Keynote Address delivered at "Aid Matters 2026 - Vienna, Austria By Dr Moses Isooba, Executive Director – Uganda National NGO Forum

Theme: *The Power of Partnerships - Shifting Development Cooperation from Subcontracting to Solidarity*

Protocol and Introduction

Distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, partners, and fellow travellers in the pursuit of a more just and equitable world. Let me begin by expressing my sincere appreciation to **Global Responsibility** for the invitation to join you at Aid Matters 2026, and for creating a space where we can have what I believe is one of the most important conversations facing the international development sector today.

I am pleased to bring a perspective from Uganda, and from the developing world, into this dialogue.

The theme of this event, "**The Power of Partnerships**," comes at an incredibly significant time. It invites us to interrogate what partnership actually means in practice. It forces us to ask the uncomfortable questions because if we are honest, some of the relationships we have called partnerships over the years have not always reflected the equality that the word suggests.

We have become very good at speaking the language of partnership. We have partnership strategies, partnership frameworks, partnership agreements, and partnership principles. Yet, in too many cases, the underlying architecture of those relationships has remained largely unchanged. We have become much better at speaking about localization, participation, co-creation and shifting power, but often without changing who makes the decisions, controls the resources or defines success. Many in the Majority World (formerly the global south) are relegated to decision-takers while the INGOs and Aid industrial complex remain the decision-makers.

As I have said multiple times in different spaces: Power moves when three things change: who decides, who holds the resources, and who defines success. If these three aspects do not change, we are only rearranging the furniture.

A partnership cannot be genuinely equitable if one side retains the power to define the problem, design the solution, control the resources, and determine whether the solution has worked. Yet it is the system that has been built over decades and that many of us, sometimes unintentionally, continue to reproduce. This is a particularly critical moment because the old dominant model is weakening, but the new one has not yet been built. Aid budgets are shrinking, multilateralism is under pressure, civic space is closing, and many institutions are protecting themselves by centralising control and transferring risk downwards.

To guide our reflection today, I want to use a simple three-world framing: **the world we have, the world we dream of, and the world we can change**. In doing so, my central message to you is straightforward: **shifting the power is not an optional, technical adjustment; it is an absolute political and institutional necessity**.

The World We Have

Let us look first at the world we have. The international development system is operating in an environment that is fundamentally different from the one in which many of our institutions and approaches were established. We are confronting a combination of crises that reinforce one another: climate change, conflict, displacement, democratic erosion, shrinking civic space, economic insecurity, technological disruption, and geopolitical uncertainty, etc. At the same time, the resources available to address these challenges are becoming increasingly constrained.

Across Europe and globally, development budgets and priorities are being reconsidered in response to changing domestic political pressures, geopolitical realities, and economic interests. We have seen abrupt programme closures and significant funding reductions, such as the major disruptions caused by the sudden closure of USAID. But let us reflect on the deep asymmetry of these changes. When an international NGO loses funding, it may represent a programme closure. However, when a local civil society organisation loses funding, it can mean staff immediately losing their livelihoods, community structures disappearing, advocacy platforms collapsing, and several years of hard-won institutional investment being completely lost.

This current moment of crisis must lead us to ask whether our system is still fit for purpose. Whose development are we actually talking about? Across Europe, development policy is increasingly being connected to investment, migration, security, trade, and geopolitical interests. The growing emphasis on investment-focused approaches, such as the European Union's Global Gateway initiative, raises legitimate questions about the balance between grants, guarantees, private finance, and traditional development assistance. There is nothing inherently wrong with investment, trade, private finance, or strategic economic partnerships; they can all contribute to development. But we should be careful about allowing development co-operation to become increasingly defined by the strategic interests of the countries providing the resources.

We must ask whether those interests are being pursued in ways that still place locally defined development priorities at the centre. Because if investment succeeds but the institutions surrounding it are weak; if communities feel excluded from decisions about investments affecting their livelihoods; if civic space is shrinking and social tensions are increasing, can we really describe that as sustainable development? Can we expect investments to remain sustainable in countries where the social, political, and institutional foundations of stability are being weakened? Can we build commercial relationships while withdrawing support from the civil society organisations, democratic institutions, and community structures that contribute to social cohesion and accountability? The truth is clear: there is no sustainable investment without sustainable societies. And there is no sustainable development without people having a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The World We Dream Of

This brings us to the world we dream of: a system that is genuinely collaborative, locally rooted, and responsive to needs. It is a system where we redefine what partnership means, shifting the very focus of the "**power of partnerships**" from institutional preservation to collective agency.

A genuine partnership is a relationship between equals in dignity, voice, and agency, even when the partners are not equal in size, resources, or institutional history. It is anchored in trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, and it recognises that both partners bring something essential to the table. It is also a relationship in which the outcomes belong to everyone. If the programme succeeds, we celebrate together. If it fails, we learn together. If the context

changes, we adapt together. And if something goes wrong, we do not immediately look for someone to blame.

That kind of relationship requires humility from organisations that have historically held more power, and it requires confidence and agency from those that have historically been positioned on the receiving end of that power. For too long, organisations in the Minority world (formerly Global North) have often been positioned as the decision-makers while their Southern counterparts are expected to be decision-takers. That model has to change. **The principle of subsidiarity offers us a useful starting point: decisions should be taken as close as possible to the people and communities affected by those decisions**. Those closest to the problem possess knowledge, relationships, and legitimacy that cannot be replicated from a distance. The woman organising other women in her community knows something that a consultant flying in for three days cannot possibly know.

What if, instead of assuming deficiency, we asked a different question? What if the issue is not always that local actors lack capacity, but that the system does not recognise, value, or resource the capacity they already possess? A local organisation does not necessarily need to become more like an international organisation to become stronger. It may need greater legitimacy, greater autonomy, better access to resources, stronger political space, and greater recognition of its existing knowledge and leadership. That is why I find the idea of legitimacy strengthening so powerful. Rather than asking how we can build local organisations into versions of ourselves, we should ask how we can strengthen their ability to lead, influence, organise, and remain accountable to the communities they serve. It moves us from asking, "What is missing?" to asking, "What is already there, and what would it take to give it the space and resources to flourish?"

Partnership should recognise communities and local organisations as co-investors, not beneficiaries. Communities contribute knowledge, relationships, legitimacy, voluntary effort, local resources, institutional memory, courage and trust. Financial resources are only one form of capital within a partnership.

Everyone has a voice. The problem is that only a few of us have the microphone. The aim is therefore not to "give voice" to communities, but to democratize access to the microphone and to decision-making.

Of course, we cannot have a serious conversation about power without talking about money, since power follows money. We can have the most well-intended localisation agenda, but if the resources continue to be controlled through long chains of intermediaries, the underlying power relationship remains largely intact. Local organisations need access to longer-term, flexible, and predictable funding. They need resources that allow them to invest in organisational resilience, leadership, safeguarding, digital security, staff well-being, and institutional development. A strong organisation is not an administrative burden standing between money and impact; a strong organisation is part of the impact.

The weakening of the traditional aid system creates a historic opportunity for this transformation. But we should not romanticise abrupt donor withdrawal. The alternative to paternalistic aid cannot be abandonment. What is needed is not less international solidarity, but a different kind of solidarity: one that strengthens local agency rather than institutional dependency. Solidarity is our currency and our greatest single renewable resource.

This is where global initiatives like **#ShiftThePower** and the RINGO project offer such vital contributions. RINGO represents the first globally coordinated, cross-sectoral effort to transform the international NGO sector by interrogating our own purpose, structures, power, and positioning. It challenges international NGOs to imagine what they can look like if they no longer need to be the most powerful actors in the system. Under this vision, international organisations must increasingly transition to a supportive and solidaristic role: connecting movements, sharing knowledge, opening doors, mobilising resources, standing in solidarity with local actors, and using their influence to create space for others to lead.

The World We Can Change

This brings us to the world we can change. How do we take these principles and turn them into practice? How do we build an enabling environment that makes the "**power of partnerships**" real?

First, we must be absolutely clear about what locally led development is not. We must establish clear, non-negotiable boundaries to protect the integrity of this effort. Let us be plain:

- Locally led development is not transferring delivery responsibilities while retaining strategy, money, and authority elsewhere.
- It is not treating local organisations as cheaper subcontractors.

- It is not replacing international intermediaries with a small number of powerful national intermediaries.
- And it is not withdrawing support while telling under-resourced organisations that they are now "empowered" to manage alone.

Let me summarise this with a simple formula: **Local implementation without decision-making is subcontracting. Local leadership without resources is abandonment. Neither is localisation**.

If we are to build equitable, dignified partnerships, we need a simple test to move us away from polished intentions and towards the actual distribution of power. I offer a simple five-question test that every organisation in this room should ask of its current partnerships:

1. Who defines the problem and sets the priorities?
2. Who makes the important decisions?
3. Who controls the money?
4. Who carries the financial, political, and reputational risk?
5. Who defines success, and who receives the recognition for it?

To move beyond this test, I challenge Austrian and European organisations to commit to **five practical structural shifts** in how you operate:

Shift 1: From Consultation to Direct Ownership and Shared Governance

Local and national actors must have real authority over priorities, programme design, budgets, and adaptation. They must not simply be invited to validate decisions that have already been made.

Shift 2: From Restricted Projects to Quality Financing

Direct, unrestricted, and multi-year funding, realistic overhead coverage, and institutional support must become the standard rather than the exception. We must invest in the institutions capable of leading, not just in short-term project activities. A strong local organisation is part of the development impact.

Shift 3: From Risk Transfer to Risk Sharing

Local organisations must not carry all the compliance, security, and reputational risks while international partners retain the money, safety, and decision-making authority. Risks must be assessed and carried together, in a spirit of mutual trust.

Shift 4: From Capacity Building to Mutual Transformation

Local actors do not always need to have their capacity "built" by external actors. Often, they possess deep, unmatched capacity that is simply unrecognised. International organisations must also turn the lens inward: they must unlearn outdated practices, examine their own survival incentives, and transform their governance, staffing, and definitions of what constitutes "expertise."

Shift 5: From Institutional Preservation to Purposeful International Roles

Northern organisations still have vital, powerful roles to play. These include mobilising international solidarity, influencing their own governments, opening political spaces, transferring visibility, and accompanying local actors. But these roles must respond strictly to what local actors ask for, rather than to the self-preservation needs of international institutions.

The Foundation of Civic Space: The Enabling Environment in Uganda.

We must also recognise that these shifts cannot happen in a vacuum. The operating environment must be treated as foundational. Local actors cannot lead if they are criminalised, restricted, excluded from public decision-making, or unable to access resources. **Locally led development cannot thrive where civic space is being suffocated**.

In Uganda, civil society organisations have had to navigate a highly difficult combination of funding uncertainty and increasing restrictions on civic space. My own organisation, the Uganda National NGO Forum, together with other leading civil society organisations, has faced suspension and operational restrictions during this period based on false allegations that we strongly contest. While one hand is dealing with shrinking resources, the other is defending the basic democratic space necessary to use those resources for the public good. When the civic space shrinks, it is an operational inconvenience and can mean that the very organisations that marginalised communities rely on to hold power accountable are no longer able to function effectively.

This is why our discussion must move beyond individual bilateral relationships between one Northern and one Southern NGO. **Genuine power shifts require investment in the whole civil society ecosystem: grassroots organisations, social movements, national NGOs, local networks, and national platforms**. **Platforms like the Uganda National NGO Forum do not merely implement activities. They connect organisations, build collective positions, defend civic space, influence**

national policy, support accountability, and ensure that local leadership does not benefit only the largest or best-connected organisations. The warning here is clear: we may localise projects without localising power if we fund individual organisations but neglect the institutions that connect, represent, and defend civil society.

Conclusion: Redefining the Table

Let me close by returning to the theme that has brought us together today: "The Power of Partnerships." It must become a call to action. It must become the standard against which our work is measured.

We cannot build a new development system with the assumptions, structures, and power relationships of the old one. We need to stop thinking about partnerships primarily as mechanisms for delivering projects. Partnerships must be seen as relationships through which we build collective power to address problems that no organisation, country, or sector can solve alone.

The question is no longer whether we support shifting power in principle. The question is: what decisions are we prepared to share, what resources are we prepared to relinquish, and what risks are we prepared to carry together? Equitable partnership is not about giving local actors a seat at our table. It is about recognising that the table, the agenda, and the resources must be shaped and owned together.

Therefore, even as Austria implements the Austrian Africa Strategy (2026–2029), we must be vigilant that development co-operation is not subordinated to narrow geopolitical, trade, or migration-control interests. We should ensure that equal, mutually beneficial partnership remains the core guiding principle.

Let us begin using our different, complementary strengths to build something that none of us could ever build alone. That is what the future of international development and partnerships demands of us, and I believe it is a future worth building together.

Thank you very much for listening to me.