

Best Practice

Organizational Development: Blair Henry at Ngamiland Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (NCONGO)



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Key Messages

- Despite a plethora of HIV/AIDS information disseminated since the mid 90s aimed at prevention and support, Botswana continues to suffer from an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of approximately 17.6% (GoB, 2008).
- At the beginning of the volunteer's mandate, NCONGO was essentially only an idea as there were no full-time employees and the organization was only serving seven member organizations with no funding. However, there was a belief that a coordinated effort among Ngamiland NGOs could more effectively reduce the HIV and AIDS prevalence rate in the district.
- Personally visiting every NGO in the region, building a trusting network with these NGOs, listening to the issues and problems brought forward by communities, collaboratively designing what NCONGO should look like and how it should behave and hiring exceptional staff provided the groundwork for success.
- The volunteer was instrumental in bringing \$US 26 million into the country through his participation and lobbying of various INGOs and other international bodies. He was also the author or significant contributor of five successful proposals for NCONGO and another seven for its member organizations.
- NCONGO has grown from being a volunteer-run organization with one part-time staff member serving as an administration person to being an established organization with its own administrative capacities and 5 full-time staff serving 54 member organizations.

Current Context

Botswana is considered as one of the great development stories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since gaining independence in 1966, the nation has remained politically and economically stable and has seen its per capita GDP rise from \$70 USD to \$12,500. However, the country still faces many challenges, among them being high poverty and inequality, a lack of economic diversity, rapidly declining mineral reserves, and above all, the world's second highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection.



School bell rings the same in every country. By Blair Henry

The first case of HIV/AIDS in Botswana was reported in 1985 and in little more than a decade, Botswana was identified by UNAIDS as the country with the highest rate of HIV infections in the world (Arnad, 2010; Jensen et al., 2012). Since that time, there have been dramatic multi-sector efforts to increase HIV/AIDS

education, access to medical care, and antiretroviral drugs. These efforts have resulted in an estimated 90,000 residents receiving antiretroviral treatment as well as significant decreases in mother-to-child transmission rates (Jensen et al., 2012).

However, despite all the prevention efforts thus far, new infections continue to occur and the results of the baseline study clearly indicated that although tertiary students' knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS was at an acceptable level, their behavior and perceptions were risky and dangerous.

NCONGO & Uniterra

Background

The Ngamiland Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (NCONGO) was established in 2008 and serves as the umbrella body of Ngamiland Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in matters related to sustainable social and economic development. This includes HIV and AIDS activities and organizations, but is not exclusively limited to this issue. NCONGO covers the Ngami and Okavango sub-districts within the Northwest District and the Chobe district of Botswana.

It was believed that the sustainability of CBOs/NGOs and their program implementation could be strengthened and become more efficient if their capacities (organizational and individual) and technical support were improved. Efforts were focused in the fields of Organizational Development, Programme management and networking (knowledge sharing) were strengthened.



The desire to establish NCONGO, develop a mission and vision, and create direction and momentum was one of the main drivers for partnering with Uniterra in 2009. The cooperation report stated that NCONGO intended to strengthen its members services through increasing its members skills and knowledge in Organizational development and Project management, Communication Skills and Strategies, and Personal Productivity as well as strengthening

and developing existing and/or new means of communication and information sharing within the Network and partners.

Organizational Development & Results

The beginning

The first eight months of the volunteer's mandate with NCONGO was spent building relationships. This was fundamental in gaining NGOs and communities' trust and respect that

would later enable NCONGO to nurture a new sense of cooperation in the region with NGOs working together towards a common goal.



NCONGO website

Results

NCONGO was also able to gain audiences with people of influence and convinced USAID that the process for supporting the HIV and AIDS initiatives had been misguided as most of the money was being allocated for the capital, Gaborone, instead of the more rural areas of the country that boasted the highest prevalence rates. Surprisingly, USAID listened and a proposal for \$US 20 million was quickly released. NCONGO was courted by virtually every organization that submitted a proposal for the contract. The next three months was spent writing the Maatla proposal with the FHI360 staff, and the final success was hiring a dedicated and capable staff that could take the organization forward.

Lessons Learned

The Uniterra volunteer had nearly a blank slate at NCONGO in 2009. At that time there was a group of supportive board members that shared a common vision of coordinating the response to HIV and AIDS in Ngamiland. However, there was no impactful response at that time and the volunteer was tasked with building a fully functioning, sustainable organization. Below are a few of lessons that were learnt during his mandate.

1. *A deeper understanding of the personal insecurities and prejudices that some volunteers bring along with them to developing countries.* This is more clearly explained by the volunteer's understanding that there is not always an urgent need to build capacity in the community. Many of the people in the community already possess the required skills, usually the educated youth. His role as an organizational capacity builder was to identify youth with relevant skills, show the validity of new thinking to relevant stakeholders and ensure that the older generation, who is often averse to change, do not impede. Giving direction and thorough vision to your staff, and then getting out of the way, is a transferable strategy that should be applied to other organizations.

2. *Many of the techniques we utilize in the developed world are impractical in the developing world due to a lack of resources.* The volunteer came to understand quickly that throwing

money at a problem is not an option in Botswana. However, he also acknowledged that many western tools and analytics also have practical applications in Botswana. For example, one could validate the effectiveness of an advertising campaign in Botswana in the same way as at home. The difference may only be the method in which the information is collected.

3. As an organizational coach, the volunteer often says that he is not here to ‘work’. Instead, he is here to participate, lead, guide and coach, but is not there to do the heavy lifting. If he did start performing tasks then he would leave a skills gap at the end of his mandate. His priority was to



Different reactions to studying. By Blair Henry

ensure that after his departure, business goes on as usual and NCONGO would be left on a growth curve. This has implications when dealing with new staff that may not have had the opportunity to hone their skills yet. Thus, one of his lessons learned was that ***you must let some of your staff struggle so they can stretch and grow confidence in their own intuition and body of knowledge.***

4. ***Do more with less.*** In the NGO world in Africa, you are always going to struggle to find enough resources of all types. This is the reality. Although

the lack of resources is sometimes frustrating, it always leads to innovation and accomplishing more with less.

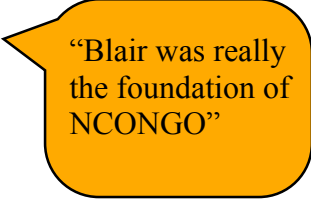
5. ***Think like a business.*** It is key that NCONGO keeps the member organizations paying increased dues for the services that NCONGO provides. This allows the organization to maintain core services and core staff if some funding were to be reduced or cut. The nature of sustainability in Botswana is that it is not possible unless an NGO is able to build a for profit industry that supports the efforts of the NGOs. Also, the volunteer strongly believes that instilling business thinking into non-profits will result in greater social impact. Successful businesses cannot survive alone, they need to have allies and partners and NCONGO is no different, they needed to develop a network and partners in order to achieve its goal.

Conclusion

NCONGO’s growth and success over the past five years must be attributed to many people’s sincere efforts to strengthen the organization’s capacity and influence. There is not one person who can take sole credit for any of the successes of the organization. However, this case study provides a unique example of a volunteer who had a rare degree of freedom and opportunity to help create and develop a fully functioning organization. His perseverance, skills and leadership were specifically noted several times during our interviews with current management at NCONGO.

The transformation that NCONGO underwent is important to analyze so that the lessons learned can be transferred to other emerging NGOs in the developing world. Relationship building, a shared vision with clear objectives, innovative solutions in the face of scarce resources, business principles and a dedicated staff were some of the building blocks that have elevated NCONGO to a respected position in Ngamiland, Botswana and internationally. A new generation of NGOs which utilizes sound business practices that promote sustainability are influencing the donor world and shaping the future of how NGOs are run.

Finally, the Uniterra volunteer created over 69 tools in his nearly three years at NCONGO. The results of these tools are often difficult to quantify and so his work cannot be put in a graph or excel sheet. However, a more holistic and inclusive indicator of his contribution is that during his mandate NCONGO has grown from being a volunteer-run organization with one part-time staff member that served seven members with no funding, to being an established organization with its own administrative capacities and 5 full-time



“Blair was really the foundation of NCONGO”

staff serving 54 member organizations. The people of Ngamiland are better able to access the services they require and untold numbers enjoy a higher quality of life thanks to NCONGO.

Charity Thite, Program Manager at NCONGO