organizations (WROs), girls' allies and CARE itself, works together as well as with girls to achieve their shared goals. As power imbalances and hierarchy affect CARE's and its partners' ability to serve the interest of women and girls, who are at the heart of their work, it was important to critically discuss these issues on a regular basis, within the organization and with the partners.

With this intention, CARE and WOREC took the collective initiative to transform the nature and quality of their partnership. The initiative is called '**flattening hierarchy among partners**', which follows a simple yet powerful modal of dialogue series. Moreover, such reflective dialogue sessions were also held between CARE, WOREC and Girls Rights Forum (GRF) to unpack the power dynamics that existed between these entities to foster more equitable, trusting, and shared purpose. Thus, the Flattening Hierarchy Dialogue series provided a safe space to connect and build a common vision for success, support and shared leadership.

The Dimensions

Unequal hierarchy and power dynamics manifest in various ways, mainly in thinking, communication, behavior and attitude. In a partnership, there are dimensions where these manifestations are observed and experienced by staff members while working together. Based on their long experience as partners, CARE and WOREC reflected on the dimensions that CARE and WOREC need to work on to ensure value-based

partnership and henceforth jointly came up with six dimensions through collaborative means of brainstorming and discussions. The dimensions are:

- 1. Leadership:**
Nurturing shared and affirmative leadership for flattened hierarchy, what does it mean in practice?
- 2. Trust in relationship:**
Unpacking building blocks for trusted relationships in personal and professional spheres of life, how to invest in it and earn it?
- 3. Decision making:**
The role of communication in decision making, what promotes shared, inclusive, and informed decision-making culture?
- 4. Coaching and mentoring:**
Qualities and contributions of a good coach and mentor, how coaching and mentoring can nurture our personal and professional growth?
- 5. Sub-grant (partnership) management**
Understanding and balancing compliance and flexibility in partnership management, what are the areas to review and improve, and how to share risks between partners?
- 6. Project activities monitoring process**
Ensure partners' involvement from the project inception phase, when and how to plan joint monitoring efforts and output/outcome harvesting?

Reflect, Learn and Institutionalize

Unequal hierarchical practices are learnt or adapted through personal, family and professional experiences. Socio-cultural schooling also influences our habits and behaviors. In addition, a state of emotional wellbeing plays a crucial role in shaping one's communication, trust, relationships, leadership and conflict resolution abilities. These interconnected aspects play a determinant role in shaping the nature of our professional life, and how we perform around the dimensions mentioned above while we work together as partners.

For any progressive change to happen, one needs to reflect and understand existing reality, followed by unlearning things that are against intended change and then learning and sharpening necessary skills and qualities required to foster such change.

Hence, CARE and WOREC initiated a series of workshops focused on the six dimensions to create an opportunity for the staff members to:

1. Reflect on existing hierarchical practices within and between the organizations,
2. Learn skills and abilities to strengthen equal partnership and fair power dynamics, and
3. Institutionalize those skills and abilities into the organizational practice and culture.

Workshops: approach and methodology

The workshops used the following understanding, approaches and methodology from designing phase to the learning brief documentation phase.

Collaborative Design

This initiative adopted a flat hierarchical approach from the beginning. The idea and concept of flattening hierarchy was discussed, designed, and planned into action collectively by both partners, based on their experiences and aspirations. The conventional approach of 'funding organization decides and tells, and recipient organization listens and obeys' did not happen.

Experiential Learning

A learning process was designed to offer experiential learning opportunities to the participants. Content and exercises used in the workshop were directly connected with the staffs' everyday personal and professional realities. In the workshop, the facilitator introduced the agenda and activities on specific topics as planned, with the participants engaging in those activities, followed by an extensive debriefing, which actively enhanced the participants' insights and wisdom.

Participatory

The workshop used various tools and techniques to ensure everyone participates equally. All participants were engaged in each activity, took turns to reflect and share, and contributed in mutual learning. Vocal personalities rarely dominated the conversation. There were practical exercises, and enough space and opportunities available for all to feel like a valued member of the process irrespective of their organizational position, background and personality.

Non-hierarchical Set Up and Process

The workshop was run in a circle sitting arrangement on chair with no tables in front, everyone could see each other and participate as equally as everyone else in the circle. Facilitator- unlike a trainer- initiated the workshop process in invitational manner instead of instructive or directive. Both facilitator and participants contributed in creating an atmosphere of equals- not of conventional position and power holders- so that the learning process could become more mutual and inclusive.

Safe and Non-Formal Space

The workshop offered a safe and comfortable environment for the participants, encouraging them to participate and express their true self. Their presence was accepted without judgement while capabilities were appreciated without comparison. The participants were not forced to put up a mask and were encouraged to express in their own way when they were ready. This created an atmosphere for open and honest sharing and learning.

Professional As Well As Personal

Professionals (staff) are human beings at first. In addition, we play various roles in family, society, culture and economy. Skills like communication, listening, cooperation, community building and constructive conflict resolution are integral in both personal as well as professional lives. Irrespective of what and who we are; our basic needs are the same- food, shelter, clothing, love, care, respect, belongingness, moral values and so on. Both our learning space and working space need to reflect and respond to these needs. Connecting to each other on this basis flattens our hierarchy. It is true not only in a workshop, but also in the workplace and life in general.

External Facilitator

Hierarchy is both psychological and cultural. Psychology and culture usually carry subtle and deep-rooted biases in an individual. This makes it more difficult to imagine a possibility of change when someone from within pulls strings as an invitation for change. Alternatively, an external facilitator can play a more effective

role in creating and facilitating such learning spaces and environment. Hence, an external facilitator is probably a better fit to design and run a workshop on flattening hierarchy between partners, as chosen by CARE and WOREC.

Impact

Following outcomes were observed through the workshops:

- Attention to bringing collectivity along and focusing on the common purpose that binds the members of partner organizations together.
- Realization of the ways one needs to improve and change things in personal and professional roles.
- Clarity of purpose.
- Explicit awareness of and attention to power dynamics and learned ways to share power to foster collaborative and trusting relations between partners.
- Attention to learn to practice and respect personal expressions of joy and sadness.
- Realization of importance of creating safe environments for expression, self-care, participation, and growth of leadership skills.
- Open conversation on various aspects of hierarchical partnership relationship and critical reflection on how we can work collectively to flatten the existing hierarchy between two organizations.

Sujeena Shakya, Knowledge Management Specialist, CARE Nepal

The workshop of Flattening Hierarchy was very insightful as it helped me reflect on various forms and manifestations of hierarchy in both personal and professional spheres, what causes it and how we can assess it critically and eventually transform it, using different approaches and methods, in order to make our behavior and practices more equitable and just.

Pavitra Rana, Knowledge Management and Communication Coordinator, WOREC

In my view, effective leadership lies in identifying and nurturing the diverse talents and strengths within a group, prioritizing growth and development over perceiving individual progress as a threat. From the workshop, I garnered that in partnership, whether between organizations or within an organization's members, diverse competencies should be identified and harnessed to ensure harmonious coexistence because the key to success in any endeavor lies in collaboration and coexistence, rather than competition.



Participants at Flattening Hierarchy Workshop share through role play during an exercise. PC: CARE

Way forward

A. Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation

Make a joint plan between CARE and WOREC to observe, reflect and evaluate the changes fueled by this initiative in staff members and in the partnership. Document such reflection and suggest further enhancement efforts.

B. Continuous Learning

Flattening hierarchy initiative requires continuous learning attitude and opportunities beyond workshops both at personal and institutional level. Create such non-formal, secure and rich learning spaces regularly for the staff members to ensure continuous learning.

C. Leadership Involvement

Like any effort to bring significant change, flattening hierarchy also requires involvement of leaders, management teams and decision makers within the organization. Involve more leaders in this process and practice.

D. Persistent Efforts

Transforming deep rooted psychological and cultural ideas and practices, like unequal hierarchy, can be defeating at times and takes longer process. Plan and be ready to be persistent in your intentions and efforts.

E. Monitoring, Evaluation and Improvement

Set up a concrete institutional mechanism to regularly examine progress toward flattening hierarchy, evaluate efforts, and come up with proposals for improvement regularly. A joint mechanism of both partners- CARE and WOREC- is suggested.

F. Institutionalization

Culture and practice are sustained and nurtured better by institutionalizing them. CARE and WOREC, both need to think about and plan the process to institutionalize flattening hierarchy practice within their respective organizations and in their partnership.

G. Broadening the Initiative

CARE and WOREC's initiative in flattening hierarchy can be exemplary in other partnerships of both organizations. It can go beyond CARE and WOREC and can influence other international organizations and local partners. There is a need and scope to broaden this initiative. Such practices can also be done with community groups, local actors and impact groups.

H. Dealing with Challenges

Be prepared to deal with unexpected and tough challenges because flattening hierarchy may shake traditional values and practices at organizational and personal levels, which can result in negative outcomes, if not handled sincerely and collectively.

I. Knowledge Production and Sharing

Documenting the processes, learnings and experiences is important; so is sharing the documentation with others. That is how we learn from each other. CARE and WOREC can be pioneers to do so in flattening hierarchy area.

CARE Action Forward

1. CARE Nepal is planning to build the practice within all projects and programs which will contribute to enhance its Program Quality Standards.
2. Develop Flattening Hierarchy understanding to CARE partners by introducing this to Network of Partners of CARE Nepal
3. Sharing the learnings in Nepal and Global platforms through Community of Practice

TESTIMONIALS

Sunita Mainali

Executive Director, WOREC

In a society where power is determined by the status of access to resources, positions, knowledge, exposure, and sexual and gender identities, it creates a hierarchy. I reflected on how hierarchical thoughts build and how they are internalized throughout life. Shifting this narrative is the biggest challenge. The different tools of reflection during the workshop opened the door to self-transformation. This helped me develop confidence in opening up communication and dialogue with the partners and among the team members.

Equal footing is most important in partnership. Our partnership is for social change. Shared values and goals are crucial for creating a social movement. But hierarchy breaks this spirit. Therefore, learning and sharing platforms and creating shared agendas through flattening hierarchy enhance our partnership to create synergy.

Niva Shakya

Senior Coordinator- Gender Justice, Health and Education Rights, CARE Nepal

These sessions and dialogues helped me connect with the staff of WOREC as well as my teammates at CARE at a more personal and deeper level. It has changed my own mindset of looking at partners as just sub-grantee and someone who needs to deliver on the project to entities who are co-strugglers to achieving same goal of social justice. I find my experience working with WOREC in implementing the project more enriching and can empathize more deeply with their challenges; problem solving is now more collaborative. Even the environment for open feedback and honest conversations has been set which in turn is making us more efficient and accountable.

Prabha Poudyal

Program Coordinator, WOREC

I realized that we could deliver complex content without intense stress, by using simple yet reflective method. All the sessions were so connected to me but the session on leadership was the highlight. I had attended and facilitated several trainings on leadership but had never analyzed minor things that play great role in a leader. Similarly, I had never thought about my good leader (mentor), analyzed why I like my leader and qualities in a good leader. Once I found answers to these questions, I am becoming more conscious about my own behavior and attitude in terms of being a good leader. It provided ways to analyze my perspectives on leadership qualities. The workshop was a safe space to express myself, my values, thoughts and ideas. I learnt we can dismantle unequal power relationships. It has helped to create a dignified narrative of good

leadership and partnership and provided insight on how to shift power to create an equal power through shared leadership and two-way mentoring.

Anup Raj Pokhrel

Localization, Social Movement and Advocacy Coordinator CARE Nepal

For me, value -based partnerships can be promoted through acknowledging the existing power relations within our partnership relationship with our partners and attempting to shift these unequal power relations so that we could achieve our shared goals collectively, co-owning the positive result and sharing the risk. The crucial aspects of principled partnership are to reflect and have an open discussion on our existing practices on partnership and craft the way-forward to nurture the relationship by addressing existing impediments for equitable relationships and co-implement those important actions. I found the “Flattening Hierarchy” workshop to be an effective methodology to promote open discussion on our existing partnership relationship, identify various factors causing unequal relationship and engage in important discussions on how we can collectively work to reinforce the relationship to achieve shared goals.

Sanju Gautam

Senior Organizational Development Officer, WOREC

I think I used to have clear communication in the team, and I was good at this. But after the communication session in this workshop, I realized that sometimes I was having red communication unknowingly, that closes the door for understanding, cooperation, decision making, trust and many more. And then, I started to be more mindful and reflective while communicating.

Madhav Shrestha

Governance and accountability Coordinator, CARE Nepal

Practice of Flattening Hierarchy helps to strengthen team building and synergy to achieve the intended result. Open communication and exchange of feedback among the team could be used as a key approach to ensure Flattening Hierarchy.

Nirmala Maharjan

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility and Social Norms Change Manager, CARE Nepal

Flattening hierarchy workshop taught me ways to decolonize the thoughts of power over in an institution and mindset of an individual. Hierarchy should be practiced horizontally with respect and empathy within a team. It is created to achieve certain goals within a certain timeframe rather than to show the dominant power and position of an individual or an organization.

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