

## **Pledge for Change Annual Virtual Retreat**

### **November 27, 2023**

### **Summary Report**

Adeso and the Pledge for Change Secretariat team convened the Pledge for Change virtual retreat on November 27th 2023, with active participation and leadership from signatories and supporters.

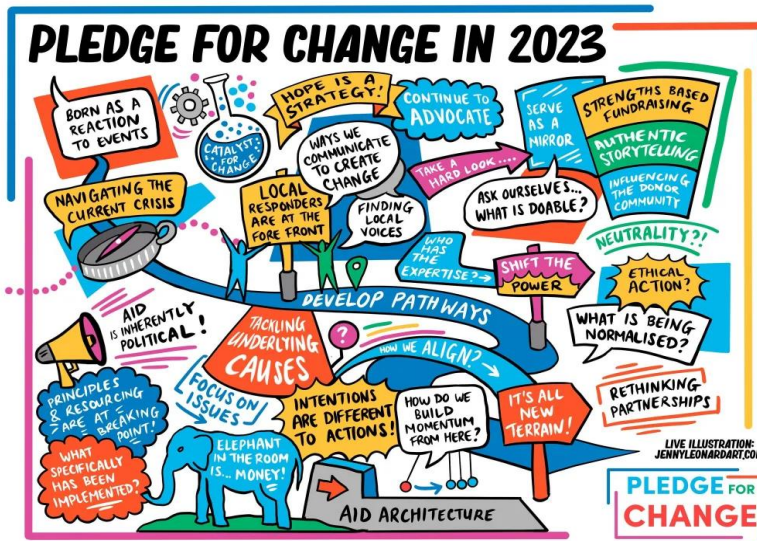
The November virtual gathering offered an accessible format for 70+ participants representing signatory and supporter organizations to engage in community building and peer exchange on multiple aspects of the pledge implementation and advocacy on issues affecting the broader aid ecosystem. The retreat took place over three hours, with participants from 16 time zones. The first hour was reserved for the leaders of signatories and supporters who discussed the Pledge's relevance and urgency in the current moment and the ethical imperative to act in the face of unprecedented humanitarian catastrophes. The following two hours, which were open to staff of signatory and supporter organizations, featured a group reflection activity, a keynote speaker, and breakout sessions on topics identified by signatories and supporters which included: [Pledge Accountability and Learning mechanism](#); [Decolonizing Aid](#); [Country-level Implementation of Pledges](#); [Collaborative Design](#) and [Authentic Storytelling](#).

Retreat participants were energized by the concrete examples of actions that signatory organizations have taken since the launch and the resulting changes described during a collective sharing session. They also urged each other to deepen their commitment to the Pledge and accelerate the transformation pace. There was recognition that all signatories must 'move from talking to action' and a particular focus on demonstrating Pledge implementation at the country level with robust accountability to partners and global south civil society leaders. Below, we provide summaries of the retreat sessions and the participants' reflections and inputs gathered in real-time during the community sessions. A complete [retreat agenda](#) and a [list of participants](#) can be accessed via the links.

#### **Leadership Circle Session: Leading Pledge for Change, Advocating for Rules, Navigating Complexities**

Sofía Sprechmann of Care International, and Pledge Chair revisited the original motivation behind the Pledge in response to global events in 2020 and reflected on the current moment and the failings of international institutions to uphold humanitarian principles, particularly in the Gaza crisis. She acknowledged the unprecedented loss of civilian life and the death of many local aid workers and first responders. She emphasized how critical it is for leadership to maintain strong commitment and ensure momentum for the work on equitable partnerships, authentic storytelling, and advocacy pledges.

Degan Ali of Adeso challenged the group with questions about NGOs' ethical roles and actions in crises, critiquing the lack of political action in mobilizing wider protests and holding their national governments accountable. Participants discussed the challenges of navigating complex situations and the limitations of the humanitarian system in the face of the Gaza crisis, noting the need to tackle underlying political causes and the importance of genuine and principled partnerships despite these complexities. Colleagues emphasized the importance of all sides in a conflict abiding by international humanitarian law, how NGOs can continue to advocate for International Humanitarian Law, and holding those who break these laws accountable. There was a discussion about the complexity of federated organizations agreeing on a collective position regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict and stressed the need for more political advocacy with governments that can end the violence. Participants discussed how urgent crises like Ukraine and Israel-Gaza impact the flow of funding and priorities and raised concerns over the funding-driven nature of organizations and the need to shift attention toward crises that receive less attention. The group noted how public the atrocities committed against civilians have become, and yet how powerless leaders feel to influence the geo-political situation.



### Pledge community open session: Creating Connections and a Safe Space for Change

The second hour of the retreat saw an expanded participant group as staff from Pledge signatory and supporter organizations joined the conversation. Kate Moger from Pledge for Change acknowledged the global challenges and expressed her gratitude for Pledge signatories and supporters' continued commitment and action. The Pledge Secretariat team emphasized the importance of moving from talking into action while recognizing and celebrating the bright spots already visible because of the Pledge. Using a Mentimeter, the Secretariat team asked participants to take a few minutes individually and respond to the following question: *What positive examples of change have you seen because of the Pledge for Change?* The complete set of responses is presented below for documentation and learning purposes, even if some statements described similar changes. We hope it is helpful to see these overlaps and parallel efforts, including the participants' language, for a better understanding of the incremental shifts that are happening across organizations and the sector. We've clustered them as related to each Pledge:

Pledge 1: Equitable Partnerships	Pledge 2: Authentic Storytelling	Pledge 3: Influencing Wider Change
Becoming a sub-grantee to organizations that used to be our sub-grantees.	Commitment to Pledges is already changing how we communicate and fundraise.	Incremental understanding across teams on how localization is critical to every issue we work on.
Willingness to commit to new ways of funding local partners.	Elevating local expertise	Evident commitment towards the pledge implementation.
More connection between partnership practices and policy positions.	More mainstreaming of power language.	Pushing CSOs for better response for humanitarian crises.
Rethinking partnership.	Inclusive stories of impact.	Positive conversations that contribute to change in the ecosystem
Less direct implementation	Improved language on shifting power.	Commitment within our organization to change practices
Practical tools for advancing equitable partnerships.	Naming our partners, enabling them to tell their own stories.	Collaboration between signatories to influence wider change.
Revitalizing partnerships with strong commitment to localization.	Change in language used.	Organizations are beginning to be accountable to their localization commitments.

Definitive move away from direct implementation.	Human-centered storytelling.	More visible INGO leadership on localization agenda
New ways of working.	Proper informed consent.	Increased attention to the pledges
Collaboration with P4C and with our organization. Commitment to make this happen, despite it being hard.	Focus on people closest to the work.	Pushing INGOs to commit to the pledges in strategies and planning. Needs more resourcing.
<b>Overall improvements in collaboration and brave spaces for more honest and open communication:</b>		
A conversation among major INGOs about partnerships and shifting power, that wasn't happening 3 years ago.	More visibility with leadership on localization.	Community growing and movement building.
Leadership courage. Bold conversations with each other.	Collaboration and meaningful discussion.	Live discussions within our organization.

We also asked all attendees to reflect on “How are you feeling about Pledge for Change?” and share their responses in another Mentimeter. The responses are presented in a Word Cloud below.



## How are you feeling about Pledge for Change? 111 responses



**Keynote: Julian Corner, Lankelly Chase Charitable Foundation**

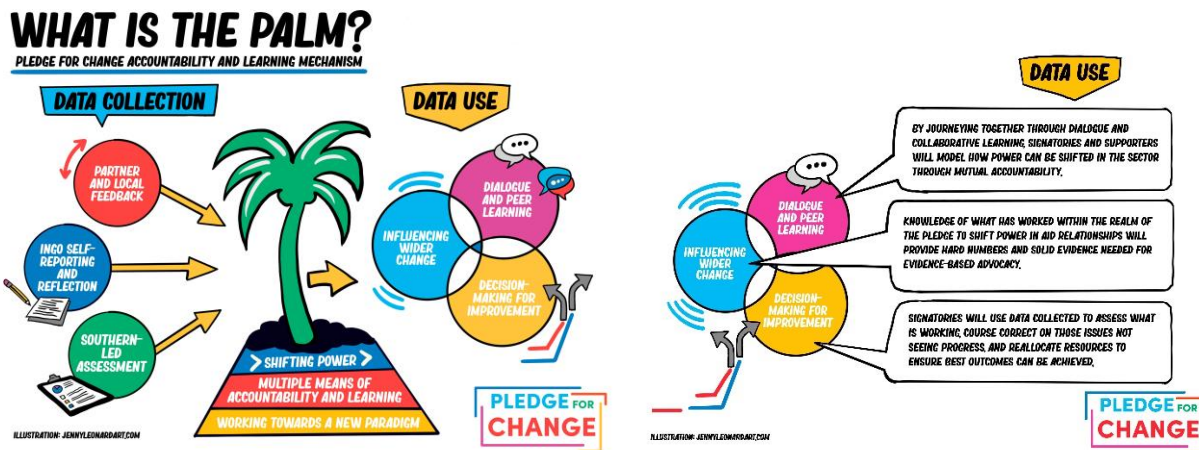
As a UK philanthropy leader who has led his team through the strategic decision to sunset the charitable foundation, Julian outlined the factors that led to the decision to close and redistribute assets over five years. He explained that the primary intent was to move funds closer to communities, allowing different people to decide on funds management and allocation, and to disentangle the charity from “the grip of colonial capitalism.” Lankelly Chase had already shifted from project-based to system-focused funding but encountered challenges in managing institutional power. Julian stressed the difficulty of transforming the structure and mindsets at the charity, noting the intense scrutiny his team faced after the decision to challenge the traditional ways of managing funds and to let go of power.

A transformation of this scale and depth also led to emotional distress on the part of staff and mistakes made during the strategy shift. He drew parallels to the Tavistock Institute's work on institutions containing anxiety, suggesting that challenging long-standing institutions can lead to a surge in contained anxiety. Despite challenges, Julian emphasized the need for fundamentally different approaches in the face of an existential crisis. During the open discussion, Julian noted that one of the lessons was the importance of having a clear and straightforward narrative about the chosen organizational path and the changes ahead. He also recognized the complexities and potential collateral damage of pursuing transformative change, highlighting insights from South Africa that inspired him and his colleagues.

## BREAKOUT SESSIONS

### Session 1: Pledge Accountability and Learning Mechanism (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning Working Group and West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI))

Alix Tiernan of Christian Aid, currently seconded as a senior MEAL expert to the Pledge for Change, led this session with Nancy Kankam Kusi from the team at WACSI. WACSI is currently developing the partner survey as part of the Pledge Accountability and Learning Mechanism (PALM). The full PALM document is available on request. The visuals below highlight the main components and how partner feedback, self-reported data, and Southern-led assessment will support learning and accountability.



Participants discussed reporting requirements and requested more guidance on self-reporting, particularly definitions for measures. The phased approach was appreciated, with an initial reporting requirement focused on five indicators. Participants noted the importance of giving all PALM components a test-drive in 2024, which may require prioritizing what is essential and measurable in the short run while committing to reporting on more indicators in subsequent years. The group recognized that country pilots could provide a beneficial testing ground for indicators across the entire organization or federation. Ideally, signatories will jointly test indicators in several country contexts while implementing the full extent of all three pledges.

## Session 2: Decolonizing Aid through the Pledge for Change (Oxfam)

Adama Coulibaly, Global Programs Director at Oxfam International, presented an overview of findings from a pre-retreat survey for participants on decolonizing aid, indicating a widespread desire for a fundamental transformation in the aid sector. This would be characterized by a focus on empowering local communities, adopting sustainable practices, engaging in equitable and ethical collaborations, and moving away from Western-centric models. The responses from the survey participants conveyed a sense of optimism regarding the future of aid, driven by a shift towards more localized, innovative, and collaborative models that challenge traditional practices and seek to address systemic issues like climate change and unequal power dynamics.

The responses also pointed to a variety of strategies and approaches that organizations are using to contribute to the decolonization of aid. Survey participants recognized the challenges and needs that must be addressed to drive this transformative process forward. The responses suggested that the Pledge for Change is a multifaceted tool with a potential to influence and reshape the landscape of international aid by emphasizing the principles of decolonization, equity, and local empowerment. The full slide deck and survey findings are shared at the following links: [survey analysis](#) and [presentation](#). Breakout session participants were asked to reflect and share their viewpoints on the questions:

- 1. What is the most important change that needs to happen to decolonize international aid?** Participants emphasized the importance of changing donor practices and a reassessment of risk appetite as crucial catalysts for real change in the aid sector. It was also noted that without a shift in mindset at both individual and organizational levels meaningful transformation is unlikely. Building trust with partners was described as a prerequisite of the incremental but essential process of changing how donors think about risk and trust. Colleagues also acknowledged that the public sentiment is increasingly critical of white saviorism, particularly in the context of crises like Gaza.
- 2. What makes you optimistic about the future of international aid? What are some of the innovative practices that could replace or transform current aid practices?** Participants expressed optimism about the transformative potential of the Pledge for Change despite the current challenges in the aid sector. The emphasis should be on collective advocacy to influence key decision-makers, particularly in the donor agencies. Examples like Lankelly Chase as a potential catalyst could initiate a domino effect leading to wider changes.
- 3. How do you or your organization contribute to the decolonization of aid? What support do you need?** Session participants underscored the importance of practical and tangible steps in the transformation process. Some also highlighted the ongoing challenges within large organizations where there is a push and pull between those advocating for change and those adhering to business-as-usual practices. Another recurring topic was weak accountability to partners. Staff from several organizations described efforts and initiatives focused on decolonizing and transforming aid.
- 4. What role should Pledge for Change play in reshaping international aid?** It is critical for Pledge signatories to hold their organizations accountable for the pace of change and for influencing donors. Regular meetings and sharing of progress are helpful in this regard both for learning and accountability and can be formalized through PALM. Participants also stressed the need to ensure that accountability doesn't become a mere checklist but involves genuine commitment beyond ticking boxes. Finally, there was a call to increase the number of signatories.



The visual artist’s representation of the discussion is included here with the summary text.

### Session 3: How is the Pledge supporting Country Level Change? (Humanitarian Aid International (HAI) and UPDHE-DRC)

Sudhanshu Shekhar Singh from HAI (India) and Meschac Nakanywenge from UPDHE (DRC), active members of the Pledge Global Advisory Group and supporter organizations, focused this breakout session on the importance of implementing global pledge commitments at the country level. They proposed that Pledge signatories should share their concrete goals and outcomes in relation to pledge implementation in countries where they operate. The urgent need to demonstrate how pledges apply at the

country level was stressed to all participants.

Signatories shared practical steps their organizations have taken at country level. Participants emphasized the challenges faced by local NGOs in forming equitable partnerships due to strict regulations. The importance of CEO engagement and a multi-speed approach were highlighted.

In relation to influencing donor funding models and alternatives, participants discussed the challenges within the current model that make it difficult to directly grant or contract with small to medium-sized civil society organizations. An alternative could be donors collaborating with international NGOs to build up national civil society organizations or international civil society acting as a middleman. Participants discussed the challenges faced by organizations who rely on institutional funding and suggested the possibility of supplementing the system with more direct cash programming. The session concluded with renewed calls for increasing advocacy with donors and private foundations and the importance of continued dialogue with partners at the country level.

### Session 4: Collaborative Design (NEAR and IRC) - Case study of SSWC and IRC

This session featured presentations and moderated discussion led by Beatrice Githinji (IRC), Caroline Muasya (IRC), Sean Scanlon (IRC), Shahida Arif (NEAR), and Shahida Suleiman (Save Somali Women and Children SSWC). Shahida Arif from NEAR presented the [collaborative design framework](#) co-developed by NEAR and IRC. Shahida Suleiman and Caroline Muasya discussed the testing of the collaborative design and lessons learned from applying it in their contexts.

The collaborative design framework emerged from a conversation between NEAR and IRC and modeled equitable partnership through the co-creation process. In-depth research, including a desk review and interviews, resulted in a guidance note and a proposed design process. IRC staff highlighted external challenges such as systemic issues and prescriptive donor calls for proposals, and internal challenges like entrenched institutional processes and personal biases. The NEAR team discussed the research highlights, focusing on five characteristics and seven enablers of collaborative design. SSWC team described the evolution of the strategic partnership between SSWC and IRC, emphasizing the importance of involving partners from the start. The seven-year partnership has leveraged many strengths, with SSWC facilitating community relationships and IRC providing technical expertise. Participants discussed the benefits of collaborative design, including better understanding the local context, sharing indirect costs, decentralized decision-making, shorter project startups, increased ownership, and capacity sharing. The

roles, responsibilities, and budget allocations in collaborative design were discussed, emphasizing clear communication and transparency throughout the process. The session was helpful in highlighting the journey, progress, and benefits of collaborative design in fostering effective partnerships.

Participants asked about the impact of the co-creation process on storytelling, monitoring and evaluation, and overall impact measurement. The presenting team highlighted that co-creation leads to more visible, equitable storytelling, collaborative monitoring and evaluation, and shared ownership compared to conventional approaches. The Pledge for Change was noted as an opportunity to collectively address how donors regulate ICRs in their contracting and grantmaking.

### [Session 5: Ethical and Authentic Storytelling \(Africa No Filter\)](#)

Abimbola Ogundairo from Africa No Filter [presented on](#) Ethical and Authentic Storytelling, particularly in the context of narratives about Africa. ANF is a narrative change organization on a mission to shift outdated perceptions about Africa. It supports storytellers, conducts research, provides grants, builds community, and advocates for better representation of Africa. ANF's research on academic writing about Africa found many harmful patterns and practices:

- **Common narrative frames** about Africa, such as conflict, poverty, corruption, poor leadership, and disease. These narratives impact the perceptions of the general public, aid workers, donors, business, investments, and self-perception among Africans.
- **Unethical and harmful storytelling** includes blurring individual countries, focusing on needs rather than agency, and reinforcing stereotypes, for example showing Africa as broken, dependent, and lacking agency. ANF works to stop harmful narratives and supports others to adopt more nuanced perspectives.
- **ANF Resources** include an Ethical Storytelling guide tailored for development NGOs and practitioners. The guide provides tools for telling better stories about Africa.
- **Ethical Storytelling** is a new approach that acknowledges existing harmful narratives and consciously works to adopt better ones. It is about highlighting assets, showcasing agency, and providing a more balanced and contextual view. ANF presentation outlines steps for ethical storytelling, including addressing power relations, ensuring respectful engagement, addressing implicit bias, and investing time in projects.

During the Q&A and discussion participants discussed challenges in shifting to ethical storytelling, ways to address power dynamics and how to create demand for positive stories.