

# BRIEF

## Evaluating Impacts of the Hewlett Foundation's Strategy to Support Local Advocacy

| By the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the Hewlett Foundation launched a [new grant-making strategy](#) to support local family planning and reproductive health (FPRH) advocacy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal: a vibrant civil society sector in sub-Saharan Africa that can capably and positively influence the family planning and reproductive health policies and funding decisions of their own national governments and of international donors. To realize this long-term goal, the strategy seeks to shift power towards local civil society organizations (CSOs) who advocate on FPRH issues in sub-Saharan Africa and to strengthen the capacity of these CSOs to engage in advocacy. From the strategy's establishment in late 2016, the portfolio has included 12 grantees (primarily international non-governmental organizations) who serve as intermediaries providing capacity support to over a hundred local CSO partners in Sub-Saharan Africa.

During the first five years of the strategy's implementation, the foundation is undertaking an evaluation and learning process in partnership with the Aspen Institute's Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program. In this brief, we explore the nature of "impact" in the context of this strategy and describe lessons learned thus far about how to evaluate the strategy and its intended outcomes.

### What does "impact" mean in the context of the foundation's strategy?

The foundation's theory of change for this strategy underscores the value of creating a strong civil society populated in part with organizations capable of effectively using advocacy to promote better FPRH outcomes. The foundation supports CSOs with financial and technical assistance via grantees that are primarily based in the United States or Europe, often called international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). These INGOs serve as intermediaries responsible for providing capacity support – and in most cases sub-grants – to local advocacy CSOs.

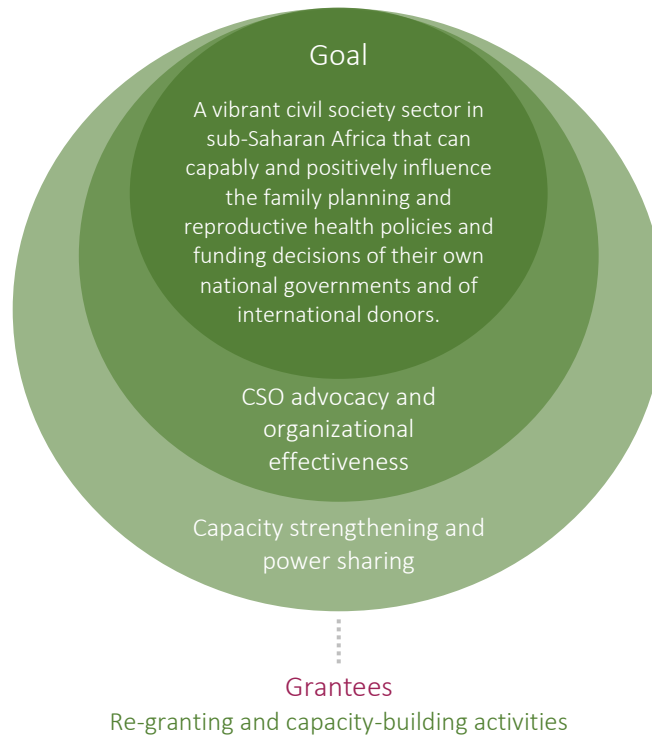
Grounded in a set of five principles, the strategy brings to this "intermediary model" a strong emphasis on shifting decision-making power and resources towards local CSOs and contributing towards their long-term organizational effectiveness and sustainability. This approach envisages impacts on FPRH policy and funding decisions as the product of a longer process of institution building and organizational development – all in the service of a broad civil society capable of promoting better FPRH outcomes.

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## A Principles-Based Strategy for Supporting Local Family Planning and Reproductive Health Advocacy in Sub-Saharan Africa



### Hewlett Foundation Resources and Values

#### Resources:

- Funding
- Organizational effectiveness support
- Convenings
- Philanthropic advocacy

#### Values:

- Collaboration based on mutual respect
- Openness, transparency, and learning

### The Strategy’s Guiding Principles

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

For those driven by the urgent need to promote access to better reproductive health services and supplies, the strategy’s focus on strengthening capacity and sharing power may seem like a roundabout way to achieve policy change. Why not focus on creating short-term policy wins – however they can be achieved – even if that means deprioritizing local organizational capacity? As one grantee provocatively queried: “Don’t we want to have an impact?”

The foundation’s strategy is intended to contribute to policy wins. But its goal is bigger than that; the foundation views investment in a robust civil society sector with the capacity to influence FPRH policies and funding decisions – sometimes in challenging political and regulatory contexts – as a structural change needed to have enduring impact on FPRH outcomes. The foundation’s understanding of how to do this focuses on helping CSOs develop the capacities they need to be sustainable, effective advocacy organizations – and giving them power over the process of strengthening their capacity and shaping their advocacy work. The assumption: this

approach will lead to more effective capacity development, which will, in turn, result in greater contributions to policy change in the long run.

Because the foundation's theory strongly emphasizes capacity development and power shifts as key steps in achieving lasting impacts, the foundation decided to focus our team's learning and evaluation process on understanding whether and how this principles-based approach is contributing towards intended outcomes of **strengthened capacity** and **shared power**. As discussed below, our approach to evaluating these outcomes has evolved over time, as we gathered insights into the multiple dimensions of broad concepts such as advocacy capacity, mutual accountability, and power sharing – and how to meaningfully measure them. In the longer term, the foundation would expect to explore the relationship between the principles, capacity development outcomes, and actual policy change.

## How are we evaluating the strategy's contributions to strengthened capacity?

Our understanding of how to define capacity is grounded in an extensive literature review, bringing together elements of current research on organizational capacity development and on the nature of effective advocacy practices. We identified 20 elements of capacity relevant to FPRH advocacy, organized into four broad categories (see box). These form the basis of the [Advocacy Capacity Review](#), a tool we developed to facilitate conversations with CSOs about their capacity priorities and plans for capacity strengthening. This tool has helped us more clearly distinguish the specific kinds of capacity that CSOs are working to strengthen.

### Defining FPRH Advocacy Capacity

- Organizational skills and resources to develop and advance advocacy strategies.
- Expertise in appropriate tactical skills.
- Organizational commitment to FPRH issues and engagement with others in the sector working on those issues.
- Institutional resources, sufficient sustained financing, internal systems, and reputation to sustain advocacy.

One knotty evaluation challenge: assessing what kinds of capacity support would constitute “alignment” with the strategy's principles – and the ways in which different forms of capacity support may (or may not) actually contribute to stronger CSO capacity. What counts as “sustained and hands-on” assistance? How do we know that the capacity support provided effectively strengthens CSOs' priority capacities? In general, we have found that an inductive approach to assessing alignment between principles and practices is more useful than a deductive approach. For example, rather than predefining “sustained support,” we have used information about the nature of support provided to identify examples of what this looks like. This approach has helped us identify forms of ongoing assistance that occur in the context of trusting relationships, where the CSO feels able to come to the grantee with ideas or questions, and the grantee is able to provide helpful thought partnership and responsive problem-solving support.

We have also found that our evaluation approach needs to reflect the lengthy, complicated, and sometimes short-circuited process of capacity development. For example, while some kinds of skills may be bolstered quickly through targeted capacity support (e.g., a training on the AFP SMART advocacy planning tool), other kinds of organizational capacities may take longer to develop (e.g., establishing and using an M&E system). Sometimes, CSOs may shift the priority given to specific capacities; for example, to respond to an emerging advocacy opportunity, a CSO may need to pivot to a stronger focus on building tactical media skills, shifting away from earlier plans to focus on other advocacy capacities. In addition, some CSOs seek to strengthen certain capacities by drawing on multiple forms of support, not relying solely on the support provided by grantees. We need to take into account this dynamic and complex process when assessing whether and how capacity is strengthened. In practice, this means we need to be aware of the time it takes to build certain capacities, understand which capacities are prioritized and why, and gather CSOs' perspectives on the sources of support that have made a difference in strengthening priority capacities.

## What does power sharing look like – and how might it be measured?

Our evaluation has explored power sharing as a function of the roles that organizations play within a partnership and the balance of power among partners. This includes examining who has the power to shape advocacy and capacity-building work, and the ways in which partners are (or are not) able to hold one another accountable.

Our understanding of power sharing in the context of this strategy has evolved over time, tracking with an evolution in how the foundation, grantees, and CSOs have understood the strategy's principle of mutual accountability. During the first year of the strategy, the foundation, grantees, and our evaluation team focused on feedback mechanisms as a primary way in which mutual accountability could be put into practice. For their part, many CSOs responded to questions about mutual accountability in terms of their own reporting responsibilities as sub-grantees of the INGOs: quarterly narrative reports, for example, or annual financial forms. Our initial data collection efforts revealed that there was confusion around what mutual accountability means in the context of CSO-grantee relationships as well as foundation-grantee relationships.

Reflecting these early findings, the foundation's annual grantee and CSO convening in 2018 included sessions focused on unpacking the concept of mutual accountability. Our discussions used as a starting point some of the ways in which the concept has been used in international development contexts. This collective effort to articulate the meaning of mutual accountability helped reveal the complexity of defining and practicing this principle. Organizations brought varied perspectives on how to define and practice mutual accountability. One INGO, for example, described its efforts to articulate the core values that underlie mutual accountability and write those values into its agreements with CSOs. Others emphasized that mutual accountability is a function of building trusting, transparent relationships between INGOs and CSOs – not something to be formalized in contractual agreements. Some wondered whether “enforcing” accountability can be truly bidirectional; can a grant recipient “enforce” commitments made by a grant-maker, given the inherent power imbalance created by the grant-maker's control over funding decisions?

This exchange of ideas helped our evaluation team begin to identify some enabling conditions, structures, and practices that comprise the concept of mutual accountability (below).

### An Initial Collective Effort to Define Components of Mutual Accountability



#### Enabling Conditions

- Trust
- Respect
- Sufficient resources
- Shared understanding of context
- Flexibility
- Enforceability



#### Systems and Structures

- Joint planning and implementation and structures for learning and adaptation
- Space and mechanisms for feedback
- Longer-term relationships or partnerships
- Accountability agreements that include enforcement
- Capacity development plans
- Adequate human resources/time
- Funding structures that integrate flexibility



#### Practices

- Consistently use systems and structures that have been set up to enable mutual accountability
- Respond to feedback with concrete actions
- Make an effort to learn and adapt to changes in each other's context
- Be honest and transparent in sharing information
- Explain deviations in plans, resources
- Do things together and collaborate
- Raise and address conflicts to mutual satisfaction

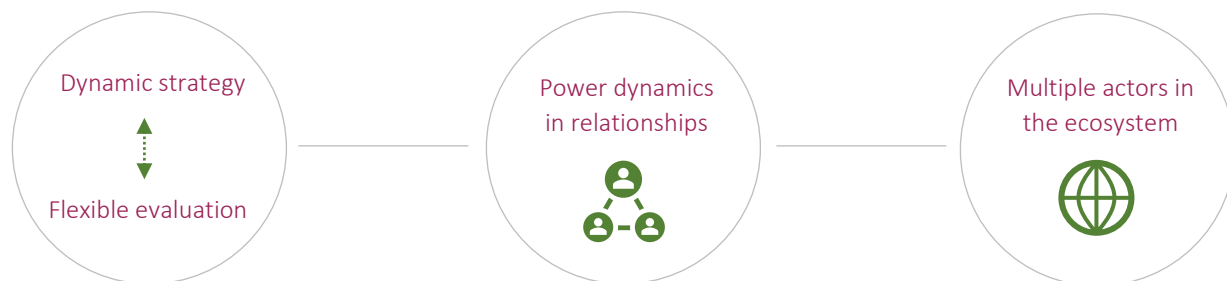
Breaking down the concept of mutual accountability in this way helped clarify how the balance of power is manifested, both in the specific roles that grantees and CSOs play and in the quality of their interactions. Mutual accountability is embedded in the ways in which grantees and CSOs plan for and implement advocacy work and capacity strengthening efforts.

Over the course of 2019, we observed more explicit recognition that mutual accountability is a way to talk about power and power relationships. At the 2019 grantee and CSO convening in Saly, Senegal, the foundation partnered with [Niyel](#), an advocacy and public affairs firm headquartered in Dakar, Senegal, to intentionally create the space to discuss questions of power. Niyel helped the foundation frame this discussion, encouraging INGOs and CSOs to talk more candidly about how the balance of power affects their relationships and influences their ability to do effective advocacy. We began to see CSOs more strongly voicing their perspectives on the impact of power in their partnerships with INGOs. foundation representatives also spoke openly about ways that their processes could better address the imbalance of power between itself and its grantees.

This explicit focus on power has helped clarify links between ideas of mutual accountability, locally driven advocacy, and capacity strengthening practices. In the current round of data collection, we are probing questions about how imbalances of power influence the roles that CSOs play in shaping their capacity support and advocacy work, and how greater awareness of that balance of power may influence the behavior of INGOs and their CSO partners. In this way, our evaluation has begun to more explicitly examine connections between power sharing practices and capacity strengthening outcomes.

## What are key lessons learned?

Over the course of the past three years, our understanding of how to evaluate the strategy and its intended outcomes has evolved. Here are three key lessons we have learned thus far.



**Lesson 1: The dynamic nature of the strategy requires a flexible approach to evaluating its potential outcomes.** The strategy is intended to evolve over time, fueled in part by insights from the five-year learning and evaluation process. Some of the assumptions we articulated jointly with the foundation have proven false – as we would expect when we try to understand complex processes. Additional assumptions now underlie our thinking – some of which will in turn be proven false. At the same time, the work that the INGOs are doing to contribute to strengthening CSOs' capacity is evolving over time, in part as their understanding develops of the strategy and their role in it. Even the actors involved in the strategy change over time: staff members at the foundation, grantee organizations, and CSOs have changed; grantees have developed technical assistance relationships with new CSOs; and the foundation has added to the portfolio two new grantees who are themselves locally headquartered CSOs. All of these factors contribute to the strategy's dynamic nature.

Over time, our approach to formulating evaluation questions, gathering information, and interpreting findings has become more attuned to ongoing developments in how the strategy's actors understand the principles and their respective roles in the strategy. We began with a more static results-oriented measurement framework,

comprised of 14 indicators arrayed against six outcomes. We have since shifted towards a more process-oriented approach to evaluating how practices and partnerships are changing over time – and how that may contribute to outcomes like capacity strengthening and power sharing. Taking a more flexible approach has allowed us to better accommodate the dynamic nature of the strategy and its outcomes.

**Lesson 2: To understand the potential contribution of the principles to capacity strengthening and power sharing, we have to explore the nuances of CSO-grantee relationships.** Our initial measurement framework did not reflect the level of nuance we needed to understand power dynamics and decision-making processes within CSO-grantee relationships. It was not enough to count the number of relationships in which both parties felt satisfied with their ability to hold each other accountable, or the number of CSOs who reported that they had access to “appropriate, individualized, and sustained technical assistance.”

To understand the quality of CSO-grantee relationships, we needed to explore who plays what role in shaping advocacy priorities and strategies, and any corresponding capacity support. It can be difficult to elicit candid responses about how power imbalances affect CSO-grantee partnerships, particularly when these imbalances are so entrenched that CSOs are not accustomed to questioning them – or hesitate to do so. We have strengthened our understanding of how to probe sensitive questions around power imbalances, often using semi-structured individual interviews or facilitated discussions with multiple staff members from an organization. The Africa-based members of our evaluation team have been instrumental, both in helping to identify positive bias in CSO responses and in cultivating a higher level of trust and rapport with CSOs. Our team has a growing ability to gently, but firmly, encourage CSOs to offer more candid perspectives on the balance of power in their partnerships with INGOs – and how this impacts their advocacy and capacity building activities.

**Lesson 3: The evaluation needs to take into account the role of the foundation and other external actors in the ecosystem.** Over time, we have expanded our focus on the role of the foundation itself as a key actor influencing the strategy's implementation and outcomes. The foundation implicates itself in the strategy's principles of sharing lessons learned and practicing mutual accountability in its relationships with grantees. It has sought to create opportunities for grantees and CSOs to talk more openly about power imbalances. And it has added two CSOs as direct grant recipients, introducing an alternative to the intermediary model. Our analysis of the strategy's effectiveness in encouraging power sharing and strengthening capacity needs will need to address the foundation's emerging roles – and their contributions to the strategy's overall impact.

Our approach to evaluating the strategy's impact on capacity strengthening and power sharing also seeks to recognize the broader ecosystem in which grantees and CSOs operate. As noted, CSOs often draw on multiple sources of support to fuel their capacity development activities and advocacy work. And other funders influence the ways in which grantees and CSOs partner with one another. We aim to account for these other actors and the potential ways they may affect the strategy's intended outcomes.

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Our purpose in this brief is not to offer a final understanding of what impact means in the context of this portfolio – or definitive conclusions about how to measure capacity strengthening and power sharing. Rather, the insights offered here represent our current reflections on how we understand the strategy's impacts and how our evaluation seeks to explore these impacts. As we look ahead to the final years of the learning and evaluation process, we anticipate further evolution in our and the foundation's thinking – and additional lessons learned from our work with INGOs and CSOs and other funders in this ecosystem about how to evaluate the strategy's contributions.