



PHILANTHROPY
REFORM ALLIANCE
RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT. REFRAMING PRACTICE

PHILANTHROPY REFORM ALLIANCE (PRA)

Collaborative Unlearning Framework

From Reflection to Practice Change in Philanthropy and Development

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philanthropyreformalliance.org

Foreword

The challenges facing philanthropy and development today are not only technical, financial, or institutional. They are deeply relational — rooted in the assumptions, narratives, behaviors, and power dynamics that shape how we understand change, build partnerships, allocate resources, and define success.

Across the sector, there is growing recognition that many of the systems we seek to transform continue to reproduce the inequities they were intended to address. Despite increasing commitments to shift power, advance localization, and promote equity, the gap between rhetoric and practice remains significant. Too often, efforts to reform systems focus on changing structures without examining the beliefs and practices that sustain them.

The Collaborative Unlearning Lab was created in response to this challenge.

Systems do not change by themselves. They are made up of people, relationships, decisions, and behaviors. If we seek to transform systems, we must also be willing to transform ourselves.

The Lab is not a training program in the conventional sense. It is a space for collective inquiry, critical reflection, and courageous conversation. It invites practitioners, funders, researchers, community leaders, and changemakers to surface inherited assumptions, question dominant narratives, and explore new ways of thinking, relating, and acting.

Grounded in trust, solidarity, humility, reciprocity, and justice, the Collaborative Unlearning Lab recognizes that awareness alone is insufficient. Transformation requires unlearning: the intentional release of ideas, habits, and practices that no longer serve a more equitable and just future.

We offer this framework not as a definitive answer, but as an invitation — to unlearn courageously, and to imagine together what philanthropy and development might become when power is shared, relationships are rooted in trust, and communities are recognized as architects of their own futures.

In Solidarity,

Imelda E. Akurut

Steward, Philanthropy Reform Alliance

1. Why Unlearning?

For decades, philanthropy and development have delivered important gains. Yet many of the systems, assumptions, and practices that underpin this work continue to reproduce the inequities they seek to address.

Across the sector, it is increasingly clear that technical solutions alone are not enough. New strategies, frameworks, and funding models cannot drive transformation if they are built on unchanged ways of thinking and working.

The Case for Unlearning

Philanthropy and development have delivered important gains over the decades. Yet many of the systems, assumptions, and practices that underpin this work continue to reproduce the inequities they seek to address. Technical solutions alone are not enough — new strategies, frameworks, and funding models cannot drive transformation if they are built on unchanged ways of thinking and working.

Collaborative Unlearning is the intentional process of examining and letting go of assumptions, beliefs, behaviours, and practices that no longer serve a more equitable and just future. It asks practitioners to question what has been normalised, reflect on how power operates in their work, and recognise that even well-intentioned actors can sustain inequitable systems.

At its core, it is an act of humility — the recognition that no individual, organisation, or sector has all the answers, and a genuine willingness to listen, reflect, and be changed by what is learned.

It is an essential practice for humanitarian workers, development practitioners, funders, and partners committed to:

- Shifting power toward communities and locally led actors
- Advancing justice, equity, and dignity in development relationships
- Strengthening locally led and community-accountable change
- Closing the persistent gap between stated values and lived practice

Real transformation in philanthropy begins with the humility to acknowledge that even our best intentions can fall short. It requires us to ask difficult questions about who we are, how we work, whose voices shape our decisions, and what we may need to unlearn

2. Theory of Change

When people collectively examine and unlearn the assumptions that shape how philanthropy and development operate, they begin to change how they think, relate, decide, and act. These shifts in practice create more equitable partnerships, strengthen local leadership, and contribute to more just and effective systems.

Sustainable systems change begins with shifts in awareness but is realized through shifts in practice.

Change Across Four Levels

Collaborative unlearning seeks to move beyond individual reflection towards meaningful changes in how we relate, organize, and shape wider systems. Change therefore needs to happen across interconnected levels — from **individual mindsets and practice, to relationships, institutions, and the broader systems** that shape power, resources, and narratives.

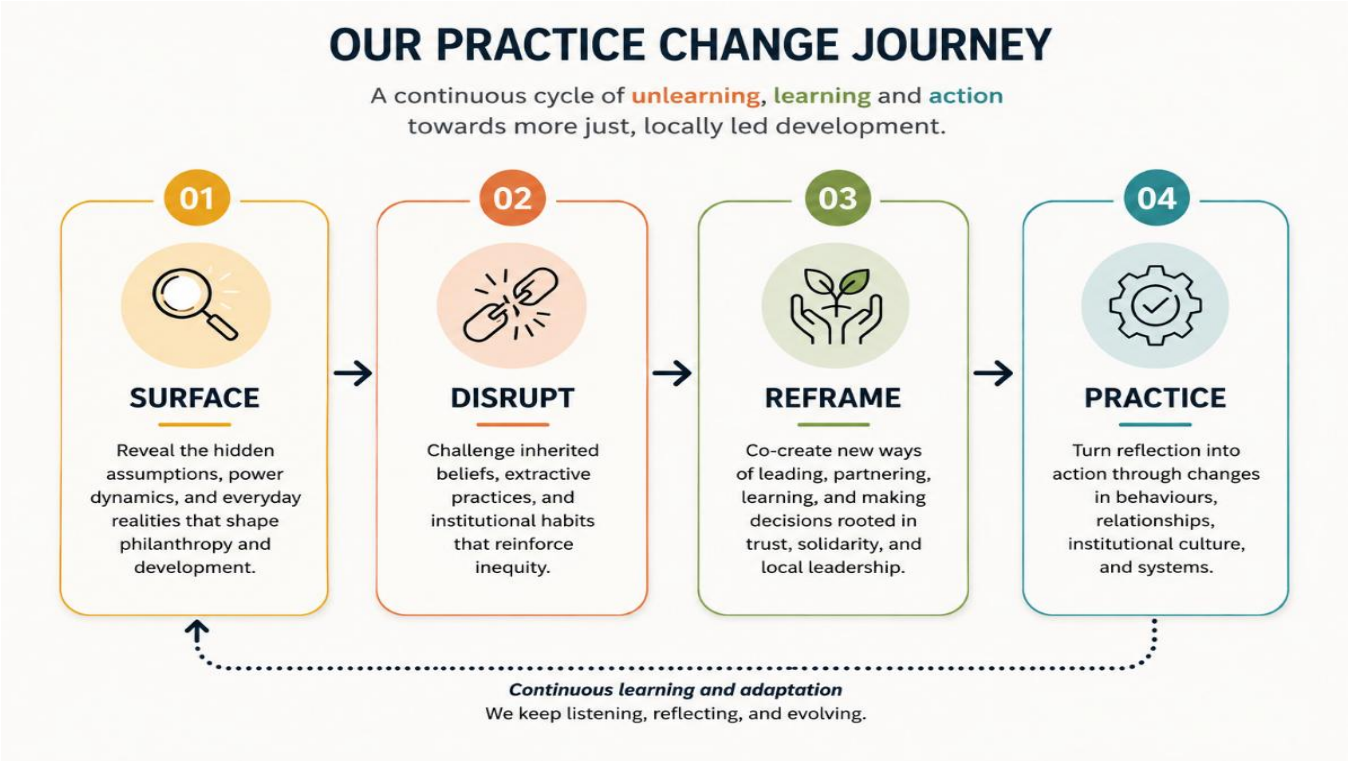
Level	What Changes
Individual	Mindsets, beliefs, identity, and leadership practice
Relational	Partnerships, trust, shared decision-making, and mutual accountability
Institutional	Policies, funding mechanisms, governance, and organizational culture
Systems	Norms, power structures, resource flows, and dominant narratives

3. The Principles Underpinning the Framework

These six principles form the ethical and relational foundation of all PRA unlearning processes. They guide how the Lab is facilitated, how partnerships are structured, and how impact is understood and evaluated.

1. **Humility** — Recognising that no individual, organisation, or sector has all the answers, and remaining open to listening, learning, and being changed.
2. **Reciprocity** — Building relationships where learning, knowledge, resources, and value flow in more than one direction.
3. **Local Agency** — Supporting local actors to define priorities, make decisions, lead change, and shape the outcomes that affect them.
4. **Solidarity** — Moving beyond transactional relationships towards mutual commitment, shared responsibility, and collective action.
5. **Trust** — Creating the conditions for openness, flexibility, shared accountability, and relationships that do not rely primarily on control.
6. **Reflexivity** — Continuously examining our assumptions, positionality, power, and practice, and adapting as we learn.

4. The PRA Collaborative Unlearning Cycle



The PRA Unlearning Cycle is a four-stage process that moves participants from awareness to practice change. Each stage builds on the last, creating a coherent journey from reflection to transformation.

Stage 1 Surface

Making visible the assumptions, experiences, narratives, and power dynamics that shape philanthropy and development practice.

KEY QUESTIONS ◆ What is happening? ◆ Who decides? ◆ Whose knowledge counts? ◆ Whose voices are absent? ◆ What has become normalized? METHODS ◆ Storytelling and narrative inquiry ◆ Critical reflection exercises ◆ Power mapping ◆ Experience sharing circles	PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES ◆ Invisible assumptions made visible ◆ Power dynamics identified and named ◆ Institutional norms examined critically ◆ Lived experiences centered ◆ Contradictions between values and practice surfaced
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- ◆ Case analysis and peer dialogue

Stage 2 Disrupt

Question, challenge, and disrupt extractive, hierarchical, and performative ways of working, and begin to let go of inherited practices that no longer serve equitable and just systems

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ Why do we do things this way?
- ◆ Who benefits from current approaches?
- ◆ Who is excluded or harmed?
- ◆ What colonial or extractive assumptions are embedded here?

METHODS

- ◆ Critical dialogue and debate
- ◆ Assumption testing
- ◆ Perspective shifting exercises
- ◆ Counter-narratives and alternative histories
- ◆ Reflective inquiry

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

- ◆ Deficit narratives released
- ◆ Saviorism and expert dominance questioned
- ◆ Compliance-centered relationships examined
- ◆ Colonial assumptions named and challenged
- ◆ Performative participation recognized and disrupted

Stage 3 Reframe

Imagining and developing alternative ways of relating, leading, funding, and partnering.

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What becomes possible when we release old assumptions?
- ◆ What would genuine trust look like in practice?
- ◆ How might power be shared?
- ◆ What does solidarity require of us?

METHODS

- ◆ Scenario building and visioning
- ◆ Collective design processes
- ◆ Futures thinking
- ◆ Peer exchange and co-creation
- ◆ Appreciative inquiry

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

- ◆ Alternative practices grounded in trust
- ◆ Equity-centered partnership models
- ◆ Shared accountability frameworks
- ◆ Strengthened local leadership
- ◆ Mutual learning cultures

Stage 4 Enable Practice Change

Translating collective reflection into concrete, accountable action.

KEY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What will specifically change, and by when?

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

◆ Who will act, and who will support them? ◆ What institutional systems must shift? ◆ How will accountability be maintained with integrity? METHODS ◆ Action planning ◆ Peer accountability structures ◆ Practice experiments with learning reviews ◆ Institutional commitment processes ◆ Longitudinal reflection and follow-up	◆ Observable changes in behavior and leadership ◆ Revised policies and funding practices ◆ More equitable partnership structures ◆ Evolved organizational culture ◆ Institutional commitments that can be tracked
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5. Where Unlearning Meets Practice

The Collaborative Unlearning Framework is designed to be applied across the wider development and philanthropy ecosystem. PRA works with different actors to tailor the unlearning experience to the specific realities, relationships, and reform priorities of each context.

Philanthropy	International Development	Civil Society	Public Systems
◆ Grantmaking reform ◆ Trust-based funding ◆ Participatory governance ◆ Power sharing with grantees	◆ Localization agendas ◆ Partnership reform ◆ Community accountability ◆ Knowledge justice	◆ Leadership development ◆ Coalition building ◆ Governance strengthening ◆ Movement solidarity	◆ Policy development ◆ Community engagement ◆ Institutional reform ◆ Public accountability

6. What Success Looks Like

Beyond participation in unlearning processes, success is measured by evidence of practice change. The Collaborative Unlearning Lab is designed to generate measurable shifts at individual, organizational, and systems levels.

Observable Outcomes by Level

INDIVIDUAL	ORGANISATIONAL	SYSTEMS
◆ Changed leadership behaviors ◆ Greater reflexivity and openness	◆ More flexible and trust-based funding ◆ Reduced compliance burdens on partners	◆ More equitable resource flows ◆ Stronger local organizational ecosystems

◆ New decision-making practices ◆ Improved relational skills	◆ Shared governance structures ◆ Increased agency for CBOs ◆ Increased local decision-making authority	◆ Shifts in dominant sector narratives ◆ Meaningful redistribution of power
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Practice Change Measurement Framework

PRA tracks progress through five evidence-based dimensions, each linked to the core learning question:

How is collaborative unlearning influencing the way practitioners think, relate, decide, and act?

Dimension	What We Look For	Signals of Change
Awareness	Practitioners recognize and question previously unexamined assumptions	Increased reflection on power, privilege, and dominant narratives
Mindset Shift	Practitioners demonstrate greater openness to alternative perspectives	Increased appreciation of local knowledge and lived experience
Practice Change	Practitioners apply insights from unlearning in their work	Changes in decision-making, partnership, and funding approaches
Relationship Change	Practitioners engage with others in more equitable, trust-based ways	Greater collaboration, shared decision-making, and mutual accountability
Influence & Diffusion	Practitioners champion new approaches in their organizations and networks	New policies, practices, or initiatives inspired by the Lab

Collaborative Unlearning is not a destination, but an ongoing practice. This framework will evolve as we learn, reflect, and practice together.

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