

Shifting power case study:

Comic Relief UK

In recent years, Comic Relief UK has taken its longstanding commitment to funding local organizations a step further by exploring what it means to intentionally shift power in a ten-year initiative implemented with civil society organizations in Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia. Here we provide a high-level summary, followed by a detailed case study, of Comic Relief UK's experiences, learnings, and reflections.

Summary

Comic Relief UK envisions a just world, free from poverty. Established as a public-facing philanthropic organization, it mobilizes funds from the British public to address key issues of justice and human wellbeing, both within the UK and internationally. Comic Relief UK supports initiatives across more than 25 countries - prioritizing locally-led and community-driven development, racial and gender justice, climate resilience, and fundamental needs such as food security, housing, and health.

Motivated by a **longstanding commitment to funding local organizations**, Comic Relief UK has sought to move beyond transactional grantmaking toward relationships grounded in trust, flexibility, and shared learning. Its approach has also been shaped by **engagement in global movements and dialogue** with Global South civil society partners. Support from its Board of Trustees, leadership, and staff - especially advocates for power-shifting within these groups - has been instrumental. In recent years, Comic Relief UK has launched the **Shifting Power Programme**, a ten-year initiative co-funded with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), focused on strengthening local civil society organizations in Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia, reshaping narratives about aid, and influencing other funders to adopt locally-led practices.

Comic Relief UK's **achievements** reflect tangible progress toward more equitable and locally driven philanthropy. The Shifting Power Programme has become a flagship example of trust-based, long-term funding, with all grants provided as flexible core support and managed in partnership with national anchor organizations. These anchors have taken leadership roles in defining country-specific priorities, while fostering co-creation and shared power with sub-grantees. The programme's success has inspired other Comic Relief UK portfolios to adopt similar approaches, including organizational strengthening components and flexible funding as

a standard practice. Leadership participation in sectoral learning spaces - such as the Shift the Power summit - has reinforced institutional commitment and helped spread these ideas across the organization. Nonetheless, **challenges** persist: fundraising models reliant on the British public require careful navigation to avoid white savior narratives, and operational concerns around risk management and compliance continue to pose obstacles to fully devolving control.

Comic Relief UK's experience highlights several **key learnings** for funders seeking to operationalize the shift of power to local actors. First, alignment between institutional ethos and the principles of locally-led development creates fertile ground for meaningful change. Second, leadership commitment - both executive and governance-level - is essential for sustaining reform. Third, designating dedicated spaces, such as a pilot programme, allows experimentation, reflection, and scaling of successful practices across the organization. Finally, internal transformation requires time and investment: funders must equip staff across all departments - including finance, legal, and operations - to unlearn control-oriented mindsets and adopt practices rooted in trust, mutual accountability, and humility. Comic Relief UK's journey underscores that shifting power is not a linear process but a continual practice of reflection, learning, and adaptation.

Detailed case study

About Comic Relief UK

Comic Relief UK is a major charity based in the United Kingdom. Its vision is a just world - free from poverty.

Quick facts

- **Geographic location and scope:** Headquarters: London, UK (registered charity across England, Wales, and Scotland). International Reach: Funds projects across the UK. Actively supports initiatives in 25+ countries beyond the UK, with some programmes taking a global scope.
- **Grantmaking budget in FY2024:** approx £30 million
- **Key programs:** Locally-led and community led development, racial justice, gender justice, climate justice, basic needs (food and essential goods, homelessness, climate resilience), safety (violence against women and girls and forced migration) and health (maternal, newborn and child health and early childhood development).

Comic Relief's motivation for shifting power

For many years now, Comic Relief has been following conversations and learnings in the sector around more progressive approaches to grantmaking, including shifting power. Comic Relief's motivation for shifting power is rooted in:

- A long-standing organizational ethos of supporting local organisations, both domestically and internationally.
- A desire to fund long-term, sustainable change rather than short-term projects.

In addition to its own motivations, Comic Relief has learned from and been influenced by -

- Participation in global and regional conversations such as the Shift the Power movement, the Reimagining INGOs movement, and a group of UK-based funders focused on locally-led development.
- Support from different levels of their organization - from their Board, leadership, and staff - including at least one strong advocate for shifting power in their Board of Trustees.
- The involvement of Global South civil society organizations in helping Comic Relief think through, design, and plan some of their work such as in their Shifting Power programme.
- The experience and learning from their Shifting Power programme which has in turn influenced other parts of Comic Relief.
- Inspiration and learning from local civil society organizations they work with - rooted in community ownership and in enabling active citizenship in their own countries.

Comic Relief's work to shift power

Comic Relief has been integrating power-shifting practices across their grantmaking and other aspects of their organization. These include practices such as -

- Flexible funding for local, small and medium-sized civil society organizations.
- Working with Funder Reference Groups - groups of people with lived and learned experience on the topic, country, or context of interest who can help guide Comic Relief's decision-making on that project or funding call.
- Collective learning processes with grantees, focused on thematic learning agendas set by grantees, as well as convenings where programme partners come together to share learnings and discuss common challenges.
- Engagement, learning, and sharing with the sector (e.g., UK funders group, RINGO movement).
- Ongoing work on what it means to shift power and support locally-led development within their own organization - including with their finance teams, legal teams, and operations teams, in addition to ongoing work with their program staff, leadership, and governance bodies.
- Working on and with the narratives and mindsets of the British public who are key donors for Comic Relief.

Shifting Power programme

More recently and in a more focused way, Comic Relief and FCDO are co-funding and co-implementing a 10-year Shifting Power programme focused on:

- (1) Providing local civil society organizations with organizational strengthening and core flexible funding, over a longer-term period - through working with four anchor partners in Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia.
- (2) Shifting mindsets and narratives among the British public around aid, to communicate a more progressive narrative around aid, and the importance of locally-led decision-making and action. There will also be some work on narratives and mindsets in the target countries as well.
- (3) Driving change in the wider sector of funders - so that other funders also shift their practices towards locally-led development.

Areas of progress

Overall, support for shifting power has been strong across most areas of Comic Relief, as supporting locally-led development aligns well with the organization's longstanding ethos of directly funding local organizations. The grantmaking team has been increasingly mindful of power dynamics and intentional around processes.

Comic Relief's Board and leadership have been generally supportive of improving grantmaking practices, which includes shifting power. Their CEO in particular participated in a recent Shift The Power summit, which helped him understand the issues, the challenges, and the need for funders to work differently with grantees. The Board of Trustees also has a strong advocate for shifting power to local organizations, which has helped ensure conversations are happening at even the most senior governance levels of the organization.

The Shifting Power programme itself has been an important space for experimentation and learning on how to fund in trust-based, longer-term, and supportive ways. All of the grants under the Shifting Power programme are flexible and longer-term, and anchor organizations in each country play essential roles in the overall programme as well as country-specific strategies and decisions. As ripple effects, Comic Relief staff are increasingly seeing their anchor partners and their subgrantee civil society partners sharing power and co-creating with their constituencies.

The Shifting Power programme has helped spread core ideas of shifting power to other grantmaking portfolios at Comic Relief. New initiatives are being conceptualized that use a similar model as the Shifting Power programme. Providing flexible funding is the standard across the whole grantmaking portfolio - such that they are funding organizations and not just projects. The Shifting Power programme's learnings have also led other portfolios to add organizational strengthening as a top-up component for their grantees as well.

Challenges along the way

Comic Relief, with the support and commitment of their leadership and staff, have made a number of positive changes in their organizational practices to shift power. However, certain aspects of operationalizing change have been challenging.

Two areas that are works in progress are fundraising and risk management. With regards to fundraising, Comic Relief relies extensively on donations from the British public, and has been grappling with how to talk about its work and impact in ways that are both ethical and compelling to the average British donor. Over the years, fundraising colleagues have been working on moving away from the typical charity model that includes white savior tropes to storytelling and fundraising strategies that recognize the agency, dignity, and assets of people and communities.

In terms of risk management, both staff and board members holding responsibility for due diligence and compliance understandably worry that relinquishing control or reducing reporting burdens might create more space for mistakes or misuses of funds. The Comic Relief team continues to work on these questions, seeking to find ways that can reduce reporting burdens and loosen restrictions on local organizations, while still managing risk effectively.

Addressing these challenges and their underlying root causes requires time and space - both to unlearn or think differently and to actually change systems and practices. This can be particularly difficult in the context of funding and human resource constraints in the sector.

Lessons learned

A number of learnings have emerged in Comic Relief's journey to shift power -

1. An organization is more likely to embrace principles and practices of shifting power if they have a pre-existing institutional ethos that is aligned.

For example, Comic Relief has had a long-standing commitment to fund directly to local organizations - so shifting power has been less about changing funding flows but more about how to fund local organizations in more effective and enabling ways.

2. Leadership support is essential.

Support and advocacy from Comic Relief's senior leadership as well as from their Board of Trustees has been foundational and has helped the organization take bold steps towards operationalizing their commitments.

3. Having a separate programme creates space to experiment and learn - and the learnings from this separate programme can then inform changes across the organization.

Comic Relief's Shifting Power programme provided space and opportunity to put into practice some of the principles that the team was learning about - such as flexible long-term funding, sharing power and decision-making with local organizations, and investment in the organizational capacity and resilience of grantee-partners. Learnings from the Shifting Power programme are now influencing change in other parts of Comic Relief.

4. It's important to invest in funders' own organizational capacity in the form of space, time, and curation for staff learning, unlearning, and skills development.

Deep internal work is involved in developing power-awareness, being able to practice different ways of being and interacting, and in improving skills and practices for accountability. Moreover, beyond grantmaking and program teams, time and support needs to be provided to other teams involved in operations - such as finance, legal compliance, and risk management - so that they also shift thinking and practices to enable power sharing and trust-based approaches.

5. Organizational learning and practice needs to be accompanied by a recognition that change is not linear but rather complex.

Moreover, the learning and adaptation process needs to be embedded in a culture of humility, feedback, mutual learning, and mutual accountability - both within the organization and with grantee- and other partners.

A note about this case study

The Giving for Change Alliance commissioned research on strategies to influence donors to shift power, and changes observed in donors. As part of this research, this donor organization was studied in detail as a case study. For the full research reports, please visit: www.wildeganzen.org/giving-for-change.

Learn more about Comic Relief here - <https://www.comicrelief.com/>