The glass is half full? Understanding organizational development within community-based organizations

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Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a central role in absorbing the impact of the orphans and vulnerable children crisis resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors engage with and support CBOs through organizational development and financial assistance. This article critically examines skills training-based approaches to capacity building that focus on differentiation and formalization, and offers a different approach. CBOs, regardless of size and type, can be supported in a more genuine manner through the appreciation of CBOs' existing strengths such as resourcefulness, flexibility and community responsiveness, and through the facilitation of a more flexible, process-oriented organizational development approach. Here, power asymmetries through financial power are discussed, and an acknowledgement of inter-dependencies encouraged, both of which require the development of language and relational capabilities on both sides: for CBOs as well as for NGOs and donors that want to engage with CBOs.

Keywords: Community-based organizations, capacity building, organizational development, orphans and vulnerable children

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Introduction

While it is irrefutable that HIV/AIDS is taking a tremendous toll on families in the most affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, it is also undeniable that countless community-based organizations (CBOs) have been essential service providers and advocates for children and families since the epidemic began. Assistance to orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) continues to be carried out primarily by families, faith-based groups and other small organizations, and successful programming reinforces the capacity of these support systems (UNICEF, 2008; Donahue & Mwewa, 2006). These small groups of committed and active individuals have long been recognized as central to the ability of many communities to mitigate the worst effects of HIV/AIDS and poverty, particularly with regards to issues faced by children and women.[1]

The authors of this article have been working with CBOs in the HIV/AIDS and children's sectors from two perspectives: as a US-based donor funding in southern and east Africa, as well as an organizational development facilitator and action researcher (conducting a PhD study) with a civil society organization in South Africa. The experiences and findings from their respective work overlapped and corresponded in several areas, which are presented below.

The role and scope of community-based organizations

CBOs are defined as voluntary associations of community members that reflect the interests of a broader constituency (Kaplan, Msoki & Soal, 1994). Most of these small organizations arise in direct response to needs within the local community. They come into existence to mobilize local resources - ensuring that children get into school, that

people living with AIDS receive treatment, that vulnerable individuals and families are supported to receive the services they require.

According to a 2004 survey by the University of Kwazulu-Natal (Manji & Naidoo, 2005), there are at least 50,000 CBOs in the South African non-profit sector alone. Swilling & Russell (2002, p. 21) further point out, that CBOs constitute 53% of the non-profit sector in South Africa, which contradicts the dominant image that development services are mainly provided by formal and professionally run non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Malawi a CBO mapping exercise identified over 1,800 CBOs focused on OVC and child protection (Network of Organizations for Vulnerable and Orphaned Children, 2005). While these figures may vary in other African countries, there is evidence of many CBOs within rural areas and impoverished parts of cities. These groups are largely informal and marginalized, suffering from the lack of resources and their inability to cooperate with one another (CIVICUS, 2005, p. 25-26).

Community-based organizations offer the most immediate and localized responses to vulnerabilities associated with the HIV pandemic and poverty. Most importantly, they offer an opportunity for sustainable and large-scale responses that even the most comprehensive donor-controlled, project-based funding may not be able to accomplish. CBOs are embedded in the communities they serve and therefore well suited to assess and respond to local needs on a long-term basis, contributing to community services, development, and rights-based work (Yachkaschi, 2008).

A mismatch: "standard" capacity building approaches and CBOs

Seeing CBOs as best suited to work in the HIV/AIDS and children's sector at community-level poses questions as to whether they could be strengthened in their role through the development of their capacity.

Fukuda Parr, Lopes and Malik (2002, p. 2) point out that there is a massive capacity development industry based on the assumption "that developing countries lacked important skills and abilities – and that outsiders could fill these gaps with quick injections of know-how." Unfortunately, capacity building practice in Africa has proven "less effective at developing local institutions or strengthening local capacities" (Berg & UNDP 1993, cited in Fukuda-Parr et al. 2002, p. 4). When looking at capacity development for CBOs the points above apply. This article argues, however, that with a different approach to capacity development, CBOs can benefit and become stronger organizations.

The literature offers a variety of definitions of capacity, which often acknowledge its complexity, such as empowerment, democratization, purpose and identity; and contributions to society (Morgan, 2006; Eade, 1997; CDRA, 1994/5; Pieterse & Donk, 2002; Brews, 1994). Some organizations in the development sector have similar definitions [2] whereas many have a much narrower understanding [3]. As a result, while there are a variety of capacity building services available for CBOs, these have so far largely focused on the imparting of skills and training to develop systems and procedures that allow an organization to function efficiently and effectively, including task performance, accomplishing project objectives, and the establishment of fiscal operations.

There is a general assumption in the development sector, that CBO capacity is measured by the degree of formal structure and differentiation [4] in the organization. Donors continue to refer to the absorptive capacity needed to implement large-scale programs (International HIV/AIDS Alliance, 2008). Therefore, CBOs are implicitly coerced to develop such capacities in order to gain access to donor resources.

Similarly, in two separate studies, South African CBOs that were asked about their capacity needs would refer to skills around fundraising, financial and project management, planning and report writing (Yachkaschi, 2008, p. 157; Ndlovu, 2004, p. 45). While it is presumed that such skills may bring access to additional funding, it is questionable whether they will enhance CBOs' impact at community-level. Instead, those skills can present a risk to CBOs by distancing them from their constituency with increasing dependency on donor demands.

Capacity development approaches for CBOs are often based on short-term training courses that do not take into account existing capacities of CBOs, nor do they address overall organizational needs, as they are geared at skills development for individual participants, as well as imparting formal systems that organizations are expected to implement. Grassroots organizations vary greatly in their size and in the scope and scale of their services, making the standard application of approaches to organizational development (OD) challenging (Birdsall et al, 2007).

At the same time, CBOs have unique strengths that donors and larger NGOs often lack, such as deep contextual knowledge and language skills. Acknowledging such strengths and the resulting inter-dependence between donors, NGOs, and CBOs can serve as the foundation for sound OD initiatives that will increase their responsiveness and

resourcefulness. While CBOs may lack the accountability mechanisms and sophisticated processes that would make them more recognizable or esteemed in the development and HIV sectors, they have a range of capacities and competencies that also distinguish them from other civil society actors. A deeper understanding of OD within the context of CBOs serving vulnerable children and families in Africa is key to unleashing the potential of these organizations.

Drawing from experience in working with CBOs

Over the past decade, Firelight Foundation has funded over 300 community-based organizations that work with children and families made vulnerable by AIDS and poverty. Firelight's experience highlights that the more intangible dynamics of organizational identity – values, leadership, reflection, and community participation – are often the most important factors in determining a CBO's level of organizational development.

As part of the foundation's organizational learning practice, in 2009, Firelight analyzed three key proxy indicators of organizational development (budget size, staff size, and years of operation) using three internal capacity categories: emerging, expanding and consolidating, and well-established (Table 1). These internal categories were assigned to each current grantee organization by the program officers working most closely with them. Due to the wide range of values, Firelight recognized that proxy indicators often used in the development sector as a measure of formalized structure within an organization will not lead to a deeper understanding of the organizational development of CBOs. Firelight then completed interviews with two senior program staff

and compiled profiles of two of its long-term grantees to describe and understand this phenomenon more closely. They concluded that capacity characterizations of grantees were not derived nor could be identified solely from the size or age of an organization.

[INSERT TABLE]

Table 1. Analysis of organization development proxy indicators for Firelight Foundation grantees

N=228		Capacity-Level Categories					
		Emerging		Expanding		Established	
		Average	Range	Average	Range	Average	Range
Proxy Indicator	Budget Size (USD)	$15,500	$0-$71,100	$74,000	$2,500 - $507,100	$126,400	$24,000 - $613,700
	Number of Full-Time Staff (Paid or Volunteer)	3	0-20	7	0-32	19	0-48
	Years in Operation	8	3-35	12	4-84	14	4-57

The South African PhD study was guided by a postmodern philosophy and stemmed from a phenomenological as well as transformative approach by applying a Goethean phenomenology, action research, grounded theory, complexity theory and various qualitative research methodologies. Furthermore the research included a sociological examination of the current development context and paradigms, and their impact in post Apartheid South Africa. During the research, findings were engaged with by a discussion forum.

The research applied OD processes with three case CBOs and 14 further examples in the townships around Cape Town between 2004 and 2006 through the researcher's work with the non-profit organization Community Connections. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with development practitioners, donors and academics (6)

specialising in development, civil society and OD. They provided information to the theme generally, as well as more local information about capacity development in South Africa.

Further depth interviews were conducted with CBO- and community leaders (7), and focus group interviews with CBO members (14). The interviewees were asked about their life story as well as their perceptions regarding their work at community level, their strengths and weaknesses at CBO level and the capacity building that was available and/or needed.

The study recommended that seeing and understanding CBOs' existing strengths and capacities is core to a meaningful organizational development process, which can contribute to community development as well as to a stronger civil society. In the context of the study, two capacity areas seemed key in the various organizations: leadership and the capability to relate to other stakeholders at community-level, as well as more powerful stakeholders like larger organizations that act as umbrella bodies, local government and donors.

CBO leaders were often strong pioneers and driving forces, as well as excellent networkers in their local context. They could however also tend to become undemocratic with organizational members over relying on individuals. Here, the OD processes were used to encourage collective leadership (Yachkaschi, 2008).

Further, power asymmetries in the development sector disempowered CBOs towards more financially powerful stakeholders. Hence, capacities to engage – from dialogue to contestation – were practiced in order to relate to those (Ibid). The two interviews with Firelight staff and grantee profiles also revealed that external linkages

and relationships, especially to other more powerful stakeholders, are often overlooked as key aspects of organizational development. Oldfield (2001, cited in Manji & Naidoo, 2005, p. 108) argues that although CBOs have been able to organize themselves, "incapacity surfaces [as an issue] instead in a shortage of external linkages." These external linkages are crucial relationships that can leverage financial, material and non-material, technical and institutional resources that benefit the organization and its programs. Also important, these relationships can signal that an organization is serving as a vital and strong link in the systems and context in which is it operating.

Despite an organization's rate of growth, organizational development is dependent upon supporting internal reflection processes. This is often a long-term change process in and of itself and does not lend itself to standardized training. Rather, supporting CBOs to become reflexive requires more practical and relevant approaches to capacity development that are directly applicable to an organization at a particular time in its development. At any stage of maturity, an organization can be supported to develop its own perception of its ability to adapt to and effect change, thereby enhancing the outcomes of its work.

Understanding the distinctiveness of community-based organizations

The first step in developing OD approaches that are based on a more nuanced understanding of community-based organizations is to understand the key characteristics that set them apart from other types of civil society organizations. Like other organizations, CBOs mobilize and involve local leaders and community members to provide needed interventions on behalf of and with vulnerable children and families. However, their resource base is derived primarily from locally available human, material,

and financial resources. Low-wealth individuals and communities systemically mobilize resources through a system of self-help and mutual assistance, which Wilkinson-Maposa and Fowler (2009) have coined as "horizontal philanthropy" or "philanthropy of community". Although many CBOs working at the grassroots-level are successful mobilizers of local financial and physical resources, they often lack an established financial history in which they can demonstrate experience in managing and accounting for external funds. However, they are able to continue their work through astute resourcefulness and volunteer commitment.

Despite their apparent lack of access to available resources within the sector, CBOs are simultaneously addressing multiple issues in their localized community. While CBOs may or may not have identified program areas, these organizations often start out with one or two simple interventions, such as home-based care. They quickly find themselves unable to ignore other issues and factors that deepen the vulnerability of those with whom they are working. It is through this direct service to children and families that their activities are ongoing in nature. Responding to communities', families', and children's immediate and varied needs on a case-by-case basis, CBOs' work is authentically and inherently holistic. Therefore, it is often difficult to conceive CBO's work by using a project-based approach.

In their nascent stages, many CBOs appear to lack formalized organizational structure. As small groups of people come together, they often structure interactions and decision-making casually. The inter-related dynamics of strong leadership, shared values and connection to each other are what drive individual members' participation. The group may not function with clearly thought-out, long-term strategy or defined roles that are

readily apparent to outsiders. Yet this is often what allows a CBO to remain an important and integrated part of their community.

CBOs' responsiveness and fluidity becomes an important capacity in their contingent context, where CBO members are forced to act upon crises on a day-to-day basis. Organizations without prescribed or strict procedures for decision-making are able to remain more adaptive and flexible to needs as they arise within families and communities. This also enables CBOs to gain the legitimacy needed to create trust and stature within their community. CBOs' connection allows for more access to those in need and more understanding about the social context than other civil society actors.

In the South African PhD research, the CBOs studied were strongly connected to their respective communities (physical communities as well the communities of people that benefitted from their activities, like HIV positive people). Those CBOs struggled with the tension between their accountability to their grassroots constituency, and donor demands, which forced them to implement clearly defined programs and comply with costly and complicated accountability mechanisms. While many CBOs spent much of their time and resources on becoming eligible for funding, very few managed to receive funding. The financial accountability and reporting requirements of many donors were beyond the abilities of most CBO members, while the grants they received were too menial to enable them to outsource such tasks (Yachkaschi, 2008).

Moreover, the intangible aspects of capacity – problem-solving skills, adaptive management, a learning culture, strong and supportive external relationships – can exist within an organization of any level of maturity or formality. A more nuanced understanding of these elements of OD, along with recognition of the strengths and

capacities that already exist within CBOs, could help inform more appropriate, relevant, and innovative capacity building initiatives with them.

Towards a new approach to organizational development with CBOs

Experience in the work of both authors has shown that skills training at an individual level does not mechanically develop organizational capacity. Here, a more process-oriented, flexible approach is needed that can address organizational capacity needs and enhance existing strengths over time, as well as correspond with the contingent, fluid way CBOs operate. While training for individuals training can be included as part of a process-oriented approach, this approach must focus on and work with the CBO in its entirety. This is much closer to what OD is defined as[5], enhanced by an emancipatory, appreciative dimension that is conscious of power asymmetries and fosters a CBO-driven OD process.

In order to maintain community "rootedness," organizational development is most effectively driven by needs and demands arising from the CBO itself. The contradiction that often arises here is that CBO members request support towards levels of capacity that they think they are expected to develop. In this case, CBOs succumb to sector demands, hoping to access funding as a result. However, if the needs are defined externally, the processes may lack meaning for the participants, and often no real commitment prevails (Yachkaschi, 2008). It is therefore recommended to engage with CBOs over time, and collectively reflect upon their needs and strengths within their context at a deeper level, to allow real needs to surface.

Fowler et al (1995) and Kaplan (1999) propose organizational capacity frameworks[6] that describe a range of capacities in organizations, where the more complex

elements like organizational "attitude" or sense of agency, are more fundamental to organizations than simpler elements like skills, formal structure, or material resources. Organizations that have analyzed their context and that have thus developed a clear vision and purpose are more capacitated than organizations that have formal structures in place, but may have forgotten their reason for being. The former organizations also appear to be more resilient and are able to function for long periods without external inputs of resources (Yachkaschi, 2008), which is especially necessary for genuine sustainability of children's programming.

When working with CBOs, these elements can guide the initial inquiry into the organizations' strengths and existing capacities and can inform a suitable, long-term OD process. However, it is important to remain as open as possible in the process in order to recognize and acknowledge existing strengths of CBOs, instead of trying to fit them into a standardized approach.

Conclusion and recommendations

Of fundamental importance to the recognition and sustainability of the work of CBOs is the expansion of the concept of organizational development to include even the smallest, most informal CBOs and the support of their unique strengths. Seeing the rising number of vulnerable children, the support from all the various CBOs is crucial in order to absorb the crisis at community-level and to improve care and services for families. Further, all civil society organizations begin as small entities that, if their cause is relevant to society, should be supported.

The strengths that CBOs have, like their community embeddedness, language and cultural capacities and the ability to operate in a responsive manner, are those that NGOs

and donors often lack. Hence, the inter-dependence between CBOs and larger organizations should be acknowledged and thus both sides need to enhance their dialogue and relational capacities in order to engage with each other fruitfully.

In order to relate effectively to CBOs, NGOs and donors should focus on building the skills necessary to accompany and support CBOs, rather than overpower or co-opt them. The ability and penchant to understand and work with organizations of any size or type can and should become a core capacity of donors, governments, and all key stakeholders working on behalf of child well-being. In calling for this shift, the authors argue that a new set of fundamental skills and capabilities are necessary at the level of donors and NGOs. The first step will be to abandon the "expertise infusion" mentality by deconstructing terms and jargon so that they will be understood in each context and will not become an obstacle to relationship-building in the process. Humility is needed to acknowledge the vision, structure, and impact that CBOs do have so that donors and NGOs do not disrupt their way of functioning at community-level. NGOs and donors need to require power asymmetries to be part of their staff's consciousness in a more comprehensive and meaningful way. Competencies in facilitative leadership and appreciative inquiry are necessary to eliminate this divide and to identify and build upon the strengths of CBOs.

Furthermore, donors and NGOs can restructure and revise their accountability requirements to focus on the minimum structure and financial controls necessary, in order to lower the "glass ceiling" for CBOs without disconnecting them from their constituencies. Allowing submission of applications and reports in multiple languages or in hand-written or oral formats will provide CBOs with access to funding and OD

resources. Application questions and reporting formats can be simplified (Bearman, 2008), which would make them more accessible to CBOs.

Downward accountability mechanisms involving CBOs' constituencies could be tested as another way for donors to better assess CBOs' effectiveness and impact (Keystone, 2006). While too much emphasis is placed on financial reports, community members' feedback can say much more about the quality of CBOs' work and how donor money was used. Such mechanisms can also build capacity that enhances an organization's reflective relationship with its own constituency.

Finally, donors and NGOs can work to foster and facilitate peer and experiential learning opportunities as a key approach to capacity building for whole organizations, rather than individuals. This approach recognizes and utilizes local expertise, and can often be cheaper than other training approaches. This approach is also more effective when language and literacy issues are present.

CBOs, as they are intricately connected to the communities and stakeholders around them, must be viewed in their wholeness. They are key actors in their respective contexts, and in actuality, they are the products of the very systems responsible for child welfare at the local, national and international levels. Recognizing the strengths and capacities that *already* exist in CBOs is vital to supporting genuine, demand-driven organizational development that can make grassroots groups an even more vital link to the increased well-being of vulnerable children and families.

Notes

1. A 1999 World Bank study, for example, showed that 90 percent of concrete material aid to AIDS-affected families in Tanzania came from community-based groups and family networks

(Mutangadura et al., 1999). Many other studies from heavily AIDS-affected countries have had similar findings (Foster, 2005; UNAIDS, 2005).
2.   E.g. the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
3.   E.g. European Commission, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), National Development Agency South Africa and United Stated Agency for International Development (USAID)
4.   Differentiation in organizational theory is considered to be the creation of a more complex structure and development of more specialized roles and functions within an organization.
5.   Definitions of OD vary in their understanding of the effort and activities as well as desired goals. Lippitt (1969, cited in French et al. 1989: 6) states that: "Organization Development is the strengthening of those human processes in organisations which improve the functioning of the organic system so as to achieve its objectives." Kaplan (1996:89) defines OD as "the facilitation of an organisation's capacity to self-reflect, self-regulate, and take control of its own processes of improvement and learning."
6.   Fowler et al.'s contextual organizational framework includes identity/attitude/values, vision/mission/strategy, systems and structures, skills and abilities, and material and financial resources. (Fowler et al. 1995: 6). Kaplan's "Features of Organizational Life" include a context and conceptual framework; organizational attitude/identity; cohesive vision and strategy; organizational culture; relationships; organizational structures and procedures; individual skills, abilities and competencies; and material resources (Kaplan 1999: 23).
7.   The Barefoot Collective describes a facilitative leadership polarities model that includes Supporting/Challenging, Focusing/Grounding, and Inspiring/Energizing (p. 43-45).

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