

## LEARNING TO SHIFT POWER AND CENTER COMMUNITY VOICES IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORK

Jill LaLonde and Sheku Mohamed Gassimu Jr.

### Abstract

International development has long been dominated by primarily white-led, Global North organizations. These organizations are raising money in the Global North and doing work in the Global South, with the intended benefit to less economically developed communities. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in activism and calls by organizations in both the Global North and South for localization of development, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding efforts in an attempt to address unequal North-South power dynamics. Since 2006, OneVillage Partners has worked to address multidimensional poverty in Sierra Leone by investing in individuals and communities to help them address their own challenges, providing targeted project facilitation and monetary support for communities to lead their own development, and connecting individuals and leaders with one another across communities to amplify their collective voices and actions for broader impact. Beginning in 2020, OneVillage Partners increased its commitment to “decolonize” their work and more fully shift power to local people in Sierra Leone. This article will provide context on the changing nature of the international development industry and outline steps OneVillage Partners has taken to operationalize the localization narrative, challenges they have encountered, and ideas for the future.

Keywords: Community-led development; decolonization; international development; proximate leadership; Sierra Leone

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## **ONEVILLAGE PARTNERS**

Jill LaLonde and Sheku Mohamed Gassimu Jr., leaders in the nonprofit organization OneVillage Partners, describe their involvement in the organization's decolonization efforts:

Jill LaLonde: I identify as a white woman from Minnesota, USA. I am middle aged and am a wife and mother. I have been the Executive Director of OneVillage Partners for seven years and have spent fifteen years in the nonprofit and international development sectors. I was educated in the United States and the United Kingdom, and while I have lived abroad, all of my professional life in the international development space has been spent living in the Global North and working to have impact in the Global South.

Sheku Mohamed Gassimu Jr: I identify as a black man from Giehun Luawa, Kailahun District, Eastern Sierra Leone. I have been working with OneVillage Partners for the past seven years. During this period, I have moved from the role of a Community Facilitator to my current role as the Partnership and Program Director, planning the delivery of existing programs and all new program activities, as well as leading the team to implement all programs at the highest levels of professional quality. Since graduating from university, I have been working in the nonprofit and community-led development sector, managing community projects and programs that are grounded in the experience of rural communities in Sierra Leone.

Neither of us, nor OneVillage Partners, are experts on decolonization and shifting power, but we desire to share our journey in hopes of inspiring and helping others doing similar work.

## INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND DECOLONIZATION

In the years following World War II, state powers in Europe and North America sought to rebuild and solidify global peace and help countries impacted by the war rebuild their infrastructure and economies. In the United States, President Harry Truman, working with the Congress, passed The Marshall Plan, appropriating \$13.3 billion for European recovery (National Archives, n.d.). At the same time, the changing post-WWII geopolitical landscape ushered in a wave of global independence movements. Between 1945 and 1960, three dozen states across Africa and Asia pulled away from European colonial powers. Some became more autonomous, and others became completely independent (State Department, n.d.). However, even as countries gained political independence, the preceding colonial rule left these new states with few opportunities for economic independence. Colonial powers had spent centuries sculpting the institutions in their domains to serve their own interests through exporting primary commodities (including humans), shaping legal, financial, and education systems to support this (Boston University, n.d.).

The beginning of the post-WWII historical period is widely cited as the time when the industry we now call *international development* originated. The industry was characterized by a bifurcation of states into the “First World” and “Third World,” classified in part by their economic status (Wolf-Phillips, 1987). These delineations are also referred to as the “Global North” (developed, high-income countries) and the “Global South” (low- and middle-income countries) (Dados & Connell, 2012). Immanuel Wallerstein, in his World System theory, described these geographies as a relationship between the Core and the Periphery (Wallerstein, 2004). Whatever the nomenclature, the international development industry is made up of governments, bilateral and multilateral institutions (such as the United Nations and World Bank), private funders, nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, and other global actors working to improve lives in communities and countries that are economically less developed than the countries that make up the Global North.

While there are countless smaller civic organizations and nonprofits working within international development, the priorities and work of larger and more robustly funded institutions dominate the field. These institutions were created and are primarily funded by more affluent nations. For example, the World Bank officially hosts 189 member countries, though the U.S. is the largest shareholder, with 17.25% of its capital shares, and every World Bank president since its origin in 1944 has been a U.S. citizen, giving the United States an outsized role in management (World Bank, n.d.; World Bank, 2017). Bilateral aid agencies of economically developed country governments, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), hold significant power. While USAID's FY2021 budget was \$41 billion, only 11.1% of their assistance went local communities and institutions, while 86.4% went to U.S.-based contracted organizations (USAID, 2021; ReliefWeb, 2023; Development Aid, 2022).

The deep history of colonialism in many of the environments where international development work is prevalent creates challenges, including the evolved power that donor countries hold in setting development priorities and making decisions that impact people's lives. For this reason, the international development industry has been labeled neocolonialist, with the First World maintaining domination and control over the Third World. This domination provides the developed nations with significant social and economic power, and often the ability to decide who receives benefits, what these benefits might be, and where limited funds might be allocated.

## **SIERRA LEONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In Sierra Leone, a country with a population of 8.4 million people, the challenges people face are complex and systemic in nature (World Bank, n.d.). These challenges have impacted the country's socio-economic development and current international development landscape.

Sierra Leone was central to the global slave trade from the late 15th Century until the mid-19th Century. The country was colonized by the British, and declared independence from Britain in April 1961, thanks in part to the deadly mosquitoes that made living conditions difficult for the colonizers, and in part to the steadfast endeavors from generations of Sierra Leoneans. A violent civil war from 1991 to 2002 and an epidemic of Ebola in 2014 have contributed to extreme poverty, lack of opportunities for individuals and families to thrive (especially women and youth), and systems and institutions that perpetuate alienation, corruption, and gender hierarchy.

Colonialism in Sierra Leone was characterized by structures established to exercise hegemonic control over people for the disproportionate benefit of those connected to power. A Western state model was imposed at the central level; hence, the traditional tribal authorities were reinvented in a more autocratic form at the local level. Forms of accountability existing in the precolonial traditional were eliminated or compromised by alternative means that enabled the elites that took over control from their masters to stay in power (Harris, 2014). This legacy continues today.

While the historical context and the specific circumstances are unique to Sierra Leone, the general trends and setbacks are common across the less economically developed world. This is true for the post-independence instability as well as the emergence of health crises and economic crises that have hampered progress.

## **THE GLOBAL DECOLONIZATION MOVEMENT**

While critiques of the international development industry are not new, in recent years there has been an acceleration in activism and calls by organizations in both the Global North and South to “decolonize” the industry. These critiques call for more money and resources to go directly to people and organizations in the country or community that aid seeks to improve. Proponents posit that those who experience challenges must be central to developing and implementing solutions to those

challenges, and that this will not only be more effective and sustainable, but it can begin to address unequal North-South power dynamics and the underlying systems that hold people in poverty.

Decolonizing an industry in which power dynamics have existed since its beginning requires efforts by people, organizations, institutions, and humanitarian actors to better understand the nature of this power. Then these actors must shift their behavior away from historic colonial power relationships that have been characterized by control and extraction. For people and organizations in the Global North, this means introspection about the social and economic power they hold as individuals and their role in perpetuating systems of inequity. For people and organizations in the Global South, this means investing in and aligning policy and planning initiatives, strengthening partnerships, and creating accountability strategies to offer opportunities for more integration, as well as embracing the space for constructive engagement with Global North actors.

This learning must go beyond theoretical concepts of decolonizing aid and shifting power, and move to practical, operational actions at all levels. Those in the Global North must take actions that might be uncomfortable, such as ceding power to others and letting go of the idea of being “the experts” because of education or language spoken, focusing instead whether and what kinds of help are needed, and on trusting that the people in the Global South know what they need and are best suited to determine how to overcome their challenges.

Despite the growing awareness of the need for power structures to change, structural changes in the industry have been piecemeal or have failed to address the deep-rooted systemic issues in the North-South relationship. Global North organizations and leaders have struggled to implement change to ensure proactive support for locally led approaches and to provide more resources directly to Global South institutions. In order to achieve sustainable development outcomes, the industry requires both the

raising of funds for projects and the availability of development professionals with technical skills, as well as the involvement of local people with a clear and collective vision of a sustainable future from which they will all benefit. While there is growing support for the idea of decolonizing aid, there is little consensus on how to actually achieve that.

### **Decolonizing at an Organizational Level**

In 2020, with the onset of the Covid pandemic and with calls for racial justice and decolonization in the wake of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis, the home of OneVillage Partners, the organization deepened its interrogation about power and decision making. While the programs were designed to be community-led, where did power truly lie? Who was making organizational decisions? Strategic decisions? We sat with the discomfort about the fact that our organization's governance, leadership, and staff at the headquarters office were largely white individuals who did not have lived experience similar to those the organization sought to impact in Sierra Leone. This re-examination is not unique to OneVillage Partners; a groundswell within the international development industry has called for decolonizing aid, shifting power, and localizing development.

For OneVillage Partners, decolonizing aid has involved critical thinking and inward reflection about current practices within our own organization. We have discussed how we can reshape these norms to center community voices and decision making, rather than crafting an entirely new practice. The reflection and subsequent action must also go beyond the organizational level to address how the current development industry benefits organizations in the Global North who know how to work within the system to access large funding opportunities for programs and research based on pre-existing relationships with funders.

We believe there is a need for systemic change to provide equitable access to opportunities and funding for local individuals, who must be central to the solutions

that are grounded in the local context and that impact their daily lives. There must be greater recognition of the skills and experience of local individuals and institutions in the Global South and the immense value these actors bring to the industry. At the same time, organizations in the Global North must recognize how to be partners, by elevating local voices and by leveraging networks and skills to support this.

## **ONEVILLAGE PARTNERS: ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The mission of OneVillage Partners is to enhance collective wellbeing across Sierra Leone by investing in people and communities through partnerships. We envision a future in which Sierra Leoneans amplify their collective power to lead transformational change in their communities.

OneVillage Partners addresses multidimensional poverty by giving individuals experiencing poverty the tools and resources to address their own challenges. Multidimensional poverty is a concept that looks at poverty beyond just income or material wellbeing. While income is certainly a piece of poverty, we must also take into account health, education, and living standards to get a fuller picture of individuals' and communities' ability to thrive.

Our work trains communities to identify their needs and to design projects that address those needs. We provide both project facilitation and monetary support for communities to lead their own projects, while also connecting people, communities, and local government leaders with one another for further impact. Our programs work together to reduce multidimensional poverty and to address the structural challenges that keep people in poverty. In addition to improving day-to-day wellbeing, our work aims to build inclusive leadership, social cohesion, gender equity, and resilience.

OneVillage Partners began in 2006 to help displaced refugees in Sierra Leone return to their homes and rebuild their communities after the civil war that ended in 2002. Jeff



Hall, a commercial real estate developer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone in the late 1980s. After the war, he returned to visit his friends and began the work that today is OneVillage Partners.

OneVillage Partners is grounded in the belief that many peoples' understanding of Sierra Leone's complex history and current challenges falls short of defining the country and the individuals within. Sierra Leone is a country filled with potential, and it is defined not by the unfortunate events of history, but rather by its assets and the opportunities that exist for its future.

Our work has been built on a partnership model and partnership values, which are woven throughout our three programs. In the [Community Action Program](#), community leaders define their challenges and design projects with others in the community to address these challenges. A group of women and men volunteer-leaders are trained to design, implement, and sustain these projects.

The [Nurturing Opportunities for Women \(NOW\) Program](#) is a three-phase, picture-based women's empowerment program that works with women and their male partners to provide women with new skills and men with the knowledge about how this benefits their entire family. The first phase teaches participants financial planning, decision-making, and public speaking skills. Women learn to budget and save within their households and to achieve the financial goals they set for themselves. Most often, the women's first financial goal is to save enough money to pay for their children's education. In the second phase, participants learn how to develop a successful business, increase profit, and communicate their business ideas. In the third phase, women receive agricultural training to do productive farming and form a savings group to increase yields and profits over the course of the growing season. Through this, women support one another to improve their income and food security.

In the [Lead Program](#), a group of men and women are trained in project design and management, and proposal writing. This is similar to the Community Action Program, but in the Lead Program communities are also able to work together across communities and write shared proposals for funding. Funded proposals are implemented by community members in collaboration with technical experts, local institutions, and traditional and elected representatives.

Our three programs complement one another and work to address the underlying systems that keep people in poverty, while also addressing multidimensional poverty through the projects that communities design and implement.

Grima, a village of about 1,000 people, is one of our partner communities that has participated in all of OneVillage Partners' programs, including being the Lead Program pilot in 2019-2020. Through the Lead Program, community-members in Grima worked together to address the extremely high infant and child death rates. They made basic improvements to their health clinic by expanding on the number of pre-and postnatal rooms, installing solar panels and running water, and tiling the floors. Our evaluation showed that there were 15 infant deaths in 2019 (prior to project implementation), 6 in 2021, and 4 in 2022.

As of January 2023, OneVillage Partners has partnered with 40 communities, working alongside them to improve the wellbeing of more than 40,000 individuals. This partnership-style work creates change on systemic levels in gender equity, inclusive leadership, social cohesion, and building resiliency. For example, we measured a 553% increase between January and December 2022 in women being involved in decision-making in their households and at the community level. At community meetings, 46% of speakers were women. And, 90% of communities met the project-specific goals they had set at the outset of the project.

When a community provides space for women to use their voices and to be involved in decision making without hindrance, other women and marginalized people feel safe to participate in developing interventions that will impact the community. The involvement of different perspectives from men and women in addressing challenges benefits all community members and makes it easier to achieve goals because they were developed collectively. For OneVillage Partners, taking into account the prevailing cultural behavior present in these communities, this significant progress is important because it promotes social cohesion and inclusive leadership, empowers gender equity, and builds resilience in communities by using their collective voices to address their challenges.

In addition to the systemic changes these projects facilitate, OneVillage Partners also reduces multidimensional poverty in measures of income, health, education, and living standards. For example, between January and December 2022, OneVillage Partners measured a 73% reduction in diarrheal disease in communities implementing water and sanitation projects, as well as \$8,500 in collective savings for NOW participants.

## **ADVANCING FROM COMMUNITY-LED TO DECOLONIZATION**

OneVillage Partners' programmatic work incorporates principles of community-led development, an approach that puts communities at the front and center in decision making and action. 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. (Vega et al., 2021, p. 1).

A defining characteristic of OneVillage Partners' programs is communities being at the forefront of decision making and action. For many years, this was a programmatic element that made OneVillage Partners unique in Sierra Leone. OneVillage Partners was by no means the only organization using a community-led framework globally; there were other organizations working with similar methods, notably Spark Microgrants, Nuru International, and Raising the Village. However, these organizations represented a small part of a very large industry, an industry which has been dominated by large multinational organizations that are household names, such as CARE, Oxfam, and Save the Children.

Our internal conversations about decolonizing aid were and continue to be difficult. They have challenged us to explore our internal biases on an individual level and to reflect on value disparities at an organizational level. The work of shifting power is a long, arduous process. It is a journey and a continual work in progress. At OneVillage Partners, we are learning every day, and our thoughts and actions evolve as we continue to learn and deepen our understanding of how we can do and be better.

The remainder of this article is dedicated to outlining some of the steps we have taken to get from intention to action in shifting power. As organizational leaders, we have looked to others with more experience and deeper knowledge to help guide our path. In doing so, we have learned that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Our approach is just one of many. The effectiveness of any approach will depend in large part on the context in which it is implemented. We have ourselves felt stuck with not knowing where to start or where to go next, and we hope that sharing what we have done and what we have learned so far in our journey will benefit us and help others to explore shifting their own power.

## **Strategies and Activities to Shift Power**

The following section describes some of the steps OneVillage Partners has taken to operationalize decolonization in our work. We hope this can serve as a resource for other nonprofits wanting to move from concept to action.

**Keeping Dialogue Front and Center.** In the summer of 2020 we began monthly calls among our five white staff from the Global North, in which we discussed different topics each month, with either a learning or an action focus. Topics included characteristics of power that show up in our day-day work, and internal biases that we each individually hold. We found that to keep these topics salient for us, both as individuals and as an organization, it was important to incorporate opportunities to learn. We quickly became more comfortable talking about difficult topics and were able to be vulnerable with one another. We also began to identify operating norms that were not aligned with our values, many of which we describe in more detail below, and we started to address those.

Initially, we started these conversations with the belief that as white folks in the Global North, it was up to us to find the solutions. As we got further into our dialogues, we recognized that we were missing an important perspective by not including our 53 Sierra Leonean colleagues in the discussions. We learned that we could still hold the burden of being Global Northerners while also deepening our understanding about what decolonization has meant to our Sierra Leonean colleagues and how colonialism has impacted their lives. We asked them what changes they wanted to see at the organization and within the international development industry. Our Sierra Leonean colleagues welcomed this. This bridging dialogue has been a key factor in the actions we have taken since.

**Managing External Communications.** We quickly recognized that we needed to change how we communicated our work, both internally and externally, to be more ethical, inclusive, and asset-based. We updated our [Communications Brand Standards](#)

with decolonization in mind, taking into account both imagery and language. Like other steps on this journey, our communications are a work in progress and will continue to evolve as we learn and grow. The process of updating our brand standards served to get all of the individuals that make up OneVillage Partners on the same page in how we talk about our work, and using asset-based language to do so.

The ways in which we use our imagery have drastically changed. In 2021, we made our photo and video consent processes more robust, moving from simply asking for photos and getting consent for a photo to be taken, to also specifying exactly how photos will be used. We adopted a new photography policy that outlines these expectations and trained our staff on explaining effectively to program participants what giving consent means. This policy can be found [here](#). We use photos showing people who are empowered and confident as opposed to helpless. We add captions and names to all photos. We hired a Sierra Leonean photographer and began outsourcing our videography and translation to Sierra Leoneans based in Sierra Leone. This has helped us to capture content more authentically, with the narrative directly from Sierra Leone.

We also continue to explore the language we use both internally and externally. For example, we have one office in the US and several in Sierra Leone, but we used to refer to the U.S. office as our “headquarters.” We no longer call the U.S. office “headquarters,” and we avoid language that diminishes real people’s human experience, like the words “poor people” or “beneficiary.”

**Managing Internal Communications.** To make communication equitable, we believe leadership is key in setting an example to provide guidance and to support communication processes. For example, a Leadership Team comprising Director-level staff in both country offices advises on key strategic challenges and opportunities that impact the organization overall. Having a group of leaders making key decisions rather than relying on the Executive Director based in the US has been important for sharing

knowledge and ideas. We have also used this group to lead broader staff engagement, including determining ways we can hear from staff at all levels more effectively. We rely on the leadership in Sierra Leone to better understand problems and provide ideas about how to get the rest of the Sierra Leonean team engaged in complex issues and change processes. This has made our decision-making apparatus stronger and more inclusive, which is also motivating for staff.

We have found other ways to better connect all levels of staff with one another, including regular all-staff town hall meetings. In 2023, we are expanding these meetings to include our Board of Directors. These meetings serve to connect people on a human-to-human level and to illustrate how the many functions of our organization work together to achieve our goals.

We have also updated our onboarding materials to make sure staff and board members in the US and Sierra Leone have the opportunity to learn about the cultural differences between our two countries and what happened historically on each side of the equator. There is a collective sense of appreciation and respect across the spectrum for both our cultural differences and our common humanity. We have seen that staff from both countries now feel more confident to engage with one another.

### **From Decolonization to Partnerism**

As Riane Eisler outlines in her body of work, Partnerism refers to the intentional shift from a legacy of domination to a system of partnership, where together we “support human thriving and the survival of our planet” (Center for Partnership Studies, n.d., section 2). The concept of partnerism has led to a major shift in mindset for our organization. We began to articulate that while we seek to decolonize our efforts, we also don’t believe that ‘flipping a switch’ and then stepping away is our most effective way to engage. Instead, we want to design and define new ways of working with one another to achieve more together than we could individually, and to center proximate voices more effectively.

In the context of OneVillage Partners, we have always placed value on partnership with the communities we served on a programmatic level, and this transition to partnership at a governance and management level has more thoroughly incorporated this value across the organization. Everyone has a unique role in advancing our mission, from our partners in Sierra Leone who are best situated to define what they need to improve their wellbeing, to those of us in the US who are proximate to potential funding opportunities.

## **A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN**

In 2021, many internal and external elements of our work converged and led us to create a new strategic plan. First, the momentum of the discussions that began in 2020 accelerated; there were more conversations, more individuals involved, and more energy put into conversations. For the first time, the chair of the Board of Directors was not a founder of the organization, thus strengthening our governance systems and succession planning. At the same time, we were nearing the end of the existing strategic period and had accomplished most of the goals that had been outlined. We had grown significantly as an organization, from working in three Sierra Leonean communities in one district in 2015 to 40 in multiple districts in 2022, and had worked to refine our model and measure our results. We needed to recognize and analyze our decade-plus of success, and dream big about what the future could hold. In mid-2021, OneVillage Partners staff and board began working on a new strategic plan; the completed plan was adopted by the board to guide our work beginning in 2023. The plan outlined our goals to expand throughout Sierra Leone, beginning with two new districts using our own staff and current programs, and 15 rural districts staffed through partnerships.

This plan also institutionalized the important structural changes we intend to make, and served as an important external commitment to those changes. Specifically, this



plan includes a “proximate leadership” pillar with a variety of related activities. For example:

- Shift from a primarily U.S.-based board to a Global Board of Directors, with a goal of strong Sierra Leonean representation and intentional efforts to recruit from within Sierra Leone.
- Hire a Sierra Leonean Executive Director based in Sierra Leone to lead the organization’s strategy and programs.

There is much work to do to ensure that we can set up the new Executive Director in Sierra Leone for success, and to integrate U.S.-based and Sierra Leone-based board members. We have made some progress (as described below), but also have much work ahead.

### **Organizational Structure and the Question of Fundraising**

The organizational structure was an area we clearly wanted to change. Operating with an Executive Director in the U.S. (a white woman) and a Country Director in Sierra Leone (a white man) was inconsistent with our new direction and our values. To fully capture and address questions, concerns, and ideas around proximity that we heard from those close to OneVillage Partners, we conducted listening sessions with staff and board members, hearing about areas of excitement and of concern, and creative ideas for making these changes effective. While we expected to hear a gamut of concerns, which we could address in our action plan, all participants came back to the same top area of hesitation: fundraising.

The hesitancy around fundraising was largely brought on because our donors have been almost exclusively based in the US. For years, many of them have developed trust in our Founder and Executive Director, who are also based in the US. Donors expressed concerns about not knowing who or what their donations would be going to. Board members posed questions about roles and accountability, and how we can maintain this trust with our donors. Staff in Sierra Leone worried that having a leader

in Sierra Leone, further away from the donor base and with less established trust, would impact dollars raised and, in turn, programs.

Another key concern came specifically from staff: How can we create more space for Sierra Leonean leaders across the organization and not just in the Executive Director role? Our organizational culture has been one of collaboration and learning, but how can we institutionalize this through the staffing structure to keep the U.S. and Sierra Leone teams and offices working together and to elevate our Sierra Leonean colleagues?

To address the leadership structure and the fundraising concerns, we have begun to create a flatter leadership structure. We created two new Director-level positions in Sierra Leone and promoted Sierra Leonean colleagues to these roles. We also created an Executive Leadership Team, a group of Director-level staff that meets monthly to discuss organizational strategic issues and helps to troubleshoot issues and topics that the Executive Director and Country Director previously addressed independently. This strengthens our operations and helps each of us to think more holistically and to identify blind spots in decision making. Along with the changes at the leadership level, we have increased the number of Sierra Leoneans on staff in Sierra Leone by hiring and investing in people who have both technical skills and cultural knowledge.

To address the fundraising concerns, we asked, How could an Executive Director in Sierra Leone be as effective at fundraising when our current donor base lives almost exclusively in the midwestern US? In some cases, this person will be more effective because they are closer to the work and its impact. How can we establish trust between that Executive Director and our individual donors, the source of most of our revenue, who have no firsthand life experience of Sierra Leone? We believe we can achieve this with a strong leadership structure across our two offices, possibly through a Co-Executive Director in the US who operates as a Chief Philanthropy Officer and works in close partnership with the Co-Executive Director in Sierra Leone, who drives

strategy and programs. Or, this U.S. person could be a Managing Director who reports to the Sierra Leone Executive Director. Or, perhaps we look at a collective leadership model, where a handful of individuals lead various aspects of the organization with no one person in control. We are not set on the structure yet, but we are planning to finalize our plans in 2023.

Our team is excited - in Sierra Leone, in the US, and among staff and our board. Staff have expressed happiness about the intentional changes they have seen already and about the plans for the future, both in the US and in Sierra Leone. They have cited the benefits of a broader leadership circle that includes more Sierra Leonean voices in decision making, the reduction of the number of white “experts”, and the opening of space for Sierra Leonean staff to move into top leadership positions. In 2022, we saw a staff retention rate of 96% in Sierra Leone, and a boost in Sierra Leonean staff confidence and commitment to the work. In the US, staff are motivated and excited by the opportunity to define a new way of addressing international development challenges that feels more aligned with their personal values and hopes for the industry overall.

### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Decolonization Committee**

What began as an informal working group centered on defining and implementing activities to shift power and forward decolonization efforts specific to OneVillage Partners has become an official board committee. We have representatives from our Board of Directors, staff in the U.S. and Sierra Leone, and academics with expertise in these fields. Like other board committees, this group is tasked with helping to carry out our strategic plan, and sets goals and activities each year to move their work forward. For example, in 2022, they evaluated our group trips to Sierra Leone and identified ways to make them more equitable, inclusive, and value-aligned.

In 2023, this group is working to more fully integrate values and education on partnerism into our work at the board level. This is especially relevant as we work to

set up our Sierra Leone-based board and define operating norms that are inclusive and equitable. This group will also provide resources to the overall board about our new leadership structure, to help everyone think creatively about how the structure could support our goals, and will examine our policies and procedures through an equity lens, to make sure they support our values and new structure.

### **Putting Communities Front and Center**

We see community members as the experts to lead their own transformational changes. This belief has led our staff to reflect on a daily basis on how we can be more accountable to the communities with whom we partner. We keep ourselves aware of the language we use in our engagement to avoid reinforcing colonial discriminatory and negative perceptions. For example, in Sierra Leone, we don't call the people we work with beneficiaries; they are partners. We believe holding ourselves accountable in a transparent manner can play a significant role in building synergy for community mobilization.

We plan for and schedule meetings and activities to accommodate regular working hours for both countries, accounting for the 5-hour time difference, and we make sure we respond to feedback about the time of day and time of year of our community engagement in Sierra Leone. Our engagement with partner communities must be built on mutual respect, transparency, and ethical partnership, and we must take into account the inherent power dynamics that exist in our relationship.

### **WHAT'S NEXT**

While we are energized by the progress we have made and excited about changes to come, we still have much work to do. There are several areas we are working on and we know must be addressed, but that we don't yet have all the answers to.

### **Identifying and Recruiting Board Members to Actualize our New Structure**

It's very hard to find board members who will bring the right expertise and engagement to OneVillage Partners, even within our talented Minnesota-based network. This becomes even harder as we try to identify prospective leaders in different geographies, and to raise both our profile and funds. Not everyone wants to work on fundraising and opening doors, but finding people who are enthusiastic about this aspect of the work is key.

It is also difficult to find board members who are from Sierra Leone and live in Sierra Leone, who can effectively represent our community partners. We rely heavily on our team in Sierra Leone, as they are the ones with connections to local leaders and change makers who would be stellar board members.

### **Donor Trips**

We have historically brought groups of donors from the US to Sierra Leone. However, we have learned that the benefits are greater for the travelers than for partner communities where those individuals have stayed for several nights, often in families' homes. Some travelers have voiced discomfort with aspects of the trip, particularly feeling they created difficulty in the host community.

While the visits build excitement and provide staff and communities with opportunities to interact with donors in person, they require plenty of staff preparation and time, which can impact program timelines, because most program activities are put on hold during the visits. While the team in Sierra Leone desires to continue donor trips, they believe that organizational leadership could do more work to transform the trips into more equitable learning experiences for travelers, staff, and communities. Travelers should not stay in the communities where OneVillage Partners works, but rather visit these communities in very small groups with a light footprint, while staying somewhere further away.

We are still exploring whether we can ethically and equitably conduct donor trips, providing learning and immersion experiences that are more values-aligned. This year, we are changing the itinerary to staying in Kenema (a larger regional hub) instead of in communities where OneVillage Partners works, and including more robust activities and learning around the historical slave trade from Sierra Leone to the US. We have also defined a clear trip objective, outlining what travelers can expect: an educational experience for those who want to deepen their learning about community-led development, gender inequity, the cultural context of Sierra Leone, and what decolonization means to our partners and in the West African context.

### **Compensation Structure**

Compensation equity is also an ongoing challenge for us. While we updated our pay structure in Sierra Leone to account for immediate challenges and competitiveness within the country, we are still grappling with how to define pay and benefit equity between the US and Sierra Leone. We have been in conversations about benchmarking salaries in various locations based on the cost of living, transportation, medical care, etc. and to ensure that all staff have enough money to meet their basic needs. But how do we operationalize this? We will continue to work through these complicated questions.

### **CONCLUSION**

The history of the international development industry has largely rested on the idea that the Global North holds the answer to the challenges persistent in the Global South. Therefore, disassembling the established hierarchy will require international actors from the Global North to approach their work with greater humility. In order to effectively localize leadership and ensure those who experience hardship are the ones defining solutions, it is the responsibility of the North to be open to, inwardly reflect on, and intentionally integrate feedback from people in the South.

While there is no silver bullet to decolonize the international development industry, there are operational steps organizations can take to shift power. OneVillage Partners is working to define what decolonization looks like for our organization today and how it might look in the future. We are evolving from a more traditional international NGO model to one that operates in true partnership. We hope that sharing our journey, our challenges and lessons learned, will inspire others to take steps, share what they are learning, and continue to challenge one another. These steps must be intentional, structural, and values-aligned.

At OneVillage Partners, we know this is a process, and we don't have all our answers today. However, we remain committed to continue taking action and learning so we can be truer to our values and ultimately serve as more effective partners in Sierra Leone.

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