

## SHIFTING POWER: ENVISIONING A PARTNERSHIP-BASED FUTURE FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

This paper explores the current dynamics of domination and partnership within the global development industry, while envisioning a transformed, partnership-based future. Despite the genuine efforts of development actors to create positive change, many interventions still reflect systems of domination—particularly through capital, decision-making, and cultural hegemony. Included are results from 34 interviews with individuals across the global development ecosystem, which uncover how these systems manifest today and analyze the barriers they create. At the same time, we highlight the growing momentum toward more inclusive, community-led, and localized development approaches. Grounded in Riane Eisler’s Theory of Partnerism, this paper envisions a future seven generations ahead, where the global development industry operates on principles of collaboration, equity, and sustainability. We explore the potential for systems rooted in mutual respect, long-term environmental stewardship, and decentralized decision-making to lead to regenerative development practices. Interviewees’ visions for this future underscore the power of integrated technologies, global networks of solidarity, and a collective shift in mindsets. By identifying pathways to shift from domination to partnership, this paper offers actionable insights and inspires further exploration toward building an equitable and inclusive global development ecosystem. This article emerges at a time when global development is facing unprecedented funding challenges. Major bilateral aid agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office - UK (FCDO), while humanitarian needs continue to grow due to conflict, climate crises, and economic instability. Civil society organizations—particularly those led by local actors—are navigating shrinking resources even as calls for localization, equity, and partnership grow louder. Against this backdrop, we offer a vision not only of critique but of hope: a transformed development system that moves beyond scarcity and control toward collaboration, care, and shared prosperity.

**Keywords:** Partnership; domination systems; global development; decolonization; community-led; localization; sustainable development; equity; solidarity

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## **Introduction**

In global development—the network of organizations, governments, and initiatives focused on economic, social, and humanitarian projects—certain patterns repeat across less economically developed regions. Broken wells, built by well-meaning NGOs, sit abandoned. Livestock markets stand empty, never used. Foreigners flood the markets with donated clothing, with little thought to the local vendors whose livelihoods they unintentionally undermine. You might have heard of the Italian organization that planted tomatoes in Zambia only to lose the entire crop to a herd of hippos—no one mentioned the hippos because the organization never asked (Sirolli, 2012). You hear of schools and clinics staffed by absent teachers and medical workers. Mosquito nets reimaged as fishing gear. Post-Ebola hazmat suits transformed into scarecrows. And then there are the white Land Cruisers crisscrossing rural villages, a reminder that the development industry perpetuates the very problems it seeks to resolve.

An African proverb wisely states, “An elephant cannot hide behind the shrubs.” Despite good intentions, many development interventions become part of the problem rather than the solution. The examples mentioned in the previous paragraph are all symptoms of a larger, systemic problem. Much of global development is done to, rather than with, the people it aims to help. This isn’t for lack of awareness; in fact, we co-authors agree, most people within the systems of global development can and do articulate the web of political, monetary, and governmental entanglements that they operate within. Development actors are largely driven by a genuine desire to make the world a better

place, believing that incremental progress is possible. The challenge isn't intention or knowledge but navigating these complex, self-sustaining systems. Domination—where power, resources, and decision-making are concentrated in the hands of a few—is embedded in these systems. Even with awareness, complicity in systems of domination remains, driven by a reluctance to risk short-term gains for the uncertainties of long-term systemic change.

There is growing pressure in global development to do things differently. The call to decolonize development, fund local actors directly, and shift power have become more prominent in recent years. Before the elimination of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) by the Trump administration, USAID had planned to direct 50% of its funding to local actors by 2030 which stirred the industry, sparking discussion on how to accomplish that (USAID, 2024). This discussion continues even without USAID. While such initiatives deserve recognition, it must also be acknowledged that even when money flows differently, there are larger systems that must change to truly shift power away from those who hold the purse strings.

While much has been written about the perils of global development, this article seeks to define what a new system of global development might look like if it shifted toward true partnership and collaboration. We take a multi-generational lens on this exploration, looking not just at what it would take to dismantle and rebuild the current system, but also at what that new vision could be. Rather than focus on a dystopian worldview, we amplify what we found in our research: an irrepressible sense of hope and vision for what a transformed global development system could achieve.

We begin by providing a conceptual overview of the Theory of Partnerism, which grounded our interviews, followed by insights into how domination and partnership have shaped global development, past and present. We then conducted a study among global development stakeholders, asking interviewees to imagine what a future based on collaboration and mutual trust could look like and how we might get there, grounded

in the wisdom gleaned from 34 interviews with individuals operating across the global development ecosystem.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Theory of Partnerism, first described by Riane Eisler in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (2007), describes a new economic system that places an economic value on care and non-monetary, non-market contributions to the capitalist economy. The theory recognizes that the contributions from both unpaid labor and material extraction and degradation have been necessary for economic progress. However, while these contributions provide a foundation for monetary gain, they are not in themselves valued monetarily. Because the necessary care and extraction underpinning monetary gains are not included in the cost of production, traditional economics and cost calculations do not capture the actual comprehensive costs associated with production.

Underpinning Eisler's theory is the re-valuation of gendered work, or 'women's work'—domestic work and caring for children and families. She argues that this work should be valued on the same level as monetary gains because it is necessary for those gains to take place.

Partnership systems and dominator systems are two tenets of Eisler's work that can be applied across industries and ecosystems, including global development. Eisler's theory outlines a spectrum of two contrasting social configurations, domination and partnership, which are, "Either equitable or inequitable relations in all spheres of life. ... No society is a pure domination or partnership system; it is always a matter of degree, depending on where a society falls on the partnership-domination social scale. ... The partnership and domination configurations reveal interactions between what happens in the so-called private and public spheres of life" (Eisler, 2021, p. 1).

The framework of domination and partnership is one that can be applied to describe and analyze the global development industry. The more recent resurgence of calls to ‘decolonize’ the development industry—shifting power, resources, and decision-making from historically dominant Global North actors, countries primarily located in the Northern Hemisphere that are considered economically developed and industrialized, to local communities—provides one such example.

## **Methods**

How can a partnership-based future for global development be imagined, and how might the cultural transformation work that is already happening help shape that future? Drawing on diverse perspectives to illustrate how domination and partnership show up across the ecosystem and provide a path toward a transformed industry seven generations in the future was the aim of our study.

## **Sample**

Co-authors, LaLond, Gassimu, Pardello, Welch, and Lloyd identified thought leaders in the global development space in their professional networks that represented a variety of categories and geographies meant to capture the breadth of actors in the ecosystem. Initial categories for interviewee classifications were Implementer, Funder, Community Partner, Policy, and Academic. Once we compiled our initial interviewee list, we replaced the Policy category with Government, which more accurately described the local and national government actors we spoke with. We also categorized interviewees by geography and age (youth/not youth). In total, we conducted 34 interviews, either via Zoom or via email.

## **Data Collection**

The interview questions were:

- In what ways does domination show up in your work today?
- In what ways does partnership show up in your work today?

- What are key factors that push your programmatic work/involvement in global development in the direction of partnership? These could be personal, team, organizational, or other factors.
- What actions can we take/what needs to change in the next 5, 10, or 15 years to move toward a more hopeful future for Global Development?

All Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature or Otter.ai, depending on the interviewer. There was no substantial difference between the quality of the transcriptions in the Zoom vs. Otter.ai; only the format varied. All direct quotations included in this paper were approved by the interviewees prior to publication.

### ***Data Analysis***

We used ChatGPT for initial analysis and synthesis of the interview content. We first experimented with prompts with a sample of six interviews, so the co-authors could cross-check analysis quality and ensure results were comprehensive. With these initial six interviews, we prompted ChatGPT to analyze the full transcripts and provide bulleted answers and themes discussed across each of our interview questions. We found the ChatGPT answers to have strong inter-rater reliability with researcher analysis, and this tool allowed us to analyze our dataset in a fraction of the time it would have taken individuals to qualitatively code and analyze the data. All transcripts and written interviews were then fed into ChatGPT to create a database of transcripts, from which we could ask questions to synthesize information and trends. While ChatGPT was used for qualitative data analysis, the written content of the paper does not use text-generated AI for narration, except in producing the abstract.

### **Results**

See Appendix (Figures 1-6) for interviewee information. We have not included names or direct identifying information in this paper, to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Information summarized in the tables in Appendix was provided by interviewees directly.

## Discussion

### *Domination in Global Development*

It has been well documented that organizations and individuals who hold power and resources are concentrated in the Global North (Fritz & Engel, 2020; OECD, 2022; Peace Direct, 2021). We will briefly touch on the following prominent domination themes from our interviews: the flow of capital, how success is defined, and gender disparities in leadership.

***The Flow of Capital.*** Between 2009 and 2021, less than 10% of Official Development Assistance (ODA), the government aid designed to promote economic development and welfare in low-income countries, went to organizations in the Global South. In fact, 63% of funding from the Global North went to their countries' own civil society organizations, and 29% went to civil society organizations in other Global North countries (#ShiftThePower, 2024).

***How Success is Defined.*** Capitalism places monetary gain as the measure of success, neglecting non-monetary activities and value such as unpaid labor and care (Eisler, 2007). As such, the flows of capital also impact societal and local governance structures. People learn to operate within the systems that exist, which may undermine local community-building and relationships when hierarchical systems move in to replace communal structures. In the process, community knowledge, partnership, and mutual respect are eroded.

Outsiders also play a significant role in defining the success of programs. Interviewees identified that donors and those in power overemphasize quantitative results and scale at the expense of program success and sustainability. Some donors look for a 'silver bullet' of development, but this is flawed thinking. Complex challenges rarely have

simple or uniform solutions. Domination in this form reflects an authoritarian hierarchy, where donors prioritize outcomes and impacts that align with their own vision of success. In addition to the limited funding for Global South organizations, those who control the money often conflate their knowledge of the problems experienced by others and their confidence in the solutions they themselves have proposed.

***Gender Disparities in Leadership.*** Within organizations, there is a disproportionately small number of women in leadership roles compared to men. The World Economic Forum reports that the global share of women in leadership roles is 31% (World Economic Forum, 2022). Similar and more dramatic trends can be seen within political and national leadership. As of June 2024, 27 countries out of 195 had women as heads of state (UN Women, 2024).

Efforts to improve the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups can be superficial, with many activities seen as ‘checking the box’ on representation without any substantive changes to the decision-making authority within these groups.

A focus solely on representation fails to address the structural changes necessary for women and marginalized groups to actually come into power and more deeply entrench the power structures that exist.

### ***Partnership in Global Development Today***

***Community-Led Approaches.*** Eighteen interviewees mentioned community-led and/or community-centric approaches, indicating there is momentum in the industry to move away from top-down approaches to models that genuinely involve and respect local communities and local voices. While community-centric approaches can vary in their depth and effectiveness, features of these approaches include listening to and integrating local views into initiative design, implementation, monitoring, and sustainability of initiatives. According to The Movement for Community-Led Development:

Community-Led Development is a development approach in which local community members work together to identify goals that are important to them,

develop and implement plans to achieve those goals, and create collaborative relationships internally and with external actors—all while building on community strengths and local leadership. Community-Led Development (CLD) is characterized by 11 attributes: participation and inclusion, voice, community assets, capacity development, sustainability, transformative capacity, collective planning and action, accountability, community leadership, adaptability, and collaboration (The Movement for Community-Led Development, 2024b, p. 1).

Interviewees spoke of not only a growing awareness of what community-led/centric approaches are but a perpetuation of these approaches and a strong ability to articulate what this means for how work is done and the impact that is achieved, including the importance of building trust in relationships and empowering local leadership.

True partnership values local knowledge as much as external expertise and finds ways to integrate these forms of knowledge to achieve greater impact. There was a strong theme in interviews of the need to respect local knowledge and operate with high cultural sensitivity for partnership to be truly effective. This requires moving away from blanket approaches and adapting programming and approaches to the specific contexts and needs of the communities with which organizations partner. Local actors must have an equal opportunity to shape program design and outcomes.

Meaningful partnership must be collaborative, learning-focused, and mutually beneficial. When deployed with these elements, partnership is a powerful tool for dismantling traditional hierarchies and the status quo in international development. When those whose lives development work seeks to improve have a meaningful say in how, when, and what development work is done, that work is more effective, sustainable, and closely aligned with the actual needs of communities.

**Localization.** Related to the increasing prominence of community-led approaches is the growing discussion of localization in global development. Calls to localize development, shift the power, and decolonize aid abound.

The actual progress to localize development is contested, but practitioners who have been to industry conferences over the last several years will attest to the trend in topics on decolonization, trust-based philanthropy, and localization, all aimed at getting more power and money directly into the hands of local actors. However, decolonization must go beyond the hype and shift the way that individuals and organizations operate. Localization efforts must emphasize more than a short-term change in the flow of money. Rather, interviewees highlighted the systemic changes that must occur to reduce dependency on foreign aid overall. To achieve long-term impact, local actors must have the resources and capabilities to manage their own development independently.

Overall, the trend toward localization is hugely important, but to truly harness the potential in this discourse the global development industry must go beyond discussion and intention. Both individuals and organizations need to put these concepts into practice, acknowledging that the dominant model of development has been rooted in a Western perspective, and, to change that, practitioners need to open up to new ways of doing development.

**Long-Term Orientation and Environment.** Interviewees cited a trend toward more long-term orientation and sustainability in the planning and rollout of development activities. There is also a growing recognition that community ownership leads to longer-term sustainability of the work at hand. More actors understand that when communities have a stake in the results of the work, they are more likely to sustain the project, fix any areas needed, and organize other stakeholders after the external support ends.

Several interviewees also cited the growing prominence and funding of environmental sustainability as a key or supporting piece of the work. There is increasing awareness and priority placed on environmental initiatives addressing climate change, conservation, and sustainable resource management. The private sector has also stepped up in this area, often in their impact investing activities and/or corporate social responsibility efforts.

***Collaborative Networks.*** There are new and growing networks and partnerships that seek to engage with diverse stakeholder groups, including NGOs, governments, private sector players, and local communities. Networks include: *Catalyst 2030*, which aims to unite stakeholders working toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Catalyst 2030, 2024); The Movement for Community-Led Development (2024a), which brings together actors across the development ecosystem (2024); and #ShiftThePower (2024a), which mobilizes global actors to highlight, legitimize, and resource new ways of “deciding and doing” around the world (p 1). These groups can harness the strengths and resources across diverse organizations and individuals and create more meaningful, creative, and holistic development partnerships and outcomes. “The most impactful changes come from collaboration,” said one interviewee. “When you bring together different organizations and sectors, you’re not just combining resources—you’re combining knowledge, strategies, and influence. This kind of network can drive real change in a way that isolated efforts just can’t match.”

Collaborative networks can pool resources and expertise, creating more coherent and powerful approaches to change. These networks are also powerful in promoting and facilitating innovation; the diverse actors involved bring together new ideas and put them into practice, allowing others to learn from them and apply these learnings and innovations to their own work.

### ***Envisioning a Partnership-Based Future***

“I imagine a world where communities work together rather than compete, where people focus on our similarities instead of our differences, and where differences are

celebrated, not criticized,” said one interviewee. “It would be a society where everyone invests in the environment, each other, and the next generations, and where doing good is the norm.”

The development landscape has long been characterized by a significant lack of trust and a systemic colonial legacy. However, there has been increased reflection and actualization from those in the Global North about how they engage with actors in the South. There is much discussion on how to cease replicating colonial patterns that are the norm in the development landscape and to improve mutual respect and partnership. Despite the calls to shift more power to local actors, significant structural systemic changes continue to be either inconsistent or short-lived.

But a vision for a transformed system is not a fantasy. We were inspired by the clear vision articulated by so many interviewees. As one interviewee said, "In seven generations you would hope that there isn't the dependency on donor funding... We've been a part of a system and included in partnerships that have led to a world where everyone has access to the seeds that they want at the right time, and can afford those seeds, and has land that continues to be fruitful, and they're continued to be able to sell into different markets and connect with different buyers, not only in the countries they're producing in, but also in different countries and different markets."

The drivers of development work will be those who are experiencing hardship. In this system, decision making will be decentralized and horizontal, placing power in the hands of those most affected by the challenges global development aims to address. Communities will lead the development process, from identifying challenges to envisioning solutions, designing the work, and sustaining the work into the future. Representation will be evident at all levels; within communities, the voices of women, minority groups, and Indigenous populations will be elevated and valued. External expertise will still be present and valued, but not at a higher level than those with lived experience; expertise sharing will be highly collaborative.

Resource distribution will happen within an economic system that is designed to benefit the majority, rather than those at the top. Education, technology, and knowledge will be distributed and accessed fairly and openly. This will require new levels of cooperation between funders and communities where the work is being done, and a better system for identifying where the greatest needs are and being able to address urgent needs quickly.

Equity will be a defining feature of this new system. As one interviewee shared, "A system of equity means eliminating hierarchies that restrict access and shifting power to communities themselves. The government and institutions should not be the dominant force but rather a support system that empowers voices. It's about restructuring economic and social systems to create true accountability, shared resources, and inclusion at every level."

To support this equitable system, capacity building and strengthening will occur in new ways. Capacity strengthening will have a long-term orientation and occur with all stakeholders, with activities conducted to maintain and sustain development impact and equitable systems and perpetuate future development according to self-defined needs. This will mean changing the way external actors look at investment; rather than project-based, it will consider long-term priorities of education, knowledge, technology, infrastructure, and training.

Overall success will be defined by care and well-being, rather than monetary gain. The traditional economic concepts will incorporate care into their calculations, providing a more holistic view of the cost of production. Taking care of people and the planet will take precedence over profit.

Furthermore, partnerships at all levels will be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances, not shortsighted in wedding themselves to an agreement made years in the past and being unable to modify based on new realities. Global development is by nature complex, and the environment is ever-changing. Conflict, environmental

disasters, and political changes can radically alter the needs and priorities in nations and communities. Less nimble forms of traditional aid will be retired; newer forms of untied aid, unrestricted funding, and direct cash transfers will unburden those closest to the work so that they can adapt to changes and more effectively operate within their evolving environment.

***Sustainable and Regenerative Practices.*** In the future, the industry will have moved away from climate mitigation activities. Development work will integrate regenerative practices and prioritize planetary health and well-being. An underlying foundation of this work will be a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of people and planet. Development projects will include environmental components not as side-work but as central to the development challenge being addressed. Actors will consider any project's impact on the environment and ecosystem and integrate environmental strengthening work into activities. "My experience with partnership is exemplified by our relationship with Mother Earth because we are all in relationship with her," says one interviewee.

There is also a belief that humanity will operate in harmony with nature in a way that would benefit the wellbeing of all. Another interviewee shared, "We depend upon [Mother Earth]. So, this is the relationship that is the foundation of all other relationships. How the water, the rocks, the birds, and the air relate amongst one another is what creates the life that we are all sharing."

Development actors will have deep knowledge of Indigenous practices that have for generations worked to sustain and live in harmony with the environment. These practices will be elevated and scaled, working to sustain water, agriculture, and community-led approaches to balance human and planetary needs.

Circular economies will be central to future development and essential to integrating regenerative practices on a wider scale. A circular economy is defined as "A model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing,

refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible” (European Parliament, 2024, p. 1). The industry can combine the best of science with the core operating principles of sustainability and mutuality. This applies to the reproduction and repurposing of circular economies to the land management, carbon sequestration, soil health, and overall attention to biodiversity.

***Integrated Technology.*** There is wide agreement that the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) will reshape how development priorities are identified and addressed (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Artificial Intelligence for Development [AI4D], 2024). However, continuing on its current path, AI’s degradation of the planet through carbon emissions, energy consumption, and resource extraction would outpace any development gains it has the potential to expedite (Howard, 2023). To fully leverage technological potential, it is imperative that advancements be achieved with care for people and the planet at the forefront. With ethical advancement prioritized, technology has the power to transform development.

New tools could have the ability to provide real-time data to alert people about developing crises around hunger, conflict, and disaster well beyond what early warning systems can achieve today. These tools can shape accountability and transparency across the development sector. Technological advancements will allow for stronger, more reliable, widely accessible data to inform decision making. It will empower any individual to combine data with their local knowledge and understanding to solve challenges. For example, any community could use open-source technology to develop a new water-purification system or energy solutions and adapt the recipe to integrate locally available resources and to fit their specific contexts.

Technological tools will blend the best of modern science and innovation with the deep wisdom of Indigenous knowledge and historical practice. The industry will move away from a simple science-based approach to our understanding of the world and toward the wisdom and understanding of our interconnectedness going back and forward countless generations. Technology should be a bridge, not a barrier.

Perhaps one of the most powerful technological advancements will be an exponential increase in our connectedness and the transparency and accountability that will stem from this. Technology can serve us in the best possible ways if it is guided by ethics and the core values under which people operate. Blockchain technology is a decentralized system to digitally track transactions and is a key advancement in transparency that can level the playing field. For example, communities might use blockchain technology to document and publish land ownership, creating transparent and public land records and reducing conflict and protecting the rights of vulnerable communities.

***Global Networks of Solidarity and Cooperation.*** The future of global development work will transcend national boundaries, and global interconnectedness will be a defining feature of the work, facilitating stronger coordination and responsiveness. Building on new technologies and connectedness online, knowledge sharing and global collaboration will be the norm. Language will have ceased to be a barrier long before. Open-source access will break down educational barriers and allow individuals of all backgrounds to learn and share with one another.

### ***Pathways to Achieving the Vision***

***Personal Commitments and Shifting Mindsets.*** The personal commitments of individuals translate into a strong ethical imperative to do no harm, emphasizing the “how” of the work as much as, if not more than, the “what.” Our focus on the day-to-day distracts us from imagining longer-term systems change and how our actions impact shared spaces. As one interviewee stated, “There is an incredible power in collective action. Many of the most transformative movements have come from groups of people co-creating solutions and working toward a shared vision. Some of the most effective advocacy efforts I’ve seen are rooted in collectives that operate with anti-capitalist, abolitionist, and reparative justice frameworks. These groups are co-creating work and policies that focus not just on short-term impact, but on truly changing systems at a fundamental level. We need to see these as essential actors in development, rather than dismissing them as too radical.”

When taken in aggregate, personal commitments to partnership and action to enact social change can become the catalyst for systems change. When enough individuals working within the system make commitments and act, the system itself will transform. The groundswell of discourse on partnership and collaboration, the growing and louder conversations about mutuality, valuing Indigenous wisdom, and planetary health are all reasons for hope.

Leaders at all levels can be influential in helping to reframe the development process as collaborative. They can lead by action and inspire and motivate those around them. They can innovate and try new ideas when others may be afraid to step outside of the norm. They can take accountability when they are wrong and can speak about their own blind spots and continually work to learn and grow. They can challenge the traditional ways of doing and acting and continue to assess their actions through a lens of partnership. All of us in the global development industry have a responsibility to cultivate this shift, and while leaders can play a significant role in leading by example and championing new frameworks and approaches, everyone in the global development ecosystem has an imperative to do so.

Leading by example is crucial for gaining traction, but the shift toward partnership can be expedited and deepened through self-reflection. It requires recognizing, despite good intentions, how individual actions may reinforce existing norms and contribute to the very problems being addressed. This calls for continuous personal work on biases and a commitment to lifelong learning and growth.

Prentis Hemphill, in *What It Takes to Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World* (2024), articulates how the hierarchy observed in the world is continually recreated.

We inherit beliefs and patterns of relationship by watching how the people around us move . . . Who is listened to and seen, who is adored, who is invisible, who is lifted up, who is hunted down. We learn in this way who we are and who we have been in relationship to the world's other inhabitants... If we are unaware

that we inherit these relational models, we end up recreating some version, some derivative, of the relational dynamics we've witnessed. (Hemphill, 2024, page number not available)

Development practitioners are called not just to improve their skills but to cultivate an ongoing practice of learning and introspection. This requires a deepening awareness of interdependence, sharpening perceptions, and the courage to look inward, especially when it's uncomfortable. As more individuals embrace this deeper understanding, the potential for meaningful, swift change grows ever stronger.

***Organizational Structural Changes.*** Organizations must espouse a commitment to partnership and collaboration, both internally and externally. Structural changes in organizations and institutions are necessary to move away from systems of domination, given that organizations generally use a hierarchical organizational chart. New models of shared leadership, consensus decision making, and co-ownership can be explored and expanded. When individuals bring more creativity to organizational decision-making, this can be extrapolated to how they engage with the world beyond their organizations.

Also, organizational teams can prioritize and practice shared decision making. Practicing new ways of collaborating with one another can have a direct impact on the way teams in the Global North interact with teams in the Global South, and this behavior can permeate programming as well. These actions naturally lead to stronger alignment with partnerism within organizations and across the programs they implement.

Organizations can help to shift power by practicing partnership-based community engagement, leadership, and decision-making. They can prioritize long-term relationships over programmatic life cycles and beyond formal project timelines. They can educate institutional and private donors on the importance of this approach and the need for unrestricted funding to support these activities. This means looking at

organizational funding models and aligning them with the organization's values. It might mean saying no to funding that is too heavily dictated from the top.

Organizations can play a key role in pushing back against the status quo and demanding change in the way funders operate and interact. Taking a bold approach isn't easy, but it can further cultivate trust among global community partners and donors who are committed to the work.

Externally, organizations can break down traditional barriers to collaboration by seeking out new partnerships that can leverage the best work of each organization and individual involved in a project. Instead of competing for funding, organizations can work with one another, recognizing the value each partner adds in working toward our shared goals.

***Global Action and Solidarity.*** Central to the ability to address the complex challenges that are being untangled is the shared recognition of global problems and the knowledge that in an interconnected world it is impossible to address challenges in isolation. Global actors must align and coordinate efforts across regions and issues to achieve unified impact at scale. "We need to use our collective intelligence," one interviewee shared. "Because there are no small ideas. From a basic idea, we can do great things if we use our collective intelligence. Our different experiences and knowledge put us in a unique position to work together, develop, think together, and strategize together."

The networks that exist for coordinating efforts are tools available for use. Practitioners should leverage these platforms to enhance engagement with one another. Coalitions, whether working on specific issues like eradicating hunger and malaria or working toward broader movements like Community-Led Development or the SDGs, help to set shared targets and coordinate efforts. They promote global citizenry and solidarity. These groups can continue to bring in diverse voices and promote partnership as a core principle.

Fair and equitable contributions to these efforts can be encouraged. Climate change is one example where Global North countries have played an outsized role in creating the problem. They also have a responsibility to provide outsized contributions to funding and finding solutions. Support can go beyond money. Countries in the Global North can be effective partners by sharing innovation, research, knowledge, and technology to address challenges experienced in the Global South.

Global solidarity must go beyond organizations and permeate individuals as well. Organizations are, of course, made up of individual actors. Practitioners must embody hope, moving beyond the chaos and noise that distract from the larger mission. It's important to shield against distractions that don't align with the intended path.

The industry needs strong organizations and institutions to promote collective advocacy and global governance. Well-governed international bodies can hold actors accountable while addressing transnational issues like climate change, pandemics, and inequality. Practitioners can advocate for changes at the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and other bodies, elevating proximate voices who have footholds and networks globally but who struggle with representation. Shared challenges can be addressed by developing new institutions and networks to meet needs and by pushing to change the existing systems that must be navigated in the short term.

Being together in community goes beyond logistical coordination. The global community must come together as individuals—learning, growing, and embracing new understandings to address shared challenges. It is imperative that individuals in the global development ecosystem care for themselves as they care for others. Burnout is widely experienced and acknowledged in the industry, but it must be overcome to prevent the loss of passionate and effective contributors from the global community of practitioners. It is essential to feel the pain and weight of the world while maintaining hope for change. This balance sustains momentum during exhaustion and fuels the effort to rebuild the systems in need of transformation.

### ***Limitations of Study***

Our methodology faced several limitations. We had only three weeks to identify and conduct interviews. While we aimed to distribute the sample evenly across key variables (category, geography, age), with more time a larger and more diverse sample could have been collected. Although interviewers followed a consistent outline, they were encouraged to let conversations evolve organically, which introduced some bias but allowed for deeper exploration of ideas. Additionally, we acknowledge the ethical concerns of using AI in research, particularly its selection bias, though this did not directly affect our study since we provided the dataset for analysis.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we sought to explore the complex relationship between systems of domination and partnership within the global development industry. Grounded in Riane Eisler's Theory of Partnerism and inspired by interviews with 34 professionals across the global development ecosystem, we outlined a hopeful vision for the future seven generations ahead. In this future, the global development industry prioritizes collaboration, equity, and sustainability. The key themes analyzed in these interviews are presented in this paper.

By uncovering where systems of domination manifest today, we can pinpoint key industry structures where practitioners can prioritize change. These systems are largely centered on control of capital, knowledge, and decision-making by the Global North. These existing structures often marginalize local and Indigenous communities, perpetuating unequal power structures and Western cultural hegemony.

Despite these challenges, there is growing momentum toward more community-led, localized, and partnership-driven development approaches. In our interviews, we uncovered shared visions for a future in which development is community-centered, where local voices lead decision-making and long-term sustainability is prioritized over short-term gains. In this future, development practitioners prioritize environmental

stewardship, positively leverage integrated technology, and lean into global networks of solidarity. We also found hope and momentum in moving toward this re-imagined development system where marginalized voices are central and resources are distributed more equitably, supporting a future grounded in care for both people and the planet. Those in the development ecosystem must prioritize personal commitments to shifting mindsets. They can address organizational structural changes and prioritize local leadership. And they can work in global solidarity transcending borders. This partnership-based future is within reach.

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[gaps-in-leadership-by-industry-and-cohort/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20the%20global%20share%20of,is%20shown%20in%20Figure%202.7.](#)

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**Jill LaLonde** is a nonprofit executive, educator, and global development consultant with nearly two decades of experience across the nonprofit and international development sectors. She supports mission-driven organizations as they grow, evolve, and scale—strengthening operations, governance, and team alignment for long-term impact. Jill previously served as Executive Director of One Village Partners, leading the organization through a strategic merger and expansion that reached over 75,000 people annually. Her global experience includes managing USAID-funded projects in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Passionate about anti-colonial approaches to aid, she works with organizations to operationalize these values at every level. Jill teaches in Columbia University’s Nonprofit Management Program, serves on the Governing Council of Catalyst 2030, and chairs the General Assembly for the Movement for Community-Led Development.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

Figure 1. Interviewees' Age (n=33)

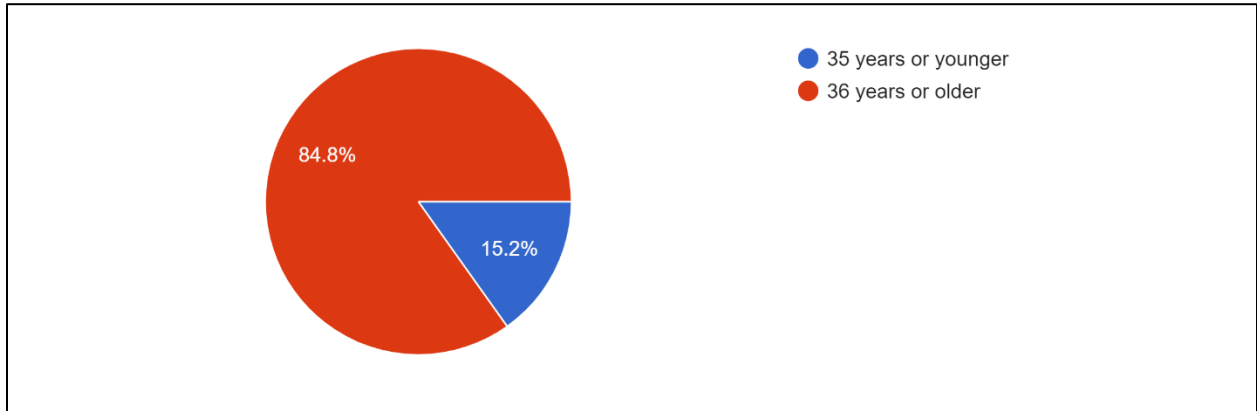
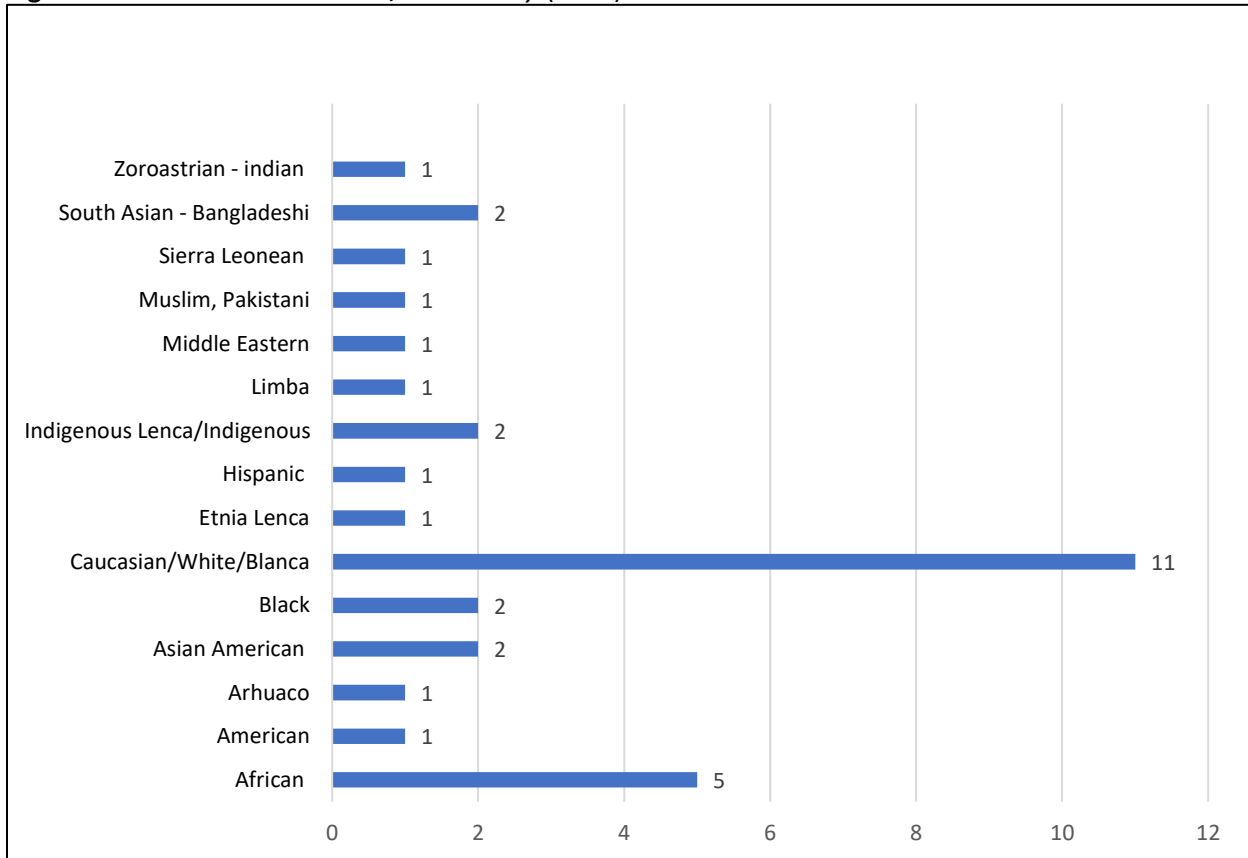


Figure 2. Interviewees' Race and/or Ethnicity (n=33)



**Figure 3. Interviewees' Work Organizations (n=32)**

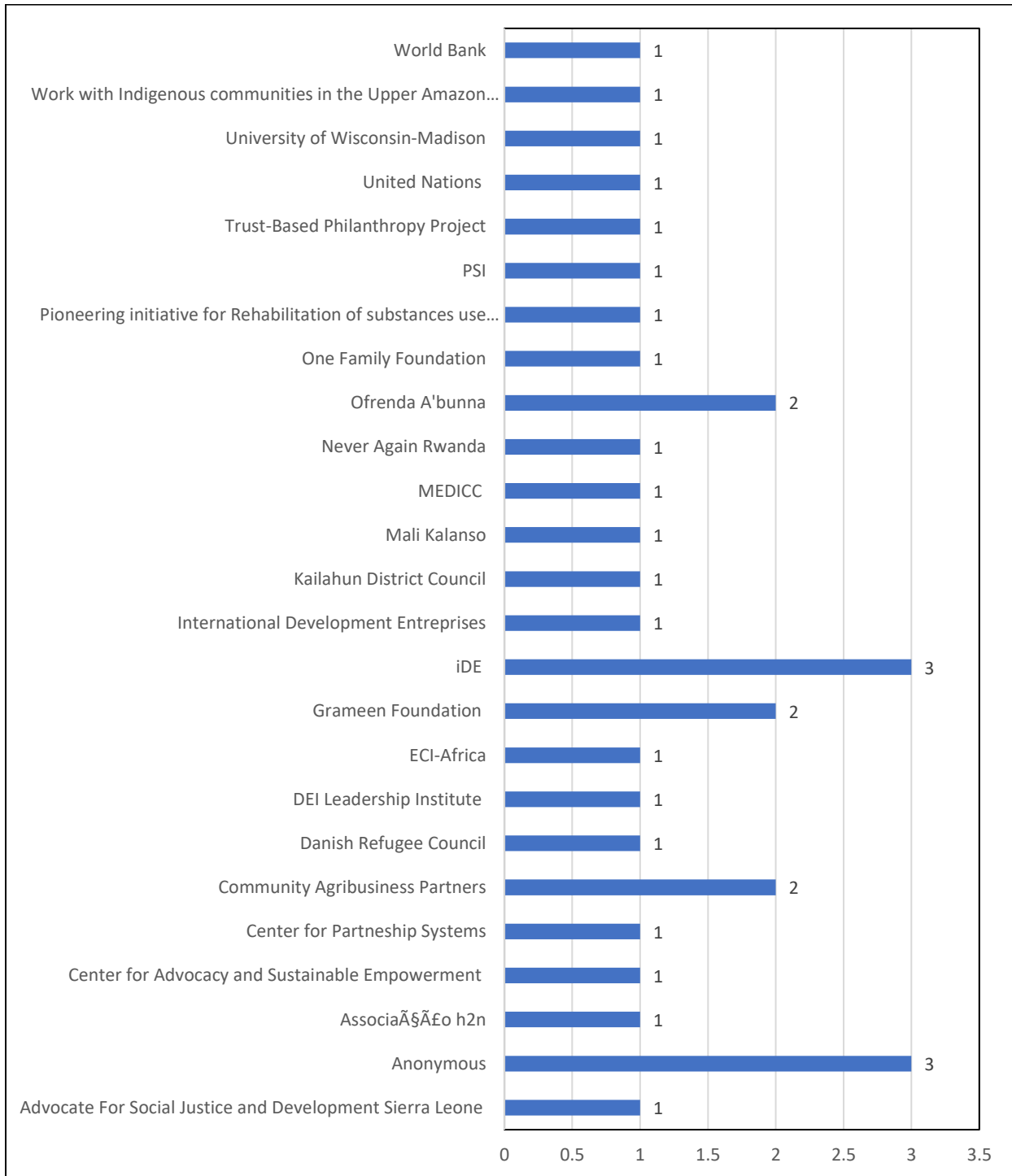


Figure 4. Interviewees' Working Titles (n=33)

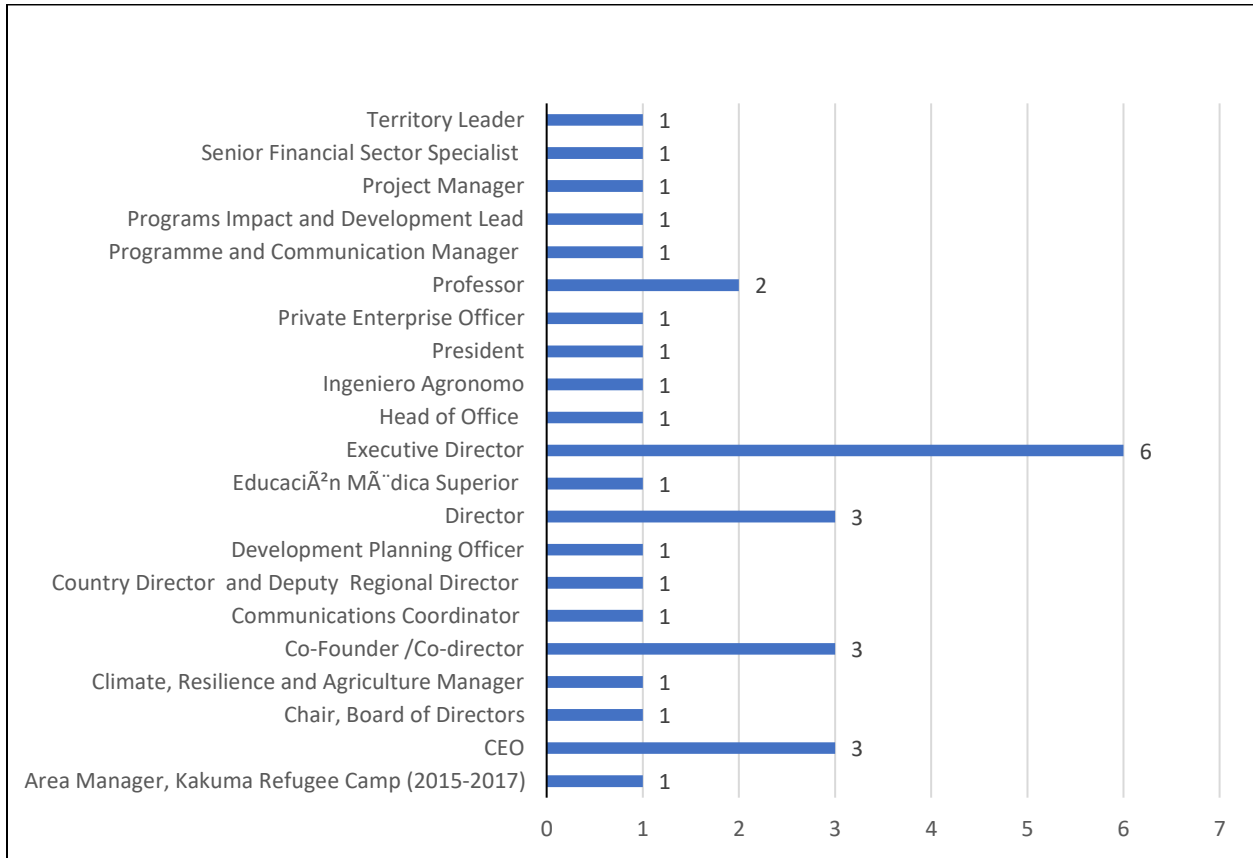
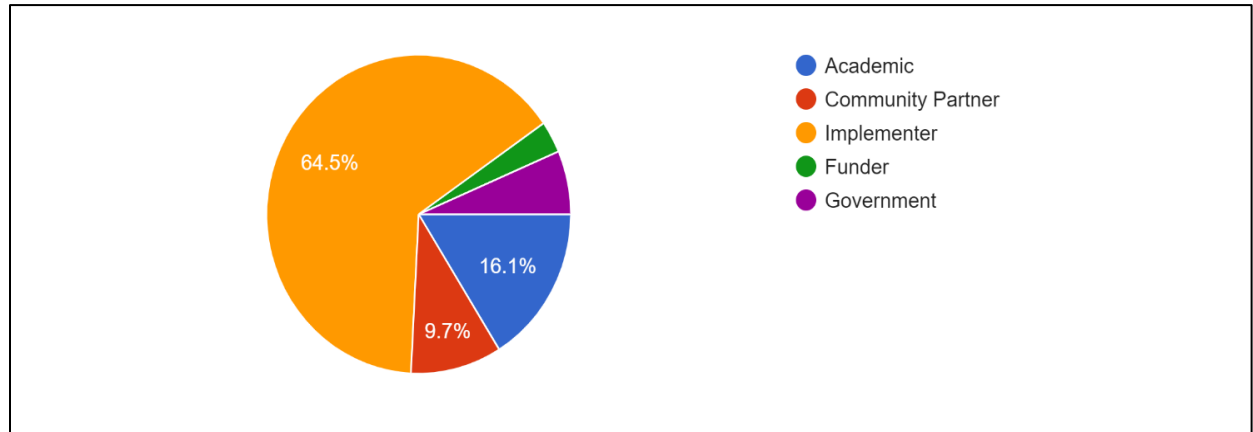


Figure 5. Interviewees' Role in Global Development (n=31)



**Figure 6.** Interviewees' Work Experience by Geographic Area(s) or Country (n=34)

