

## Shifting power case study:

# Friendship Foundation's experience shifting leadership and decision-making to Sri Lanka

September 2025

This case study describes the Friendship Foundation's journey to shift power. Initially established as a private development initiative in the Netherlands, and then registering as a non-profit organization in Sri Lanka, over the years the organization has shifted overall decision-making, programme leadership, and organizational management from Dutch volunteers in the Netherlands to Sri Lankan leadership and staff in Sri Lanka. The case study provides an overview of the organization, and then dives into their motivations to shift power, their journey to shift power, areas of success and progress, challenges, and lessons learned along the way.

## About the Friendship Foundation

In 2005, the Friendship Foundation was established in the Netherlands as a private development initiative (PDI). PDIs in the Netherlands are small, volunteer-led efforts that provide direct support to communities in the Global South. They often emerge from personal experiences or connections formed during visits abroad, and operate independently of government funding.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, the organization registered in Sri Lanka as the Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation (DLFF), a non-profit organization focusing on upliftment of poor and marginalized families with a disabled family member through various care, education and income generating activities.

### Quick facts

- Vision: A society where everyone is equal and where everyone's talent counts; a safe and involved community in which people with disabilities feel safe to be themselves and develop their talents.
- Geographic scope: Ampara District, Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.
- Organizational size: The Netherlands organization involves a small, volunteer-based team (Board, founder, and a few staff - all unpaid). In Sri Lanka, the organization has 16 staff members, including a Country Director, District Manager, Project Managers, and Educators.
- Target group: Persons with disabilities, aged 5 to 45 years old, living in a family.
- Areas of work: care and education, work and income, and inclusion and participation

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<sup>1</sup> Kinsbergen, S., & Schulpen, L. (2013). From tourist to development worker. Private development initiatives in the Netherlands. *Mondes en Développement*, 41(161), 49-62. Available online at <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mondes-en-developpement-2013-1-page-49?lang=en>

## Friendship Foundation's motivation for shifting power

The Friendship Foundation was initially established by Kirsten Giethoorn to support work in Sri Lanka. A primary schoolteacher by profession, Kirsten was inspired by the Montessori approach which emphasizes children's self-directed learning and play as part of their developmental growth. This influenced Kirsten's conviction that people from affected countries and communities must be involved in shaping the decisions and programs that affect their lives, and led to the local registration of the Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation in Sri Lanka.

In 2020, Leon Lawrence, a Sri Lankan practitioner-leader in Sri Lanka, was brought on as an Inclusion Consultant. Leon, having worked internationally in the INGO sector, was skilled at bridging Western expectations and local realities. He also had direct experience with Westerners' biased assumptions about the skills, knowledge, and value of people from the Global South. This experience has grounded his commitment to shifting power and ensuring accountability to his people in Sri Lanka.

As Kirsten and Leon worked together, they found themselves aligned on their commitment to shift power and the locus of decision-making at the DLFF. This was fundamentally rooted in an increasing recognition and understanding that local expertise and contextual understanding are critical for informed and effective decision-making. DLLF leadership realized that their projects had limited effectiveness and impact when they were designed in the Netherlands - by people having limited understanding of local realities such as culture, socio-economic conditions, politics, religious dynamics, and local leadership. There was increasing recognition that Sri Lankan staff and leaders more deeply understand community needs, structural realities (e.g., government systems, education models), local dynamics, and approaches that work better in their community and context. In some cases, the Netherlands team learned that if local staff were leading some of the initiatives, they would have even started very differently from what was done by the leadership in the Netherlands.

*"Projects were decided in the Netherlands, and Sri Lankans just said 'yes' while knowing it wouldn't work. We needed to design solutions with the community, not for them."*  
- Leon Lawrence, Country Director, DLLF

Another motivating factor was DLFF's realization that dependency on Dutch funding and leadership would ultimately compromise the organization's longer-term sustainability, their ability to direct their own decisions and activities, and thus, their longer-term impact. The intent is for DLFF to be an independent, local organization - determining the strategies and activities it undertakes as well as from where and how it mobilizes funding.

DLFF's leadership also recognizes important external influences that have inspired and supported their journey of learning and change. These include -

- Resources, webinars and blog posts such as -
  - The [Power Awareness Tool](#) by Partos
  - [Strengthening small organizations with big ambitions](#) - by INTRAC
  - Webinars and blog posts from RINGO

- Trainings from Wilde Ganzen such as a training on participatory approaches from Wilde Ganzen (attended by the Dutch team) and training on local fundraising and mobilizing support as part of the Change the Game Academy (attended by the Sri Lankan team)
- Learning from the Karuna Foundation in Nepal which underwent a similar transition of power from the Netherlands, and coaching from [Tunafasi](#) around decentralizing management and increasing self-reliance (especially for Kirsten and the Dutch team)
- Leon's lived and professional experience of how implicit racism and colonial mindsets shape ideas and practices in global development, as a Sri Lankan having worked in the global development space while living in Canada
- Kirsten's background in the Montessori approach, which seeded her belief that people should be able to determine their own lives and futures.

## Friendship Foundation's journey to shift power

From DLFF's registration in Sri Lanka in 2007 through to 2019, Kirsten served as the Head of Mission, based in the Netherlands. The DLFF's board was in the Netherlands, and they had some volunteers and consultants from the Netherlands.

In 2020, Leon joined DLFF as an Inclusion Consultant. As Kirsten and Leon worked together, they realized that they needed more meaningful ways to consult with local leaders and experts, and include local practitioners in key programming and operational roles. This led to the establishment of an Advisory Board as well as strengthening and expanding of the organizational structure in Sri Lanka - including hiring key roles such as a Project Manager and Finance Officer in Sri Lanka.

In 2022, more active work around shifting power began. Leon became Interim Country Manager, and along with others the team in Sri Lanka, worked closely with Kirsten. Close, frequent, and detailed discussions and updates helped them feel aligned across borders. Gradually, the DLFF organizational structure was redesigned, and organizational policies and systems were developed and held by the team in Sri Lanka.

By 2024, the organization moved more towards a shared leadership model. Leon became Country Director, although Kirsten remained Head of Mission. Leon directly supervised a growing number of staff in Sri Lanka. In 2025, the organization reached an important milestone as they institutionalized a co-leadership structure in the organization.

- Kirsten's role as Joint Director - Monitoring Mission focuses on activities in the Netherlands such as fundraising donor relations, as well as providing high-level oversight. Kirsten also sits on and chairs the Board.
- Leon's role as Joint Director - Operations focuses on activities in Sri Lanka such as adaptive project design, government/community liaison, and field operations, as well as providing updates to Kirsten.

Moving forward, the plan in the coming 12-18 months is for Leon to become the sole country director, leading a fully local management team, and Kirsten not having any role to play in Sri

Lanka. Instead of leadership and oversight, the role of the Netherlands-based Friendship Foundation will be to provide support and partnership.

Key aspects of the Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation's journey to shift power include -

- Shifting from a Dutch-led INGO to a locally-registered Sri Lankan NGO;
- Shifting decision-making from Dutch leadership to Sri Lankan leadership;
- Strengthening the autonomy of the Sri Lankan leadership through decentralizing decision-making and establishing local management systems and teams (e.g., project teams, finance, monitoring and evaluation);
- Strengthening local ownership through increased community involvement in activities and close collaboration and advocacy with government officials; and
- Working towards the exit of the Dutch team from decision-making relating to activities in Sri Lanka.

## Areas of progress

DLFF has achieved notable milestones and successes such as -

- Sri Lankan leadership - All decisions and processes relating to programs, community engagement, government engagement, and operations are led and managed by the Sri Lankan team. This helps ensure the organization's activities are aligned with the actual needs and priorities of the communities.
- Community involvement - There has been increased community involvement in DLFF's activities. Some programs - for example, vocational programs - are even being co-designed with communities. This is strengthening community ownership and impact.
- Local legitimacy - The DLFF team in Sri Lanka often advises Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education on inclusive policies - demonstrating the credibility given to their technical and local expertise.
- Shifts in cultural dynamics - There has been important progress made in addressing cultural tensions and dynamics within the work in Sri Lanka (e.g., addressing the influence of some religious leaders in project areas) as well as between the Sri Lankan and Dutch teams (e.g., staff have shifted from calling Kirsten "madam" to treating her more as an equal partner).
- Fundraising and sustainability - Kirsten and the Dutch team focus on fundraising and other activities in the Netherlands. They support the Sri Lankan team by providing linkages to international networks, funding, and knowledge. Their intent is to serve as partners and supporters towards improving the longer-term sustainability of the organization in Sri Lanka.

As the DLFF reflects on factors that contributed to their success, they mention the importance of -

- *The founder's mindset* - Kirsten's commitment to self-directed development meant that she was willing to relinquish power and control over processes and outcomes. Without this, it is unlikely the journey to shift power would have started, much less made as much progress as it has today.
- *Peer learning* - DLFF had visits and opportunities to learn from the Karuna Foundation that worked through a similar transition of power from the Netherlands to Nepal.
- *Flexible funding* - DLFF received a flexible grant that they were able to invest in transition costs such as trainings and legal processes.

- *Constructive conflict* - Kirsten and Leon shared that they regularly disagreed and challenged each other (e.g., Leon pushing back on unfeasible ideas) - and this led to better solutions as well as better mutual understanding.

## Challenges along the way

The DLFF has also experienced a number of challenges and barriers in their journey to shift power. Some of these include -

- Organizational resistance to change - In the Netherlands, it was noted that there were some concerns or fears, especially among the Board, around losing control over finances and accountability. This was addressed through gradual trust-building. In Sri Lanka, some older employees struggled with new management - those who couldn't adjust were supported to transition to other roles outside the organization.
- Misunderstandings with local stakeholders - There were some instances of misunderstandings with the local community and government - for example, over decisions to relocate the office. These were clarified with better communication - and important focus and effort continues to be given to ensure strong communication and understanding with local stakeholders.
- Funding dependence - The organization's leadership noted that they were somewhat concerned about the reliance on Dutch donors and what that means for the longer-term resilience and sustainability for the Sri Lankan organization. They are exploring other sources of funding as well as government partnerships.
- Communication gaps - Kirsten's limited English fluency sometimes hinders nuanced discussions - highlighting how language (and culture) can be barriers to deeper understanding and alignment.

## Lessons learned

The DLFF team's journey has enabled a number of learnings to emerge, that may help others who are also seeking to shift power towards local organizations and communities.

The experience of the DLFF team offers valuable insights for others seeking to meaningfully shift power toward local organizations and communities. The following five thematic learnings have emerged from their journey:

1. Power shifts are not just about resource flows or structures. They require deep, relational shifts grounded in trust and shared values.
  - Shared values ensure that different members of the organization and its partners have a common foundation to guide them and to refer back to in times of conflict or uncertainty. Both Kirsten and Leon emphasized the importance of alignment in values and vision. This was reflected in DLFF's values-aligned hiring, as well as the constant communication and constructive conflict to ensure decisions and actions reflect values.
  - It is essential to hold a stance of humility and start with trust. Shifting power must be rooted in confidence in local capacity and leadership.
  - Relatedly, it is important to recognize that mistakes will happen and things will go wrong - and this is normal and part of learning. Learning and adapting over time enables organizations to improve their systems, relationships, and operations to be more values-aligned, effective, and impactful in the long-term.

2. Shifting power requires deliberate investment of time and resources in the legal, financial, relational, and cultural aspects of organizational change.

- Shifting power takes time. DLFF's transition process took more than three years, involving iterative trust-building and role evolution.
- Organizations will need resourcing for the different legal processes (e.g., local NGO registration), cultural work (e.g., donor education), and financial planning (e.g., models for local sustainability) involved in shifting control and decision-making.
- Unrestricted or flexible grants are especially helpful for organizations to invest in the systems and processes involved in shifting power. This involves seeking out funders who are focused more on partnership and institutional strengthening than on control and specific outputs.

3. Strong interpersonal relationships and open communication are essential to navigating complexity and co-leadership.

- At DLFF, the co-directorship model is working because of intentional relationship-building. Kirsten and Leon describe how honesty, openness, and mutual respect have enabled them to work through cultural and personal differences. Over time, they have become increasingly clear in their understanding of each other and quicker in aligning on decisions.
- Fundamentally, belief and trust in each other has been critical to shared leadership. Kirsten in particular has noted that relinquishing her control over decision making was necessary to enable Leon's leadership.
- The result has been more effective decision-making and implementation, driven by co-creation rather than top-down control.

4. Context matters - one size does not fit all.

- DLFF drew inspiration and learning from other peer organizations, external models, and reports and resources. However, they trusted their intuition and experience, adapted these insights to fit the Sri Lankan context and DLFF's unique organizational DNA.
- It's also important to be flexible and be open to course correction - slowing down when necessary, changing direction when needed, and continuously reflecting on what is values-aligned and sustainable in one's own context. Ultimately this is what results in a solid, self-confident, local organization.

5. Shifting power requires challenging mindsets and hierarchies - both within Global North and Global South organizational contexts.

- DLFF noted implicit assumptions and ideas that shape power dynamics between Global North and Global South organizations and colleagues. For example, sometimes staff from the Global South might be perceived as 'less capable'. It's important to name and challenge such implicit (or explicit) mindsets and attitudes that are harmful to local agency and self-determination, and to the process of shifting power.
- There are power dynamics and hierarchical norms embedded in the organizational structures and cultures of both Global North and Global South organizations. It's critical to rethink leadership and management structures, decision-making and authority, and systems of accountability within each organization as part of the broader work of shifting power.
- Ultimately, local leadership must lead solutions. If power is genuinely shifted, then local leaders and organizations should not need permission or approval from Global North or

international actors. Rather, they should have the space and capacity to work with their communities - in their own ways - to define priorities, identify solutions, take action, and learn and adapt.

## 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](http://www.wildeganzen.org/giving-for-change).

**Learn more about the Friendship Foundation here:**  
Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation (DLFF) - <https://dlff.org.lk/>  
Friendship Foundation - [www.friendshipfoundation.nl](http://www.friendshipfoundation.nl)