



Working in Partnership

Learning from CINDI in Zambia

This paper documents the lessons learned from the partnership between Action Against Hunger (ACF UK) and Children in Distress (CINDI), a local NGO in Zambia. The collection of key lessons was brought together from detailed discussions with members of both organisations. It is hoped these learning points will be relevant in other partnerships of which ACF and CINDI are a part, and contribute more generally to the discourse on North-South partnerships for sustainable development.

Overview

The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS compounds the formidable challenge of tackling widespread poverty in Zambia. It is estimated that 16% of the adult population aged between 15 and 49 years in the country is HIV positive and around 68% of the population live below the poverty line. Children in particular have suffered, losing one or both parents to the disease, and

subsequently forced to join the increasing number of orphans in the country fighting to survive, have enough to eat and go to school. These children are at risk of malnutrition, disease, discrimination and abuse. The caregivers of these children are often already overstretched and struggle to access health services, education, enough food and a sufficient household income.

ACF is one of the leading humanitarian actors in the fight against global hunger and malnutrition. The ACF international network, with headquarters in London, Madrid, New York, Montreal and Paris, carries out programmes in nutrition, food security, water and sanitation, health and advocacy in around forty countries worldwide. Children in Distress (CINDI) is a local non governmental organisation working to ease the plight of orphans and vulnerable children and their caregivers in 11 townships of Kitwe, a mining town in Zambia's Copperbelt Province.

Action Against Hunger (ACF) is an international humanitarian organisation operating in over 40 of the world's poorest countries. Its vocation is to save lives, especially those of malnourished children, and to work with vulnerable populations to preserve and restore their livelihoods with dignity.



ACF UK and CINDI started working together in 2004 through a number of short term food security and nutrition activities. A new phase in the relationship between ACF-UK and CINDI was marked in 2006, with the start of a 4 year project funded by Comic Relief with the aim of delivering an integrated community response to improve the health, food security and nutritional status of households affected by HIV/AIDS.

Lesson 1: Managing expectations from the start

Before starting a project, it is important that prospective partners take time to get to know each other and understand more about each others limitations and expectations. The state of an organisation as a whole has significant impact on its ability to deliver a project, and so it is vital in these early stages to find out how each of the partners functions, its culture and way of working, strategy and direction, systems and processes. If this investment is made at the beginning of a relationship, it will save time and frustration or potentially more serious consequences later on by avoiding the discovery that one or other partner is not able to deliver what is needed. The ACF partnership guidelines contain an organisational assessment tool which is a helpful guide at the point of selecting a partner or during these early discussions.

Case note 1

Before ACF and CINDI started work together on the Comic Relief project there was perhaps not sufficient understanding of the demands of the project or the capacities of each partner to deliver it. The way in which events unfolded is aptly described by Angelina Lawrence, the Director of Finance at ACF UK “...we jumped in with both feet without really looking to see if it was the best fit and without considering both ACF and CINDI capacities at the time...”. As the project began, difficulties became more and more apparent and eventually serious concerns about CINDI’s capacity to deliver the project and ACF’s ability to work in partnership came to the forefront.

The unfolding realities jeopardised the success of the project and the future of the partnership. Drastic action was needed to get the project back on track. CINDI was in a state of turmoil and had to make significant change in order to strengthen its overall management and governance. ACF had to reflect on its expectations and practice in working with local partners. Angelina summarises a key lesson from this experience: “...in the future we need to enter into a partnership with our eyes open and be better prepared to understand each others limitations and differences... We also need to be more realistic about what can be achieved...”. ACF (2009)



Lesson 2: Overcoming the challenge of long distance relationships

Open and regular communication and information sharing is essential for successful partnership and managing a relationship from a distance can be tough. Dropping by the office to share a new idea, to talk through a problem or just to catch up is not possible and doing so over an unreliable phone connection or by email is just not the same. With one organisation based in Zambia and the other in the UK it is rare to have meetings with the key people from both partners present. The important socialising aspect of the relationship can be neglected as it is difficult to incorporate into fleeting technical or monitoring visits. As time is precious, such visits also tend to focus on problem solving and planning rather than sharing and celebrating the successes and achievements of the partnership.

These obstacles can be overcome with a mix of careful thought, planning and modern technology. A simple communication plan can be developed which defines the regularity of contact, the channel of communication and who needs to be involved (McManus S & Tennyson R, 2008). If partners agree the kind of information that should be shared for the benefit of the partnership it can help create a sense of openness and transparency. Such a plan can also help avoid any confusion later on about reporting requirements and accountability

mechanisms. Advances in communication technology offer even more creative ways in which we can interact and integrate sound and visual media including online chat and group email facilities, Skype, social networking sites, and various services which facilitate audio and video conferencing.

Case note 2

ACF and CINDI keep in regular contact over the phone, Skype and by email. There are regular monitoring and technical support visits to the project by ACF representatives throughout the year. CINDI provides ACF with regular reports which detail project progress and along with relevant supporting documentation, so that ACF has a real sense of what is happening on the ground. ACF provides feedback on reports and technical advice and support when needed. As noted by a CINDI team member during a workshop to review the ACF/CINDI partnership: “...although there is a distance between the two organisations, we know each others strengths and there has been a sharing of responsibilities, for example, in developing shared reports and writing proposals....” (2009)



Lesson 3: Managing the ups and downs of partnership

Working in partnership carries with it inevitable risk but the potential benefits make this risk worthwhile. When it works it is wonderful, but the journey is not necessarily easy and there can be times when building, managing and maintaining a relationship is difficult. Differences in culture, ways of working, attitudes and values can present significant obstacles that need to be carefully negotiated for a partnership to succeed. The often unpredictable, unstable and changing environment in which many of our partnerships operate adds to these challenges. There can also be operational issues along the way that could seriously threaten or undermine the success of the project or the partnership itself.

Conducting a joint risk assessment as part of the early partnership dialogue, which describes the key internal and external risks facing the partnership and how these are to be managed should they occur, is a useful way of ensuring partners are better prepared to deal with difficult circumstances. Failure and setbacks are to be expected but these experiences should be regarded as an enriching opportunity to reflect on what went wrong and why and to learn lessons for the future. The way in which such obstacles are handled can expose the very foundations on which the partnership is built. If a serious problem arises, all options should be carefully weighed up before taking action and the potential consequences for each partner and the targeted beneficiaries considered. If the partnership is still seen as the best way to achieve the desired aims, then every effort must be made to make it work.

Case note 3

As the reality of CINDI's situation became clear in the early stages of the Comic Relief project, options for the way forward including the possibility of withdrawing or finding another partner were carefully weighed. It was concluded the best approach was to continue working with CINDI if the organisation committed to strengthening its management and governance.

ACF therefore proposed to adopt an organisational engagement in addition to its programmatic partnership approach with CINDI. This proposal was accepted by the CINDI board and with the support of Comic Relief the project budget was revised and substantial funds redirected to strengthen CINDI's organisational and programmatic capacities. As Father Joe Hayes, chairperson of the CINDI board explains *"ACF stood by CINDI in a time of confusion and difficulty and worked with CINDI to bring stability back to the organisation...."*

Although the Comic Relief project had a shaky start, there has been a marked improvement in the delivery of activities every year and the conclusion of the mid term evaluation was generally positive. CINDI is now on the road to recovery and experiencing a period of relative stability. Father Hayes goes on: *"...we have reached a stage where CINDI has greater clarity of vision, there is more local confidence in the organisation, and we have a more talented and experienced management and team."* ACF (2009)

Lesson 4: Reviewing the partnership

The importance of communication for a successful partnership has already been mentioned, but we also need to consider the content of these interactions. Although keeping up to date on progress with project activities is essential, it is also important to step back and have conversations about the partnership itself from time to time. These crucial conversations are often neglected as project implementation happens at a much faster pace than partnership building, and so often takes up all of our time and attention (Tennyson R, 2005).

In the beginning, partners need to define the purpose of the partnership and make clear their expectations and scope of the relationship. Later, when activities begin, the focus may be on project delivery however there is still need to monitor the partnership, for example, to see how conflict is being managed, how communication is working, and if partners are meeting expectations. The way in which the partnership is to be reviewed and evaluated needs to be clearly understood. This process should involve the revisiting of the purpose of the partnership to ensure it is still relevant, continues to add value and is the best way to achieve the specified aims.

Case note 4

The scope of the partnership between ACF and CINDI was initially focussed on the delivery of the 4 year Comic Relief funded project. This project is now in its final year and so ACF and CINDI have already started the conversation about the future of the partnership and reviewing how the relationship between the two organisations has been experienced, its achievements and challenges, and what each partner has learned through working together. If the partnership is to continue, sufficient time has to be allowed to source new funds for the partnership and avoid any gap in provision. *ACF (2009)*

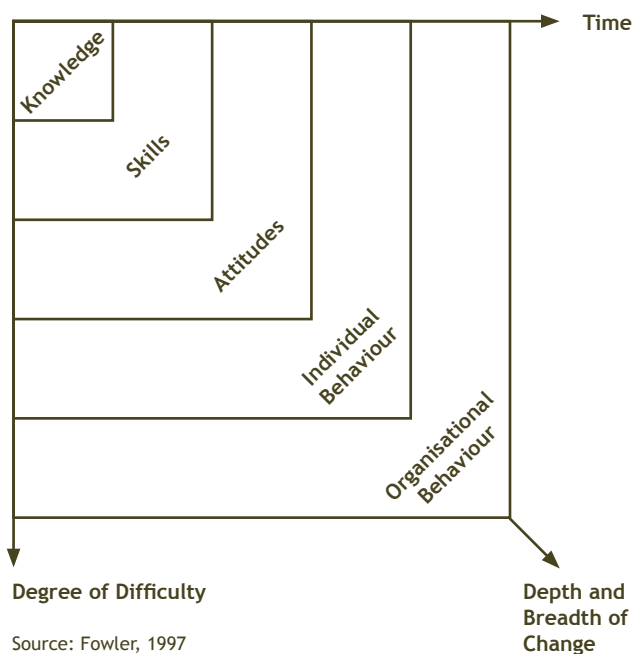
Lesson 5: Building capacity in partnership

“If we look back on our own lives we know that change is a complex, dynamic process. It is emotional: at times exhilarating, at others frightening. But when we approach capacity building we often forget the human dimension. We treat organisations as lifeless objects - logical machines, not living systems.”
(James & Hailey, 2007)

Capacity building (or variations of the term such as capacity strengthening) is a fashionable part of development jargon these days. Although it regularly appears in reports and proposals, the meaning, purpose, method and target of capacity building differs from one organisation to the next and the approach taken often reflects personal perspectives, values and attitudes. Something that can perhaps be agreed upon is that capacity building is typically about strengthening the ability of individuals, organisations or communities to make change for the better (James & Hailey 2007).

Any action aimed at strengthening capacity should recognise and build on existing capacities and cannot be imposed on an individual or organisation. What can be done is to promote an empowering environment that values learning and invests in creating opportunities to absorb new knowledge, develop skills, reflect on attitudes, experiment and innovate, network and build relationships, leading to changed practice. However, it is ultimately an internal process and responsibility for making change lies with the individual or organisation itself. As shown in Figure 1, overleaf, capacity building, particularly in terms of driving organisational change, is a continuous, evolving, long term and resource intensive endeavour and constitutes an important part of partnership working. It is helpful for organisations to work together to develop a capacity building plan for the partnership which recognises the contribution made by each partner, the gaps in collective capacity and how these will be addressed. Such a plan helps demonstrate the two way nature of capacity building and the added value of the partnership as well as improves the ability of both partners to deliver programmes and better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Figure 1: Demonstrates the challenges in changing organisational practice



Case note 5

ACF proposed a dedicated Capacity Building Advisor to be based at CINDI for around 12 months, to help the organisation get itself back on track. Funding has been made available for capacity building in each year of the Comic Relief project and used by CINDI in a number of ways such as developing their strategic plan, undertaking a staff audit, training the board in good governance and financial management and contributing to relevant professional studies undertaken by staff. CINDI has control of this budget line and responsibility for deciding how it should be spent. As Charlene Bangwe, the Coordinator from CINDI Kitwe and manager of the ACF/CINDI Comic Relief Project describes, “...An important point to come out of the partnership has been an appreciation of the value of continuous learning in order to improve the services we deliver...” This was an equally important lesson for ACF, as Mariana Merelo Lobo, Director of Operations for ACF UK explains: “There is need to include capacity building as part of partnership. There has to be a dedicated budget and a tailor made capacity building plan. These aspects need to be institutionalised within ACF.”

Lesson 6: Funding to deliver programmes and work towards sustainability

International NGOs are often concerned about the sustainability of local organisations, which can result in reluctance to work with them beyond short term project delivery. To help local partners thrive we have to be willing to contribute to their core costs when delivering projects, invest in their organisational development, create opportunities for them to network and engage with other local and international development actors, and support their efforts to generate and diversify sources of income (Michael, 2004).

Whether international or local NGO, in order to deliver quality programmes an organisation needs skilled and experienced staff, logistical and financial support structures, and relevant equipment and materials. When working with a local partner to implement activities, it is important to ensure sufficient contribution to the organisation’s core costs is planned into the budget. Competitive salaries are needed to attract and retain skilled programme and support staff. Office space, vehicles, computers, other office equipment and utilities are vital for an organisation to operate.

Local NGOs are often financially dependent on donors and so vulnerable to their typically short term and changeable programming trends. There is not necessarily a culture of public giving or private sector philanthropy in a country where a local NGO is based, which can make this dependence even more acute. As a result, local NGOs often spend a great deal of time and energy trying to survive rather than concentrating on improving and developing their programmes.



Case note 6

Although the first draft of the Year 1 Comic Relief budget was developed jointly between ACF and CINDI, it was later found not to adequately reflect the cost of delivering the project or the need to reinforce the organisation.

As the reality of CINDI's precarious financial situation became clear, the budget was revised and greater support dedicated to staff salaries, capacity building and organisational running costs. In particular, the salary contribution to the Executive Director and Finance Manager position's were increased significantly and helped CINDI attract skilled and experienced staff in these key positions.

As a 4 year project, Comic Relief also provided some financial stability to the organisation and allowed space to focus on delivering activities. *ACF (2009)*

Conclusion

Partnerships can take many forms, from the relatively straightforward to the more complex, each different, depending on the circumstances, the players involved and the work in hand. The lessons learned and associated recommendations from the ACF UK - CINDI experience cannot simply be a prescription for every partnership. Each recommendation has to be considered on its merit and relevance to a specific set of circumstances. In some cases it may not be appropriate or may need to be adapted and tailored to suit the particular partnership in question.

The lessons learned from the ACF UK - CINDI partnership can be summarised as follows:

- i. Conduct an organisational review at the point of selecting a partner or in the early stages of a partnership in order to understand limitations and set realistic expectations
- ii. Develop a communications plan in order to agree the information that needs to be shared, the reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms.

- iii. Prepare a risk assessment for the partnership so that you and your partner are prepared if a serious problem arises
- iv. Create a tailored partnership agreement that describes the purpose and scope of the partnership and how it is going to be reviewed and evaluated
- v. Develop a capacity building plan for the partnership which identified gaps in collective capacity and how these will be addressed. It is good practice to elaborate a learning plan in order to capture the learning of the partnership. Make sure there is also a dedicated budget available to deliver the plan.
- vi. Prepare a project budget that reflects the actual costs of delivering the activities and contributes to meeting a local partners core costs. Where feasible, invest in a partner's efforts to generate income or other activities aimed at improving the sustainability of the organisation.

The partnership between ACF UK and CINDI offers a model of operation that could be more widely adopted by ACF as part of a long term and sustainable strategy in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. This way of working, with the partnership serviced from a headquarter in the North rather than through a field office, may provide a way for ACF to have or retain presence in a country, ensure the lasting impact of its programmes and make the most efficient use of resources. By putting greater emphasis on rallying support for the cause in the South and empowering local people and organisations to respond to local problems, ACF could create a global network of partners from the North and South, working towards a vision of a world without hunger.

Author: **Kirsty Buchanan, ACF UK**
Many thanks to CINDI team!

Series Editor: **Valerie Fuchs, ACF UK**

References & Further Reading

Action Contre La Faim UK Partnership Guidelines, June 2008

Action Contre La Faim UK/CINDI Mid term Evaluation Report, Comic Relief Project, 2008

Brehm V M, Autonomy or Dependence? Case studies of North-South NGO Partnerships, INTRAC, 2004

Fowler A, Striking a Balance, A guide to enhancing the effectiveness of non governmental organisations in international development, Earthscan, 1997

Fowler A, The Virtuous Spiral, A guide to sustainability for NGOs in international development, Earthscan, 2000

James R & Hailey J, Capacity Building for NGOs, Making it Work, INTRAC, 2007

James R, Demystifying Organisation Development, NGO Management and Policy Series No. 7, INTRAC, 1998

McManus S & Tennyson R, Talking the Walk, A Communication Manual for Partnership Practitioners, International Business Leaders Forum, The Partnering Initiative, 2008

Michael S. Undermining Development, The absence of power among local NGOs in Africa, African Issues, James Currey, Oxford, 2004

Tennyson R, The Brokering Guidebook, Navigating effective sustainable development partnerships, International Business Leaders Forum, The Partnering Initiative, 2005

This paper is part of a series of papers written to share learning amongst organizations involved in the development and humanitarian sector. The text may be freely used for the purpose of education, campaigning, research provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

For further information please email v.fuchs@aahuk.org

Action Against Hunger learning papers and publications are available at www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk