



The Collaborative Unlearning Labs

Pilot Learning and Redesign report

From conversations to practice change

Learning Report — July 2026

Partnerships in Practice: Making Visible the Invisible Systems of Development

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Executive Summary

The Philanthropy Reform Alliance (PRA) established the **Collaborative Unlearning Labs** to create reflective, practice-oriented learning spaces where actors across philanthropy, humanitarian action, and development can critically examine the assumptions, power relations, colonial legacies, institutional incentives, and inherited behaviours that continue to shape development practice.

The pilot phase centered on the theme **Partnerships in Practice: Making Visible the Invisible Systems of Development**, bringing together practitioners from across the global development ecosystem to explore questions of power, partnership, localisation, trust, and institutional change.

562	272	~48%	57	92	4
Registration	Total session attendance	Average attendance-to-registration rate	countries	Organisations	Lab sessions

The pilot demonstrated a clear and growing demand for collaborative unlearning. Strong registration levels, rich participant reflections, and engagement from practitioners across multiple countries and organisations confirmed that there is significant appetite for spaces that move beyond technical discussions of localisation and partnership to interrogate the deeper cultural, relational, and structural dynamics that sustain unequal development systems.

Importantly, the pilot also generated critical learning for PRA. While interest in the topic was consistently high, sustained participation was considerably lower, with only **48% of registered participants** attending sessions. Those who participated consistently described the conversations as valuable, thought-provoking, and professionally relevant. However, participants also expressed a desire for more time to build trust, deepen reflection, explore practical dilemmas, and translate learning into changes in everyday practice.

Collaborative unlearning is not a one-off event but a developmental process.

The pilot demonstrated that meaningful practice change is most likely when participants engage in a shared, trust-based unlearning journey, learn alongside peers, test new approaches in their own contexts, and reflect on their progress over time. Building on these insights, PRA is transitioning from open discussion sessions to a structured, cohort-based **Collaborative Unlearning Journey** guided by its four-stage learning methodology:

SURFACE → DISRUPT → REFRAME → PRACTISE

The redesigned model introduces an eight-session modular programme supported by participant onboarding, organisational self-assessment, facilitated peer learning, guided practice experiments, reflective documentation, and post-programme accountability. The redesign creates the conditions necessary for participants to translate insight into sustained behavioural and institutional change.

Ultimately, this report captures more than the findings of a pilot. It documents the evolution of an emerging methodology for collaborative unlearning — one that seeks to strengthen locally led, trust-based, and solidarity-driven development by helping practitioners rethink not only what they do, but how they relate, decide, partner, and lead.

1. Introduction: Why Collaborative Unlearning, Why Now?

Philanthropy and development are living through a period of stated reform. Commitments to localisation, trust-based philanthropy, equity, and decolonisation now appear across strategies, funding guidelines, and public statements. Yet the everyday practice of partnership — who sets the agenda, who controls resources, whose knowledge is treated as evidence, and who carries the risk — has proven far more resistant to change than the language describing it.

PRA was founded on the premise that this gap cannot be closed through new frameworks or policy commitments alone. It closes when the people who hold institutional power — funders, intermediaries, and international organisations — are willing to examine their own assumptions, behaviours, and habits, and when those most affected by unequal systems have protected space to name what they experience and to lead the redesign of practice.

The **Collaborative Unlearning Labs** were conceived as PRA's methodology for doing precisely this: a facilitated, reflective process through which practitioners surface the invisible rules that govern development relationships, disrupt the scripts that normalise unequal practice, reframe partnership around solidarity and reciprocity, and practise alternative ways of working in service of justice, dignity and shared flourishing

This report presents the findings of the pilot phase and sets out a redesigned model for the next phase of the Labs. It documents what the pilot revealed, honestly, including where the initial design fell short, and translates those lessons into a more deliberate architecture for sustained practice change.

2. Purpose and Objectives of the Pilot

Pilot Learning Questions

The pilot was designed to explore whether collaborative unlearning could serve as a **meaningful** and **decolonial approach** to transforming practice across philanthropy, humanitarian action, and development. Specifically, it sought to answer four interconnected learning questions:

1. To what extent does collaborative unlearning create meaningful spaces for practitioners to critically examine the assumptions, power dynamics, colonial legacies, and institutional behaviours that shape development practice?
2. What conditions enable, or constrain participants from moving beyond awareness to deeper reflection, sustained engagement, and meaningful dialogue on power, partnership, and locally led development?
3. How does participation in the Collaborative Unlearning Labs influence participants' perspectives on trust, solidarity, local agency, partnership, and their own roles within the development ecosystem?
4. What programme design, facilitation, and learning approaches are required for collaborative unlearning to translate into sustained behavioural, organisational, and systems change?

3. Pilot Overview and Methodology

The pilot was structured around the theme:

Partnerships in Practice: Making Visible the Invisible Systems of Development

It explored partnership not only as an institutional arrangement, but as a relationship shaped by power, knowledge, history, incentives, and everyday practice. Grounded in PRA's collaborative unlearning philosophy and decolonial approach, the pilot created space for participants to examine how inherited assumptions, colonial legacies, and dominant ways of defining expertise, accountability, risk, and impact continue to influence philanthropy, humanitarian action, and development practice.

The pilot invited participants to critically reflect on what needs to be unlearned, disrupted, and reimaged in order to build relationships grounded in trust, dignity, solidarity, and local agency. The methodology centered on facilitated dialogue, collective reflection, lived experiences, and peer exchange.

The pilot explored four unlearning angles:

Session 1: Framing Conversation – Unlearning Colonial Ways of Doing Good

Facilitated by Professor James Thomas, this session built on the ideas explored in his book *Unlearning Colonial Ways of Doing Good*. It introduced the foundations of collaborative unlearning and examined how colonial histories, assumptions about expertise, and ideas of helping continue to shape contemporary development practice. Participants reflected on the difference between good intentions and transformative action, and the need to question the systems and beliefs that influence how development work is designed and delivered.

Session 2: The Invisible Architecture of Decision-Making

Facilitated in partnership with Aid for Aid workers, this session explored the hidden structures that shape power, influence, and decision-making within partnerships. Participants examined how funding systems, institutional norms, professional hierarchies, and knowledge systems determine whose voices are prioritized, whose expertise is recognized, and who has the authority to make decisions.

Session 3: The Politics of Partnership

This session examined the gap between the language of partnership and the realities of power within development relationships. Participants explored how commitments to localisation, participation, and inclusion can become performative when they do not translate into meaningful shifts in decision-making, resources, and authority. Discussions highlighted practices such as tokenistic participation, where local actors are included without real influence, and explored what it means to move from transactional partnerships towards relationships based on reciprocity, solidarity, and shared agency.

Session 4: The Courage to Trust – Applying Trust-Based Philanthropy Principles in Everyday Humanitarian and Development Practice

Facilitated by Katherine Zavala through a collaboration with the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, the final session explored trust as both a guiding principle and a practical approach to transforming relationships in philanthropy and development. Participants examined how trust-based practices challenge conventional assumptions about control, compliance, risk, and accountability, while creating the conditions for more equitable, reciprocal, and locally led partnerships.

4. Who Participated: Reach, Engagement and Diversity

A total of **562 practitioners** registered for the pilot, with **272 participants** attending at least one session—representing an average attendance rate of approximately **48%**. While these figures should not be interpreted as a precise conversion rate due to variations in registration processes and attendance tracking across the pilot, they reveal an important insight: interest in collaborative unlearning significantly exceeded sustained participation in the learning journey. This gap provides valuable lessons for the design of future cohorts and is explored further in **Section 6.2**.

Participants joined the pilot from **57 countries**, representing a diverse cross-section of the development ecosystem, including philanthropic organisations, intermediaries, international NGOs, and locally led organisations. This breadth of participation confirmed that the themes of collaborative unlearning resonate across institutional roles and geographies, rather than with any single constituency.

The pilot also highlighted an important learning for PRA's own evidence and learning practice. As participant data on organisational type and seniority were not consistently captured across all sessions, it is not yet possible to provide a robust breakdown of participation by institution or leadership level. This has informed the design of future cohorts, with **Section 9** outlining an enhanced monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) framework that will enable more systematic tracking of participant diversity, representation, and engagement.

5. What the Pilot Revealed: Key Learning Insights

Nine detailed observations from the pilot converge into seven core insights that now anchor the redesign.

5.1 Demand for deeper conversations on power and practice

The pilot confirmed that many practitioners recognise the limitations of conventional approaches to development reform. Participants were interested not only in new tools and frameworks but also in examining how inherited assumptions, behaviours, identities, and institutional incentives influence their work.

The level of registration and interest demonstrated that terms such as localisation, trust-based philanthropy, equity, decolonisation, partnership, and participation are generating important questions across the sector. Participants appeared to value a space where they could discuss issues that are frequently acknowledged but not always examined openly.

This indicates a clear opportunity for PRA to position the Collaborative Unlearning Labs as a structured platform for personal, relational, and institutional practice change.

5.2 Interest does not automatically translate into sustained engagement

One of the strongest operational lessons was the gap between the number of people registering and the number attending. Contributing factors as per feedback survey included:

- Participants registering out of general interest without committing to the full journey.
- Sessions being perceived as optional public webinars rather than a connected programme.
- Competing professional responsibilities and time-zone differences.
- Calendar invitations, reminders, and access links creating unnecessary friction.

- Unclear expectations regarding attendance and participation.
- Dissatisfaction with some sessions, too much content, limited time
- Participants do not understand how one session is connected to the next.

The pilot demonstrated that registration numbers alone are an inadequate measure of meaningful demand. Future monitoring must distinguish between people expressing interest, completing registration, confirming participation, attending the first session, participating consistently, completing the full journey, and applying learning in practice.

5.3 Unlearning requires time, trust and continuity

The subjects explored during the pilot were complex, personal, political, and institutional. One-hour sessions created space for important conversations but were often insufficient for establishing trust, introducing a complex topic, hearing multiple perspectives, facilitating small-group dialogue, reflecting on practice, and agreeing on actions between sessions.

Unlearning requires time because it may involve questioning familiar beliefs, professional identities, organisational norms, and established relationships. Participants need space to process discomfort, listen to experiences different from their own, and consider the implications for their practice.

Compounding this, the open format's changing participation from one session to the next limited continuity: participants repeatedly had to establish context and relationships with new people, and facilitators could not always build on previous conversations.

A cohort model where the same group meets consistently over time would enable participants to develop trust, establish common language, build on previous sessions, test new practices between sessions, and hold one another accountable. Open public conversations should continue as entry points into the work, but deeper learning should occur through defined cohorts meeting for longer, connected sessions of approximately 90–120 minutes.

5.4 Reflection must be connected to practice change

The pilot successfully surfaced problems related to power, trust, partnership, and decision-making. However, participants need more structured support to translate insight into action.

Without a clear practice component, unlearning risks becoming intellectually stimulating but institutionally limited. Participants may leave with increased awareness while returning to organisations whose systems, incentives, and procedures remain unchanged.

The next design must therefore include practical application through personal reflection commitments, organisational or partnership diagnostics, power-mapping exercises, practice experiments, peer accountability, institutional action plans, follow-up learning sessions, and documentation of changes, resistance, and unexpected outcomes. The objective is not to complete an unlearning course; it is to change how participants relate, decide, fund, lead, communicate, and exercise power.

5.5 Power differences shape participation and learning

Participants represented different types of organisations and occupied different positions within the development ecosystem. A funder, an INGO representative, an intermediary, and a leader of a community-based organisation may experience the same partnership very differently.

These differences influence who feels able to speak openly, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, who can challenge institutional practices without consequence, who controls funding and opportunities, who carries reputational or financial risk, and who is expected to adapt.

Future facilitation will not assume that all participants enter the room with equal power. The design should intentionally prevent institutional authority, professional status, or donor proximity from overshadowing locally rooted knowledge and lived experience through careful facilitation, clear participation agreements, smaller groups, and deliberate recognition of different forms of knowledge.

5.6 Courageous spaces require intentional facilitation

Discussions about coloniality, saviourism, institutional power, exclusion, and unequal partnerships can evoke defensiveness, discomfort, frustration, or vulnerability.

The pilot indicated the importance of creating a space that is courageous without becoming punitive. Participants must be challenged, but they must also be supported to remain engaged rather than retreating into silence, denial, or institutional language. Effective unlearning requires a balance between challenge and care, honesty and dignity, accountability and curiosity, institutional critique and personal reflection, and speaking truth while sustaining relationship. Facilitators need the skills to work with tension, resistance, and unequal power without allowing harm or domination.

5.7 The participant journey must model the values PRA promotes

Registration, communication, reminders, session access, and technical support may appear administrative, but they directly influence participation. Difficulties experienced during the pilot included registration-related barriers and inconsistencies in participant communication.

For a programme centered on inclusion and shared power, the participant journey must itself model accessibility, clarity, responsiveness, and care, through a simplified registration form, immediate confirmation, calendar invitations, automated reminders, a single recurring session link, clear time-zone information, accessible materials distributed in advance, a named contact person for technical support, follow-up after missed sessions, and alternative ways to contribute for participants with connectivity challenges.

This same principle extends to how PRA documents and evidences its own learning. The pilot generated valuable reflections, but the next phase requires a more consistent system for capturing participation, learning, and practice change — the subject of Section 9.

6. From Learning to Redesign: What We Are Changing

Taken together, the insights in Section 6 point to a single conclusion: the pilot's open, session-based format was the right way to test demand and surface issues, but it is not, on its own, sufficient to produce the sustained practice change PRA is seeking. The table below traces each pilot learning through to a specific design response carried into the redesigned model in Section 8.

Pilot learning	Implication	Design response
Interest in unlearning was high	The subject is relevant and should remain publicly accessible	Continue open conversations as entry points into structured cohorts
Registration was much higher than attendance	Registration does not equal commitment	Introduce applications, confirmation, and commitment agreements where appropriate
Session time was too limited	Complex reflection cannot be rushed	Increase sessions to 90–120 minutes

Pilot learning	Implication	Design response
Attendance varied between sessions	Continuity and trust were difficult to establish	Use closed cohorts with consistent membership
Conversations surfaced important issues	PRA has a strong reflective methodology	Retain facilitated dialogue and critical reflection
Reflection did not always lead to concrete action	Awareness alone is insufficient	Introduce diagnostics, practice experiments, action plans, and follow-up
Participants held unequal institutional power	Open participation can reproduce existing hierarchies	Use power-aware facilitation, caucus spaces, and audience-specific cohorts
Logistical barriers affected engagement	Administration influences inclusion	Simplify registration, automate reminders, and provide technical support
One format could not meet all audience needs	Different actors face different responsibilities	Develop funder, INGO, locally led, and cross-ecosystem pathways
Evidence collection was inconsistent	Programme development needs stronger data	Establish baseline, endline, attendance, reflection, and follow-up tools
Participants valued honest conversation	Psychological safety is essential	Develop cohort agreements, confidentiality standards, and safeguarding processes
Deep change requires time	Unlearning is an ongoing process	Position the programme as a journey, not a one-off training

7. The Redesigned Collaborative Unlearning Journey

Programme Philosophy

The programme will be positioned as **The Collaborative Unlearning Journey** — a facilitated cohort experience that enables development and philanthropy practitioners’ surface inherited assumptions, disrupt unequal practices, reframe relationships, and experiment with more just and locally led ways of working.

Goal

To support practitioners and institutions across philanthropy, humanitarian action, and development to critically examine and unlearn the colonial assumptions, power structures, and institutional practices that shape contemporary development work, enabling a shift towards more equitable, trust-based, locally led, and solidarity-driven approaches grounded in dignity, reciprocity, and shared agency.

Objectives

1. Surface hidden assumptions and inherited ways of working

Enable participants to examine how colonial legacies, dominant narratives, and institutional norms influence understandings of expertise, leadership, partnership, impact, and accountability.

2. Disrupt unequal power structures and practices

Support participants to identify how power operates through funding, decision-making, knowledge systems, risk management, and partnership relationships, including practices that reproduce dependency, tokenism, or exclusion.

3. **Reframe relationships and approaches to development practice**

Support participants to imagine and explore alternative approaches grounded in trust, reciprocity, solidarity, dignity, and locally defined agency.

4. **Practise new ways of working and translating reflection into change**

Enable participants to apply learning within their organisations and partnerships through practical experiments, reflection, and commitments that contribute to more equitable and locally led practice.

Overall, the Collaborative Unlearning Labs seek to move participants from awareness to action—supporting a shift from transactional approaches towards relationships and systems that recognise local actors as knowledge holders, decision-makers, and leaders of change.

Delivery architecture

PRA’s Collaborative Unlearning Labs will operate as a connected ecosystem of learning spaces that balance accessibility, deeper cohort-based transformation, and broader sector engagement. The architecture recognises that different actors within philanthropy and development hold different positions of power, responsibilities, and experiences; therefore, meaningful unlearning requires both **audience-specific journeys and opportunities for collective reflection across the ecosystem**.

Level	Purpose
Level One: Open Unlearning Dialogues	Public thematic conversations that introduce PRA’s decolonial unlearning approach, explore emerging questions within philanthropy and development, and create opportunities for wider ecosystem engagement. These dialogues serve as entry points for reflection, relationship-building, and identifying participants for deeper learning journeys.
Level Two: Audience-Specific Collaborative Unlearning Journeys	Structured cohort-based learning cycles designed for specific groups within the ecosystem, including funders, INGOs/intermediaries, and locally led organisations. Each journey creates space for participants to examine their own roles, power, practices, and assumptions through the SURFACE → DISRUPT → REFRAME → PRACTISE methodology. Cycles include facilitated sessions, reflection practices, peer learning, practice experiments, and end-of-cycle learning reviews to capture insights, challenges, and emerging changes in practice.
Level Three: Cross-Ecosystem Learning and Institutional Transformation	Spaces that connect learning across different actors and support collective reflection on shared challenges. These include thematic dialogues, ecosystem learning sessions, institutional partnerships, and accompanied change processes that help organisations examine policies, relationships, and systems that influence how power, resources, and decisions are managed.

Across all three levels, PRA will embed **continuous learning cycles** through participant reflections, peer exchange, practice documentation, and collective sense-making. This approach positions unlearning not as a

one-time intervention, but as an ongoing process of questioning, experimentation, and transformation that strengthens more equitable, locally led, and solidarity-based approaches across the development ecosystem.

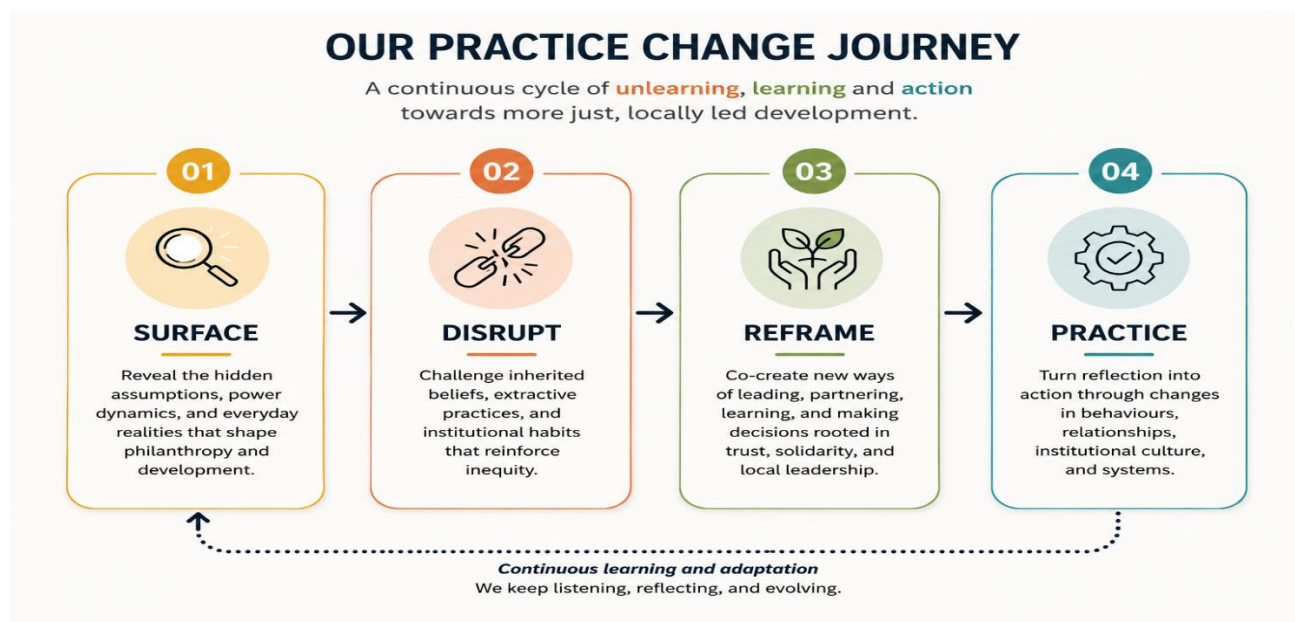
Facilitation model

The Collaborative Unlearning Labs will be facilitated through a power-aware, participatory, and decolonial learning approach. Each cohort will ideally include a lead facilitator, co-facilitator, learning and documentation lead, and participant support focal point. Facilitators will bring experience in reflective adult learning, decolonial and locally led practice, conflict-sensitive dialogue, organisational change, and navigating difficult conversations around power, identity, and institutional practice.

Facilitators are not positioned as experts who have completed the process of unlearning, but as companions who create conditions for collective reflection, challenge, and transformation. They are expected to model humility, curiosity, accountability, and openness to learning alongside participants. Where possible, facilitation teams will reflect diverse geographic, institutional, and lived experiences, while centering African and locally rooted perspectives and knowledge systems.

The role of facilitation is to hold a courageous learning space where participants can examine inherited assumptions, question dominant development narratives, engage across differences in power and experience, and translate reflection into changes in relationships, decisions, and everyday practice.

Learning Methodology: Surface → Disrupt → Reframe → Practise



Audience Pathways

The pilot indicated that a single programme cannot address every participant's responsibility and power equally. PRA should therefore develop differentiated pathways.

1. **Funders: From Grantmaking to Solidarity Stewardship**
2. **INGOs and Intermediaries: From Gatekeeping to solidarity Accompaniment**

3. **Locally Led and Community-Based Organisations: From Survival to Agency**
4. **Cross-Ecosystem Cohort: Unlearning Together Across the Ecosystem:** Brings funders, INGOs, intermediaries, national organisations, and community-based organisations into one cohort. Because of the differences in power, this pathway should include separate caucus spaces, facilitated power analysis, anonymous reflection mechanisms, clear participation agreements, protection against institutional retaliation, and locally led facilitation and agenda-setting. Cross-ecosystem cohorts are likely to be most effective after participants have completed an audience-specific pathway.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Evidence Framework

The redesigned programme will measure progression across five levels, moving well beyond the registration and attendance counts that were the primary data available from the pilot.

Level 1: Reach and Participation

- Number of applications, acceptances, and confirmations.
- Attendance by session and percentage completing the journey.
- Participant diversity by geography, institution, and role.
- Reasons for absence or withdrawal.

Level 2: Learning and Reflection

- Increased ability to identify power and coloniality in practice.
- Increased confidence discussing difficult partnership issues.
- Changes in participants' understanding of expertise, accountability, trust, and risk.
- Quality of participant reflection and evidence of listening across difference.

Level 3: Behaviour and Relationship Change

- Percentage completing a practice experiment and adopting at least one new behaviour.
- Changes in meeting facilitation, communication, consultation, or decision-making.
- Evidence of more transparent partnership conversations.
- Increased willingness to receive and respond to feedback.

Level 4: Institutional Practice Change

- Policies, procedures, or tools reviewed.
- Changes in reporting or due diligence requirements, and in who participates in decisions.
- Introduction of flexible or locally governed funding.
- Changes in partnership agreements, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms.

Level 5: Ecosystem Learning

- Practice-based case studies produced, and lessons incorporated into PRA's framework and curriculum.

- Alumni contributing to future cohorts.
- Institutions adopting or adapting PRA tools.
- Evidence informing wider philanthropy and development reform conversations.

Data collection should combine surveys, interviews, facilitator observations, reflection journals, practice-change stories, and follow-up conversations — closing the evidence gap identified in Section 5.

9. Implementation Priorities for the Next Phase

Before launching the next cohort, PRA will prioritise the following:

1. Publish the Collaborative Unlearning Framework.
2. Develop the modular curriculum and facilitator guide.
3. Create the participant workbook and practice tools.
4. Establish a simplified application, confirmation, and reminder system.
5. Develop baseline, endline, attendance, and follow-up instruments.
6. Recruit and orient a pool of facilitators.
7. Define participant safeguarding and confidentiality procedures.
8. Select one audience-specific cohort for the first redesigned journey.
9. Test the revised design with a manageable cohort of approximately 20-25 participants.
10. Hold a formal learning review after the first cohort before scaling.

The first redesigned cohort will be treated as a second-stage prototype rather than a final product. PRA will continue learning and adapting based on participant experience and evidence of practice change.

10. Conclusion: From Conversations to Practice Change

The pilot phase confirmed that there is a meaningful demand for unlearning within philanthropy, humanitarian action, and development. Practitioners are seeking spaces where they can move beyond institutional language and examine how power, hierarchy, coloniality, professional identity, and organisational incentives influence everyday practice.

The pilot also showed that interest alone is not transformation. A public conversation can introduce an idea, but it rarely provides sufficient time, trust, continuity, or accountability to change deeply embedded behaviours and institutional systems. Meaningful unlearning requires a journey in which participants repeatedly return to their own practice, encounter different perspectives, experiment with alternatives, and remain accountable for what they do with what they have learned.

The next phase of the Collaborative Unlearning Labs therefore moves from a primarily session-based model to a structured cohort journey. The redesigned model preserves openness, curiosity, and diversity that made the pilot valuable, while creating stronger conditions for sustained engagement and practice change.

Unlearning is not completed when a difficult truth is recognised. It begins when that recognition changes how people relate, decide, lead, share resources, and practise solidarity.