On February 6, the Spindle organized a Meetup of the Strategic Partnerships. The theme of the meeting was "Rethinking Ownership and Control within advocacy Partnerships". Staff of about 50 CSOs were present and reflected together. To prepare collective reflection, they were all asked to write down challenges their organization faces in organizing Southern ownership and control, and options to solve these challenges - with interesting results.

The challenge written down most was more something of a question: what can a new model of collaborating with Southern partners actually look like? For example: how to divide budgets? Facilitate partners taking control? Adjust accountability relations?

Two challenges reinforce this challenge of thinking up a new model. First, there are existing practices of collaboration that have become habitual, and mentalities may reinforce these habits. Traditional ways of working do not encourage Southern partners to take the lead, and Northern partners may not acknowledge the capacity of Southern partners to do so. Interestingly, little mention was made of vested interests among the Northern CSOs that could also play a role here. At the same time, some participants were apprehensive of a future with more Southern ownership. How to give space to their diverse views and capacities and at the same time build a coherent program? Advancing Southern ownership means giving space to competing viewpoints and interests. Control thus appeared to be seen by some present as a way to build (needed?) coherence. Secondly, existing conditions work against reimagining collaborations. Donor-CSO relations maintain a focus on upward accountability, and so do requirements from donors like threshold criteria and reporting standards. This limits the space for reimagining and recreating collaboration with Southern partners, participants felt. In addition, workloads, funding cycles and time constraints get in the way.

When it comes to options to solve these challenges, there was much agreement among participants: we need to start with us. What is needed is honest reflection amongst Northern CSOs that raises awareness of power relations and habits, and
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move from there. Ask yourselves how ready and willing you are to accept change. Identify ways to overcome barriers, using more the available space to do that. Accept also that Southern ownership may mean a true transformation in the way you work, and start having conversations about that, internally and with Southern partners. Thereby, develop trust, mutually supportive relations, and new vision.