CIRW 2024 – Key Takeaway #3

BUILDING ISP–LED NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

RCF occupies a unique niche in investing specifically in global and regional community–led and civil society networks to sustain and expand the role of ISP in the HIV response. As these networks face a storm of shrinking funding landscapes and rising, well–organized, well–funded anti–rights movements, to emergencies like war, epidemics and impacts of climate change they are beginning to feel a crisis of hope. However, ISP communities and their networks are responding with innovation and resilience, growing their capacities, governance structures, collaboration and solidarity within and between countries and globally.

Key Challenges

Rising Authoritarianism: Growing restrictions on civil society dialogue and democratic spaces, including increased surveillance, foreign agent laws, and direct government interference with community organizations. These restrictions severely limit ISPs' ability to organize, advocate, and access services safely.

Anti–Rights Movements: Well–funded opposition groups actively working against ISP interests through coordinated media campaigns, policy influence, and grassroots mobilization. These movements often have significant political backing and resources that dwarf those available to ISP networks.

Resource Constraints: Limited and shrinking core funding for institutional strengthening, particularly affecting networks' long–term planning and organizational sustainability. Traditional donors increasingly favor project–based funding over institutional support, making it difficult to maintain basic operations and respond to emerging needs.

Crisis Response: Multiple simultaneous emergencies including war, epidemics, and climate change impacts requiring immediate attention and resources. Networks must balance urgent crisis response with ongoing programmatic work while operating with limited resources.

Network Sustainability: Challenges in maintaining long–term movement building amid constant leadership transitions, changing donor priorities, and hostile political environments. Networks struggle to retain experienced staff while developing new leadership.

Hope and Resilience: Maintaining momentum amid compounding challenges, including activist burnout, security concerns, and seemingly insurmountable political opposition. Networks face the emotional toll of continuous setbacks while trying to sustain community motivation, dubbed at the 2024 CIRW as a Crisis of Hope.

Growing authoritarianism and well–funded anti–rights movements are fueling increased vulnerabilities of ISPs and new challenges in responding to them. The donor system's focus on short–term programming has neglected adequate core funding, contributing to a "crisis of hope" as networks struggle to sustain their essential work in an increasingly resistant world.

Successful Strategies

Coalition and Alliance Building: Creating formal and informal partnerships across different movements and sectors, including women's rights, environmental justice, and economic justice groups. Networks are establishing joint advocacy platforms, shared resources, and collective response mechanisms that strengthen their collective voice and impact.

South–South Exchange: Facilitating peer learning and relevant knowledge sharing between networks facing similar challenges in comparable contexts. These exchanges focus on practical solutions and contextually appropriate strategies rather than imposed external models.

Crisis Response Systems: Leveraging network infrastructure for resilience through established emergency protocols, flexible funding mechanisms, and rapid response teams. Networks have created systems for mutual aid and resource mobilization during crises.

Strategic Partnerships: Dividing labor and providing mutual support across networks through formal agreements, joint programming, and resource sharing. Networks are moving beyond competition to create collaborative platforms that maximize impact and efficiency.

Global Advocacy: Countering anti-rights narratives through coordinated action at international forums, strategic communications campaigns, and evidence-based policy advocacy. Networks are developing sophisticated messaging and building broader coalitions to amplify their impact.

Youth Leadership: Developing new leaders and innovative approaches through mentorship programs, dedicated youth spaces, and meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes. Networks are actively creating pathways for youth to shape movement strategies and priorities.

Working in partnership was a key strategy for success.

RCF networks had faced a number of different crises including from climate change, war, authoritarianism, the pandemic, and economic downturn. The networks found opportunities in crisis, leveraging intersectionality to build bigger coalitions, strengthening solidarity amongst a broader array of allies, and focusing more on cooperation with their peer organizations rather than competition.

Common Pitfalls

Burnout and mental health issues.

Multiple stressors, not the least of which, the "crisis of hope" mentioned above, impacted the mental health of people involved in the movement to support ISP health and rights, and affect continuity and prioritization of partnerships. The challenges have beenaddressed by RCF partners through mental health support and flexible leadership structures.

Pitfalls related to varied culture, language, time zones and organizational capacities in partnerships.

These pitfalls are inherent in regional and global cooperation. RCF partners countered by investment in improved coordination, documentation and communication processes; some RCF partners use AI translation/interpretation services to ensure language justice; scheduling across timezones has been identified as one of the most persistent challenges when coordinating collaborations across the globe.

Quick Assessment Questions
These questions can be used to reflect on your partnerships

Have we analyzed our intersectionality and strategically developed approaches to our work, representation and partnerships relevant to it?

Have we assessed our institutional capacity technical assistance needs and planned to address them?

Have we looked "beyond HIV" for new partners and to see our connection to the broader social/health/environmental justice movements?

REFLECT ON...

Are we contributing to youth–led activities to support the long–term sustainability of our work?

Do we have policies and practices designed to address the mental health needs of our members, staff and those we serve/represent?

Significant Stories: CIRW 2024

A spike in violence in the Sahel region in Africa led to the closure of services and withdrawal of French funding due to problematic diplomatic relations affecting Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Coalition Plus helped to build solidarity among Sahelian partners for mutual support and to seek alternative sources of funding, through meetings, improved coordination and cooperative strategizing. The coalition also made emergency funds available.

Despite a growing anti–rights movement in its region, MENA Rosa continued to strengthen itself as a network and build its partnerships and cooperation. It not only built its own capacities and the capacities of its members but it cooperated with partners to secure funding from a diversified pool of donors and a heightened position in the region as they will collaborate with MENAHRA to host the Global Fund MENA Learning Hub for the next 3 years.

"We have been able to create strong partner–ships with other RCF grantees – some donors consider us too big and others consider us too small – in the consortium we have been able to do more. we have learned from each ther – and shared experiences – and built our capacities – we learned how to approach different donors."

Resources & Further Readings

Though it is an older material and not focused specifically on ISP networking, this guide is quite thorough and gives very useful background and practical tips on networking.

International Council of AIDS Service Organizations. 2002. *HIV/AIDS Networking Guide.*

This manual offers a theoretical overview and practical learning exercises to build knowledge and thinking on advocacy networking.

Stop TB Partnership, WHO, Constella futures. 2007. *Networking for Policy Change: TB/HIV Advocacy Training Manual.*

Relevant RCF Outcome Areas

Outcome Area 1: Network Strength and Influence

CIRW takeaways clearly demonstrate how ISP networks are building their organizational strength through strategic partnership development and coalition building. With strong network infrastructure, partners have been able to respond effectively to crises, leverage south–south learning opportunities, and cultivate youth leadership. Networks are increasing their influence by working across movements, engaging in coordinated global advocacy, and building broader solidarity platforms. The transition from competition to collaboration among networks has particularly strengthened their collective voice and impact in increasingly challenging environments.

Outcome Area 2: Improved Human Rights

Partner experiences show how networks are leveraging partnerships to counter growing authoritarianism and anti–rights movements. Through coordinated advocacy and mutual support systems, networks are better equipped to document and respond to human rights violations. Cross–movement collaboration has strengthened their ability to protect ISP rights by connecting HIV advocacy to broader human rights frameworks and building wider constituencies of support. Youth leadership development is ensuring sustainable human rights advocacy for the future.

Outcome Area 3: Improved Access to & Quality of Services

Key learnings demonstrate how networks are using partnerships to maintain and improve service access despite challenging contexts. Through coordinated advocacy and resource sharing, networks are addressing barriers to services while building sustainable support systems. Crisis response mechanisms and strategic collaborations are helping ensure service continuity even in hostile environments, while south–south exchange is spreading effective service delivery models.

Outcome Area 4: Resource Accountability / Funding Environment

Key learnings show how networks are using partnerships strategically to create more sustainable and efficient resource use. Through collaborative approaches like joint programming, shared resources, and mutual support systems, networks are adapting to funding constraints while maximizing their impact. The development of crisis response mechanisms and flexible funding structures demonstrates how networks are building more resilient funding models. Cross–movement partnerships have also helped networks access diverse funding streams and build stronger cases for core support by showing their intersectional impact.

As stronger networks with robust partnerships advocate for advancing human rights, improving service access, and building sustainable funding models. Partner experiences demonstrate that investment in strategic partnerships enables progress across all outcome areas while building resilience against growing challenges.
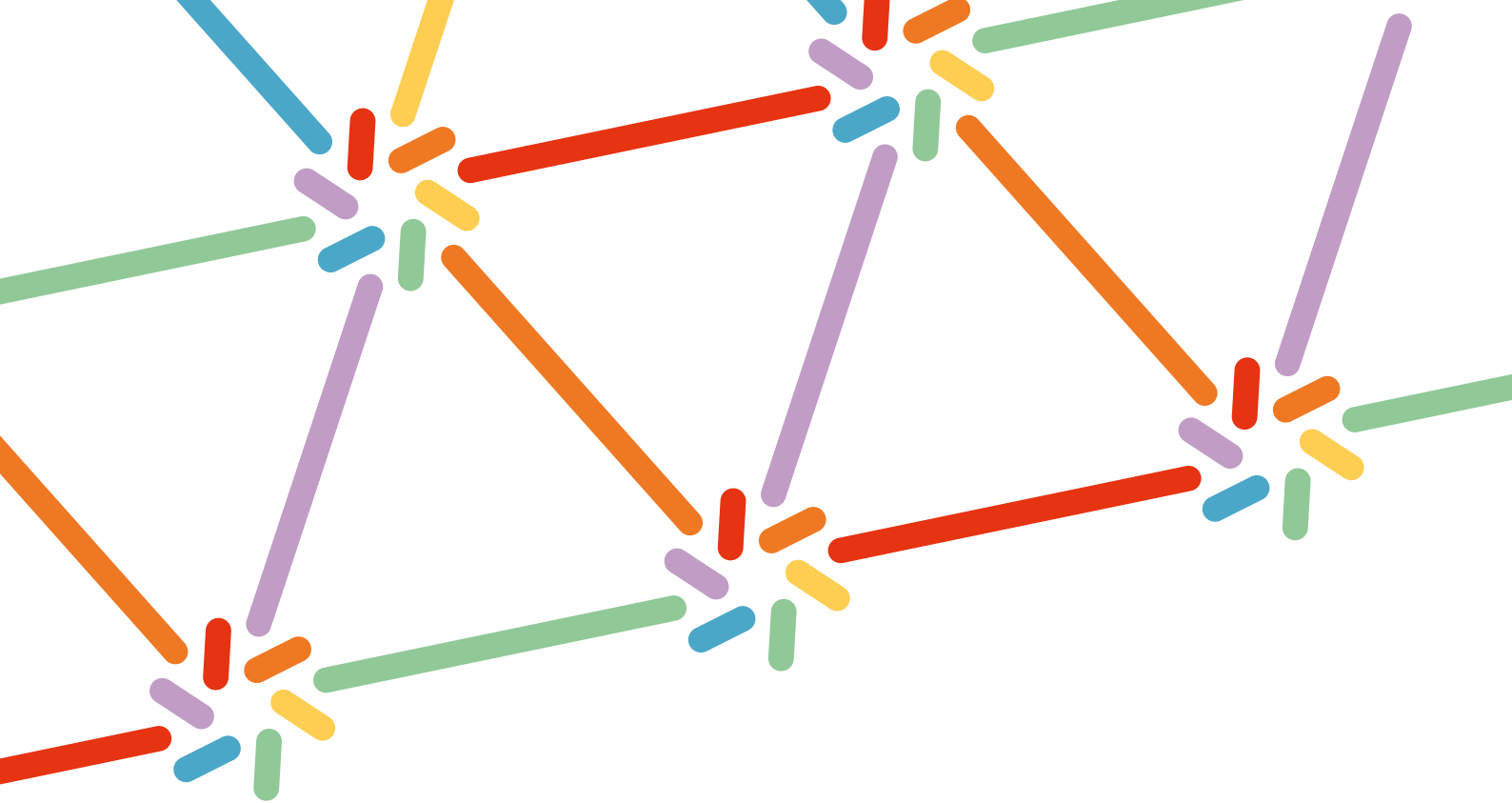
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