

Fair pay and ethical and values-driven consultancy: addressing pay inequality

*Ishbel McWha-Hermann (Project Fair) and
Paul Knipe (INTRAC)*



Unequal pay is a core part of ongoing inequality in the international development sector. Differences in how staff and consultants are paid are increasingly highlighted as inappropriate, and challenge efforts to decolonise and shift power.

Disparities in pay can reinforce hierarchies, undermine relationships, and negatively affect motivation and collaboration. Pay is not only a financial issue—it can signal how individuals are valued and whose knowledge counts.

Achieving fair pay is critical to addressing enduring inequalities of power dynamics, and inequalities that disadvantage some groups over others. It can also lead to better quality outcomes and productivity, by enabling staff and consultants who may be better placed to bring about lasting change.

Achieving pay equality must be promoted and driven by organisations, consultants and commissioners. This paper introduces pay inequality and recommends approaches we can all take to achieve it.

Understanding unequal pay

Through studying inter-group relationships and discussing these issues with a range of partners, Project Fair has found evidence of a clear hierarchy of status and power between international and national staff, consultants, and volunteers. This hierarchy directly maps onto pay.

Among international and national staff

Pay differences between international and national staff are among the most visible and longstanding forms of inequality in the sector. Differences reinforce hierarchies of power and status within organisations. They can undermine efforts to decolonise practice and shift decision-making power, particularly when national staff are paid less despite having equal or greater contextual expertise.

Among staff and consultants

Differences in pay between staff and consultants can create significant tensions within organisations. Consultants are often brought in at higher daily rates, which can lead staff to feeling undervalued. At the same time, consultants may struggle to feel integrated into teams or fully invested in organisational goals. They have higher rates to reflect the lack of social security and benefits that comes with staff employment, which may be misunderstood among colleagues.

Among organisations

Intergovernmental organisations or larger INGOs often pay higher rates compared to others, especially national NGOs and CSOs. This leads to challenges for CSOs to receive good quality consultancy support and maintain a strong staff base which can be crucial for them to achieve their aims. It is well known that rural, grassroots organisations struggle to access good quality, ethical consultancy support.

Among consultants

Consultants rooted in the global minority often command higher rates than national or local consultants in the global majority, even when local consultants may be better placed to deliver contextually appropriate and sustainable outcomes and partnerships. Similarly, consultants who are better connected, often from urban contexts in the global majority may have better access to higher paid roles. This exacerbates inequality among consultants from marginalised groups.

Achieving fair pay

Key messages

When considering fair pay for staff, consultants, and those commissioning consultancy, several key points stand out:

- Staff, consultants and commissioners should build their understanding of fair reward practices. This helps ensure rates are ethical, market-informed, and enables consultants to advise clients on equitable internal pay systems—playing an important role in driving change.
- Fair pay systems are central to EDI efforts. As one of the most visible forms of inequality, pay must be addressed as part of a broader approach that includes equity, power-shifting, and decolonial practices
- Pay differences within teams and across consultants have real interpersonal impacts. Evidence shows they can undermine motivation, satisfaction, learning, and perceptions of fairness—affecting collaboration and overall project success.
- Fair pay structures should be participatory, aligned with organisational values, based on job requirements (not personal characteristics), and responsive to contextual factors such as cost of living.



Additional resources

Project Fair's Principles and Standards of Fair INGO Reward, co-designed with 25 NGOs, are a set of five principles (ethical reward, transparency, equity, sustainability, compliance and risk) which are each complemented by a set of standards. The Principles and Standards are designed as an aspirational tool for defining pay fairness in the sector.

INTRAC have co-designed an Ethical and Values Driven Consultancy Framework to help consultants and commissioners, along with other resources on decolonising consultancy in practice, with fair pay a crucial part.

Recommendations for organisations



- Critically examine how pay structures reflect and reproduce inequality. Pay systems should support, rather than undermine, equity, diversity and inclusion commitments and values —and whether they align with stated values around equity and inclusion
- Pay should align with role requirements and contributions, rather than location and origin
- Review and reform pay structures that differentiate between international and national staff.
- Align pay with role requirements and contributions, rather than location or origin.

Recommendations for commissioners of consultancy



- Be intentional about why the organisation is engaging consultants, how roles are defined, and how pay is communicated and justified within teams.
- Consider and respond to ethical aspects of setting fair pay rates for consultants.
- Be intentional about why consultants are engaged and what roles they fulfil.
- Define clear role requirements and set fair, consistent rates based on these.
- Communicate transparently with staff and consultants about pay decisions to reduce misunderstandings and tension.

Recommendations for consultants



- Be aware of your positionality and the power it brings, particularly as an international consultant.
- Advocate for fair and equitable pay practices within teams and assignments.
- Draw on contextual knowledge to inform appropriate and fair rates.
- Use inclusive and context-sensitive communication when discussing pay, recognising that these conversations can be complex and sensitive.

Note

Note: Some of the links are to documents that aren't open access. If you would like a PDF version please contact Ishbel.McWha@ed.ac.uk



About Project Fair and INTRAC

Project Fair focuses on the psychological impact of dual salaries in the INGO sector. Our work, based on over a decade of research, explores how organisational policies affect employee motivation, performance, retention, learning and teamwork. Underpinning our work is in-depth expertise in social justice and fairness, and the role organisational policies and practices play to address the challenges related to poverty and inequality. Project Fair operates as a community forum for 100+ INGOs committed to shifting pay structures to be fairer, facilitating peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, workshops, and specialised training.

INTRAC is a UK-based not-for-profit training, research and consultancy organisation. Through a small team of staff and network of practitioners, we support and strengthen civil society, based on a belief that vibrant, diverse and inclusive civil societies are essential catalysts for a world where everyone can thrive. INTRAC supports actors to reimagine their roles, relationships and responsibilities and to challenge structural inequalities which exacerbate poverty and discrimination. We are committed to centring local knowledge and context-based experience. We pride ourselves on developing practical solutions to civil society challenges, and combining ethical and values-driven consultancy, training, research and learning.

Ishbel McWha-Hermann is the Founder and Director of Project Fair, which brings together HR and reward managers from INGOs, to develop research based pathways to fairer reward policies and practices. She is also Personal Chair of Work and Organisational Psychology and Deputy Director (Academic) of the MBA Programme at the University of Edinburgh Business School.



Paul Knipe provides strategic direction for INTRAC's consultancy and network services and is a member of the Senior Management Team. Paul has held advisory, management and leadership roles in civil society, academia, and government for 15 years. He is an experienced knowledge broker, familiar with accompanied learning processes to influence policymaking and believes strongly in the importance of locally-led development.

