

Introducing 'the RINGO Project': *Re-imagining the INGO and the role of global civil society'*

What is the RINGO Project?

The RINGO Project is a systems change initiative that seeks to transform global civil society to respond to today's challenges.

The world has changed since INGOs started to become a prominent actor on the global stage and in recent years they have been challenged from all sides – both externally and internally. Internally, issues around gender, race and power are all in the headlines in recent years; externally, the issues we face from climate change to global inequality, conflict and now a global pandemic seem to have left INGOs unable to truly respond with sufficient efficacy to change the status quo, in spite of the ambition to do so. Like others in civil society, INGOs have faced the challenges of shrinking civic space, while also failing to respond to the crisis. Both the credibility and effectiveness of the INGO model have come into question. We need global civil society, but the current model of the INGO seems no longer fit for purpose.

We're ambitious – we don't just want to transform single institutions, but we know we need to change the system in which INGOs function too. This project aims to provide a systems change approach to transforming the INGO sector to meet the challenges we face, both externally and internally. (For further information, see Background and Context at the end of this document)

Our intent is to provide the opportunity to address three things:

- what we want out of **global civil society** more broadly
- what that would look like from an **institutional perspective**
- Identify what may need to change in the **wider system** and how we can work towards that

We know that a lot of work has been done by others to identify what needs to change. Importantly, the project aims to explore not just the 'what', but the 'how' we get there, while building opportunities to act collectively and accelerate implementation of these ideas throughout the course of our project.

We also appreciate that people are dealing with the immediate challenges of COVID-19. The situation has accelerated calls for increased *localisation* and more bottom-up power amongst many in the global south. The Black Lives Matter movement has also provided a direct impetus to finally address race and power in the sector too.

We hope that the RINGO project can help with these multiple and converging challenges, by not only providing the space to think collectively about our sector, but also how we can use the crisis of COVID to genuinely reshape and transform global civil society, while accelerating our ability to implement the changes we need to see.

How will we do this?

Through deep systems-change processes, such as Design thinking or the U process designed by MIT university, we will be looking to **identify** and **rapidly prototype** the changes we want to see working

long-term for global civil society. We are already initiating action research to look at what's happening in the current crisis as well as understanding from past experience in order to capture and feed into our process to ensure outcomes are relevant. In particular, the research will help to articulate the 'demand side' of re-imagining the INGO: what changes would Southern civil society actors of all kinds like to see over the coming months and years?

What are our next steps?

We have received an enabling grant from the Ford Foundation which provides us with some funding to develop the project further.

Here is what we're actively doing to get this project fully off the ground:

- **Governance:** Establishing a governance process for the project that is transparent and ensuring shared ownership – we want to model our initiative based on what we want to see from global civil society
- **Process facilitation:** Identifying a facilitation process that can work in remote formats and ensure rapid prototyping can come to life as the convening progresses
- **Research:** Embarking on an initial action research programme to inform, articulate and contribute to the 'redesign' process – and collectively gathering the research that's already been done on transformation in the sector to date
- **Collaboration:** Building partnerships with organisations in the INGO sector
- **Communication & outreach:** Setting up a portal to provide insights about the process and the wider debates – linking to the many others who are also innovating in the sector
- **Process participation:** Inviting participants into the process
- **Funding:** Securing funds for the full convening and rapid prototyping

How to get involved?

This is a project for **everyone** working in and with international civil society who wants to see a rapid transformation take place, and has the agency to help bring that change to life.

Please stay in touch with us via the form below, and tell us if you would like to be involved and if you're already working on a change agenda for INGOs. We'll keep you updated about how to engage with us as we move forward.

Fill out the [Google form](#) and tell us a bit about yourself and your interest in the project.

Check in with our forthcoming website regularly (launching in late July 2020), and to find out more about us and the project: <https://rightscolab.org/RINGO>

Who are we?

We are hosted by [Rights CoLab](#), a network of global social change leaders. Our core team is made up of experienced civil society practitioners and leaders from around the world.

Nana Afadzinu, the Executive Director of the West African Civil Society Institute (WACSI), with over 20 years experience in civil society.

Deborah Doane, founder of the project and partner of Rights CoLab with 25 years of leadership experience in civil society and philanthropy, including INGOs.

Charles Kojo Vandyck, Head, Capacity Development Unit at WACSI and 15 years experience working in social justice and development in Africa.

Tara Rao, Founder of Our Groundworks, with 20 years of experience in leadership positions in Global INGOs, including Amnesty International India, Greenpeace and WWF.

Jennie Richmond, Director of Impact Works Associates, former head of International Programmes at Comic Relief, with previous leadership roles in Oxfam and DFID.

Funding

We are currently funded through a small development grant from the Ford Foundation. Further resources are being sought to deepen the work of the project.

Further background and Context

There is a growing movement that is of the view that many International NGOs (INGOs) are no longer fit for purpose. Their ambition to tackle the biggest challenges we currently face, and the urgency they present: climate change, populism, a backlash against human rights, are not matched with the drive and institutional agility to meet them.

Newer social movements or more modern, networked INGOs have grown up differently and are responding in new ways to the challenges. However, the dominant INGOs in international development, human rights and environmental arenas remain in force and in many ways, largely unreconstructed. And so, these institutions have been coming under increasing levels of scrutiny in recent years, from all angles.

Southern organisations, for one, question their legitimacy, or talk about the challenges of the 'white saviour complex'; they rightly question the higher salaries given to international workers, the lack of southerners and people of colour in leadership positions throughout the sector, alongside the lack of resources flowing to the global south. Ideas are often considered to be 'imposed' and partnerships are perceived to be unequal and un-collaborative.

At their heart these are questions of power and legitimacy. Despite decades of debate about how to ensure that people affected get to determine and design the solutions to the problems they face many INGOs have insufficiently altered their practice to make this a reality instead consolidating their hold on to power, influence and access to resources.

There is a growing backlash, as well, against international aid, as citizens, facing their own issues at home, question high levels of aid expenditure. In other countries, there is a backlash against the perceived imposition of so-called 'western' values advocated by INGOs. In the global South there is also a growing demand for NGOs to be more driven by 'Southern agendas' and their own agency.

No one INGO seems immune. The humanitarian aid scandals of 2018 – putting Oxfam and Save the Children under the spotlight were amongst the first of recent very public scandals that threatened INGOs directly. Oxfam, for one, reported a 10% loss of supporters. Other scandals have since followed – a bullying culture at Amnesty International; alleged collusion with paramilitaries by WWF, and the latest intervention from the Black Lives Matter movement have brought more issues around power to the fore.

At the same time, INGOs have been one of the primary target of the trend towards 'closing space for civil society' – manifesting in both the North and South alike. In the Global South, restrictive regimes are trying to close them down, through freezing bank accounts or using negative rhetoric, accusing them of undermining development, and feeling threatened by their influence. We've seen Greenpeace and Amnesty's bank accounts shut down in India; Action Aid in Uganda raided and targeted; and after the recent Indonesian tsunami, humanitarian INGOs were frozen out altogether.

The trend towards decentralisation by INGOs has also come with unintended consequences. There is a growing concern expressed by local NGOs who feel that INGOs are taking their space and crowding out their space and resource opportunities. Some are making overtures to acquire or merge with local NGOs, further diluting domestic civil society diversity.

In the North, INGOs face further de-legitimisation as many governments are side-stepping INGOs in favour of privatised aid, or using large-scale consultancies to undertake aid related projects. While private sector actors may have a role to play in development, the unadulterated use of private sector

instruments will not be sufficient to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, especially as INGOs face increased marginalisation.

They are often accused of having too much power and being ‘over-corporatised’. Kumi Naidoo, the current head of Amnesty International, for one, has said that “INGOs have become too corporatised, obsessed by brand, growth and visibility.”¹ This can result in a focus on survival over impact.

Yet perversely, INGOs don’t have sufficient power to confront the world’s vested interests that are preventing progressive change.

The issues that are confronting the INGO model include both internal and external factors, including:

Internal challenges

1. Charge of being over-professionalised and out of touch
2. Governance from the north or top-down, including top-down accountability mechanisms
3. ‘Partners’ treated as passive ‘beneficiaries’
4. ‘Too big to fail’ or inability to respond flexibly
5. Cognitive ‘toolkits’ – the concepts, patterns, experiences, beliefs and values that inform behaviours and actions fail to evolve
6. A lack of recognition of the impact of racism and a lack of equity on practice

External challenges

1. Political contexts have changed, including physical and economic insecurity met by the rise of populism
2. Technological changes
3. Paradigms are outdated, such as ‘development’
4. Deteriorating physical and policy environment, bringing more competition for scarce resources between vulnerable populations
5. Retreat from internationalism

What has been done to date?

Many of the longer standing INGOs – Oxfam, Amnesty or WWF, are acutely aware of the challenges they face, and there have been a number of efforts by international civil society organisations to address the critiques. Some of these include:

1. **Decentralising.** Many have sought to decentralise their organisations in recent years: Amnesty, Action Aid, Oxfam, amongst others, to respond to concerns about Northern led action. Some have included shifting headquarters to the global south, others have moved towards creating more federated structures. While this has been welcome, it has also resulted in some unintended consequences, including local organisations seeing themselves suddenly in competition for fundraising with ‘local’ arms of INGOs; or being directly vulnerable to more direct attacks from national governments (such as closing bank accounts).
2. **Safeguarding.** Over the past year, there have been numerous initiatives progressing, to address safeguarding, such as the proposed ‘passporting’ system for humanitarian workers,

¹ Podcast: 100 Campaigns that Changed the World, 10 January 2019.

and increased training of INGO workers.

3. **Narratives.** The 2011 'Finding Frames' initiative looked at how better to engage the public in international development and environmental causes. It looked, in part, at the structure and ways in which organisations raise funds. Several organisations piloted new methods of framing, but the ground has yet to shift sufficiently.
4. The **#Shiftthepower** movement has been looking at the issue of more direct and democratic resourcing of the sector, alongside important contributors to this movement such as Civicus or the Near network. A number of international funders are now responding (private and public donors) adopting new direct resourcing models as well. Meanwhile participatory funding mechanisms that allow affected communities to make decisions about how resources are allocated are being developed and utilised by a progressive band of funders including FRIDA, The Red Umbrella Fund and UHAI.

These are all laudable efforts, but the responses have yet to revolutionise the international civil society sector. Many of these have been technocratic responses to a more fundamental and indeed political challenge. Those within the #shiftthepower movement, for example, often refer to INGOs as 'blockers' to their efforts. Our starting point is that the presence of international civil society will be needed now and in the future, but that what we have now is no longer fit for purpose.

How can we better respond?

The critiques and failings of the INGO sector can't be traced to singular challenges around management or accountability systems. They require a whole-scale examination of the purpose, role and delivery mechanisms of the International NGO. And it can't be down to any one institution, or indeed sector to do this alone (eg. Environment or Development).

Disruption, innovation and *systemic* thinking are required. By gathering a group of dedicated people from the wider system – people who have worked in INGOs, or engaged with them, from social movements, or as partners – we intend to unpack the institutions the way they're organised, alongside the wider changing context in which they're now operating. The aim is to consider what we need institutionally to better respond to today's and the forthcoming challenges – something dynamic, responsive and accountable.

Fortunately, the field of systems change has matured, and we can bring these methods to a **systems change lab aimed at re-imagining the INGO**. We will draw on deep methods, such as the 'U' process, developed by MIT² and recent innovations in design thinking, aimed at driving long-lasting change across different systems.

Key issues such a project would address (amongst other things):

1. **Taking the long view and situating the context.** Is there a common starting point for INGOs across sectors? Can we imagine the world we want to see?
2. **Power and trust.** How do we genuinely address concerns about power and dominance in civil society, by INGOs? Can INGOs see their role in #shiftthepower and act on it? How do we address issues of power and gender inequalities? Or power and trust between INGOs and local NGOs? What form of partnerships, including with local NGOs, should there be and what values should guide those partnerships? What needs to be the distribution of power and responsibility to create real impact in people's lives?

² <https://www.lifeleadershipproject.com/thinking-tools/u-process/>

3. **Diversity and genuine inclusion.** How can INGOs address racial inequities within their own structures? How can we facilitate racial diversity in senior leadership and decision-making processes, and foster genuine inclusion at all organisational levels?
4. **Governance and accountability.** How should INGOs be governed? Who are they accountable to now? Who should they be accountable to in future? What form of governance would create 'effective' accountability?
5. **Funding/resources/ownership.** How should INGOs be funded in order to ensure their legitimacy? For many the majority of funds come from western governments. Does this harm their independence or perceived independence as non-governmental? How can buy-in to support longer-term fundamental change be ensured?
6. **Service delivery vs. advocacy.** Do INGOs offering services (such as water, health, education or humanitarian aid) conflict with their advocacy aims? Do the two work together effectively? What are the challenges? Is another model needed?
7. **Organisational form.** Do we need to adapt the legal models of INGOs? What other options are there? What organisational form would strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness?
8. **Legitimacy and authority.** How can INGOs ensure their moral authority at a time when their role is questioned? Is this simply about narratives or something deeper?
9. **Size, scale and reach.** Is there an optimal size or form of organisation to have maximum impact? What are the different options and how do we avoid a 'one size fits' all model?
10. **Culture, practice and cognition.** What are the cultural norms that inform current practice? How do we emerge from mental models and assumptions that are barriers to change? How do organisational / sector purpose, values and culture combine to create legitimacy and impact?

Process

Systems change processes have been pioneered over the last decade and more to help to break down barriers between entrenched positions of groups acting as part of a wider system, connecting both their personal and institutional role in this endeavour to try to remap a solution. We will be convening a group of **30-50 participants willing to be part of the core of the journey over approximately two years to represent 'the system'** (see below for more on who should join).

With expert systems-change facilitation, the participants will initially meet virtually [as a result of COVID19 limitations on travel] to explore their own role in the system, and start to identify what needs to change, and more importantly, how. We will shape this with experts in facilitating systems change, however, a very short overview of a long process might look like this:

- An initial research agenda that runs parallel and informs the design process – through action research, a literature review that constructs an overall 'dashboard', focus group discussions, and other research tools.
- Start to explore people's desire to bring about change – why we need it, what's not working, from the various perspectives present in the room. It would also explore people's motivation and intent. We would ask them to bring their institutional knowledge, but to be present as individuals, not representing their institutions.
- Create a roadmap for where we want to be in the future. What is the emerging role of civil society organisations in these times of increasing uncertainty? Do we need INGOs? What is their role? What might a more sustainable and equal INGO system look like? We will build on work that's already been developed around scenario planning for the sector.

- Identify prototypes and projects that could emerge to reshape the landscape relating a few key areas like, collaboration, policy, scale, funding. This would have a focus on both a ‘what’ is the change we seek, but perhaps most importantly: ‘how’ we might get there. Do we create a new model INGO? Who is willing to experiment with reshaping their systems? How can the peer group help to shepherd this through and accompany transformation? Examples from other systems change projects include the Finance Innovation Lab, convened by WWF-UK and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales, whose prototypes included stronger advocacy-based coalitions across the ‘system; the [Natural Capital Coalition](#) innovating accounting models for sustainability; to [new technology solutions](#) to support the financially excluded.

Beyond the core group, we will encourage a wider engaged community to interact with the process.

A key component of systems change processes is not to pre-prescribe the solutions, but to co-design and collaborate as the process progresses. We don’t propose to know the answers. But we want to invest in the emergence of solutions.

Both during and at the end of the process, we hope to see prototypes and projects emerging, for which we aspire to create an ‘innovation/challenge’ fund. Some of these may be immediately implementable, others scalable innovations that could help to transform the sector and in turn, how its members interact with the wider world.

Who should join?

INGOs: Senior and strategic individuals working with INGOs (but we would ask them not to represent their institutions per se). These are those who are grappling with some of the issues identified earlier and seeking opportunities to learn and explore new models from outside their internal systems, including relating to Southern NGOs. This includes development INGOs; human rights or environmental INGOs.

Southern NGOs: Civil society organisations who often partner with INGOs and are closer to the ground, who seek change in their role, their working relationships, nature of impact, amongst others. They too cover a diverse range of NGOs, CBOs working in the areas of environment, human rights, broader urban and rural development issues.

Think tanks/Academics: Researchers and thought leaders, from both southern and northern institutions.

Membership/network organisations: Those who represent the sector in both the north or south.

Donors: Donors are part of the overall system of INGOs and are important actors. Like the INGOs, we want those with a donor perspective to be present in their individual, rather than institutional capacity.

Individuals: Key individuals who work with the sector as experts, consultants and advocates.

Why should people join?

Processes that seek to engender systemic change are inherently challenging. But they are also highly rewarding. The benefits to participants in this project include the chance to work across organisational (and subject area) boundaries to address shared internal and external challenges, the

space to pause, reflect and engage in ‘first principles’ thinking (for which there is rarely time amidst busy delivery schedules), and the opportunity to engage with some of the deeper, root causes of recent crises in the sector.

While we will ask participants to shed their organisational ‘hats’ during the process, the potential to contribute their experience and perspectives, while taking ideas and energy back to organisations is immense. We aim for the process to be fully transformative – both for individuals and institutions alike.

For more information please fill out the [Google form](#), or contact: RINGO@Rightscolab.org