



McDonald Chipenzi, a member of the Civil Society Poverty Observatory Group, speaks during the launch of the Kulinganiza Campaign in August 2015 in Mansa, Zambia. Photo: Oxfam

ACCOUNTABILITY AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS IN PARTNERSHIPS

My experience in Zambia – by Mutinta Nketani

One of the key challenges of working well in partnerships is ensuring a good level of engagement from all sides, so that everyone feels equally responsible and accountable for the delivery of the project, and ultimately for helping to improve the lives of marginalized and vulnerable people. So, how do we achieve this? This paper examines a specific case of a network that went wrong, and how it was rebuilt more successfully thanks to accountability and feedback mechanisms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mutinta has been with Oxfam in Zambia for 5 years, as the Grants Compliance Officer. Her role involves working with partners to manage grants given to them by Oxfam by ensuring that they report on time and according to donor and Oxfam guidelines, provide feedback on reporting and partnership related issues, and work with partners to ensure their development plans are implemented. She also works with other programme staff, particularly programme managers, to manage the reporting processes, as well as facilitate year-end processes at project level.

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop,¹ this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to 'work well in partnership'.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores two Zambian experiences with regard to accountability and feedback mechanisms in networks. The two civil society organization (CSO) networks presented in this paper, Zambia Climate Change Network (ZCCN) and the Civil Society Poverty Observatory Group (CS-POG), were specifically selected to demonstrate unique experiences and lessons that have helped Oxfam to build on its current operating model of working with networks in Zambia. **The reason for delivering programmes through a network of organizations is to increase the advocacy voice and achieve wider impact.**

ZCCN is a network of CSOs and individuals engaged in climate change mitigation and adaptation interventions, including research, the creation of citizen awareness, implementation of pilot projects and the undertaking of advocacy on the issue. Oxfam partnered with ZCCN on a project funded by Oxfam America called the Adaptation Finance Accountability Initiative (AFAI).

CS-POG is a network of 30 civil society organizations working across the country, advocating for greater accountability for poverty reduction efforts in Zambia. It provides cutting-edge policy alternatives and perspectives to the Zambian government on poverty reduction in relation to national development planning and sustainable development goals. Oxfam facilitated the formation of the network and the funding of its first campaign on inequality: *Kulinganiza*, meaning 'Even it Up'.²

In 2013, Oxfam in Zambia signed a partnership and funding agreement with the Zambia Climate Change Network (ZCCN). The partnership was managed through the ZCCN secretariat (the national coordinator, accountant and other support staff) employed by the board of the organization. The ZCCN secretariat was tasked with coordinating implementation of the project activities. The partnership with Oxfam was well established and the contract included sufficient accountability mechanisms, such as agreed reporting dates, involvement of ZCCN membership and other stakeholders, and joint planning of activities between Oxfam and ZCCN as well as the normal routine of expenditure verification. However, this partnership encountered some challenges.

2 CHALLENGES

One of the key challenges was that the ZCCN network members did not feel that they were equally responsible and accountable for the delivery of project outcomes. The absence of member participation and ownership – which was cultivated throughout the duration of the project – low participation from the board members, and absence of steering committees and working groups, all made it difficult for member organizations to fully participate in the planning and implementation of the project. Members also felt that they had nothing to gain from the project since no individual member organizations were funded to carry out any of the activities. These challenges led to a disconnect between the members.

NETWORK MEMBER EXCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION

Network members were not included in the design and implementation of the AFAI project from the onset. Even though the network secretariat worked hard to bring them on board, this was a challenge as they did not feel they owned the initiative and the subsequent processes. The accountability mechanisms at network level were therefore undermined, and the provision of checks and balances, the holding of the ZCCN secretariat accountable for implementation and resource use, was only done by Oxfam, which took away the essence of ‘working in a network’. The secretariat felt compelled to be accountable only to Oxfam, and not to other stakeholders. Members also felt that there wasn’t any benefit from participating in the network and the project.

CLOSED COMMUNICATION/FEEDBACK CHANNELS

The other challenge in the ZCCN partnership was that communication and feedback mechanisms ended at the secretariat level, which meant that member organizations were often excluded from decision making. Initially, information and feedback was communicated from Oxfam and other network members and stakeholders to ZCCN, and the secretariat was expected to disseminate this to network members. But in most cases the secretariat did not communicate to members, leading to delays in activity implementation and the exclusion of some key stakeholders from essential activities.

IRREGULAR/INFREQUENT MEETINGS

The reason for delivering programmes through a network of organizations is to increase the reach of advocacy and achieve a wider impact. To ensure this, members need to be kept interested in the project through regular meetings, and should give and receive feedback in order to re-strategize, and for joint planning and fundraising. This was a major challenge in the partnership with ZCCN. Only two of the planned six meetings were held with members for strategic input into the project during the year that ZCCN implemented the project. This resulted in low turnout for some meetings and member discontent with the project, since they felt they did not know what was going on.

NO SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

There was no agreed sustainability and joint fundraising plan in place. Network members did not see the activities continuing beyond the Oxfam funding, and scaling up was not even discussed. This was partly due to the challenges highlighted earlier, but also due to the fact that this was not inbuilt into the network from the outset.

These challenges meant that individual network members did not feel responsible for ensuring accountability for both finances and outcomes. Members distanced themselves from the project and the network. Consequently, network members felt disconnected, disempowered and unaccountable. There was a loss of trust and confidence in the network, and members expressed discontent with the actions of the secretariat and the board. Oxfam identified the challenges and facilitated efforts to get members to resolve them but it was difficult because some of the key systems were not built in from inception. Ultimately this meant that the network did not manage to build an active civil society movement around tracking climate change adaptation financing. This led to the disintegration of the network, and members stopped participating in other network activities as well.

3 LESSONS WE LEARNED AND HOW WE ARE NOW WORKING DIFFERENTLY: THE CASE OF CS-POG

ACCOUNTABILITY AND FEEDBACK THROUGH NETWORK LEADERSHIP

- In a network, it is important to **build consensus with all network/alliance members on accountability and feedback mechanisms** from the outset. This needs to be documented for further reference.
- With consensus from network members, the CS-POG agreed first to have a lead organization in the alliance, and to have a secretariat sitting with the lead organization (more like the chairmanship of the CS-POG). This was the Zambia Council for Social Development (ZCSD) and was for purposes of coordination and accountability. It is in Oxfam's interest to **ensure that the secretariat has capacity to coordinate the work of the network as opposed to playing an implementing role**, and to this end, Oxfam has provided institutional support to the secretariat and to other organs of the CS-POG (i.e. the steering committee and technical working groups).

FUNDRAISING AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Joint planning and fundraising are key to ensuring sustainability in a network model. Those plans have to be an integral part of the network model from inception. From the beginning of the CS-POG, **sustainability was promoted through joint fundraising and planning**, even if there were funds from Oxfam initially to establish the network/alliance. This has **kept members interested and active, given them a sense of purpose and the desire to promote ownership of initiatives**. Aspects of collective responsibility and benefits from the projects were also incorporated. All members have participated in **the development of the five-year strategic plan and fundraising strategy for the network**.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

- Mutual accountability and collective responsibility become particularly important in a network. Accountability and feedback mechanisms have to be built in and enforced by the network members. This is key to ensuring sustainability of the model. **Accountability and feedback mechanisms were agreed with all network members participating in the campaign.** A steering committee was put in place and Technical Working Groups (TWGs) were formed for each thematic area of the campaign. It was agreed that ZCSD would report back to the members on funds, and that all members have collective responsibility for programme delivery. This has led to a sense of ownership in member organizations. Members, through the pro-active role of the secretariat, continuously relate to the programme of work of the CS-POG, and link the actions of the CS-POG to what they are already doing, for the purpose of **enhanced ownership and cost-effectiveness.**

OPEN CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION AND TIMELY FEEDBACK

- Timely feedback and consistent communication is very important in keeping diverse members of the network interested in the work we are doing.
- For example, in the case of the CS-POG, the TWGs meet quarterly while the steering committee **meets once a month, on average, to provide feedback and a reviewing progress – what's working and what's not working.** This is proving very effective in maintaining good partnerships and member interest in the project. Communication channels in the CS-POG are open, and there is a **mailing list, which makes it possible for all members to give/receive feedback, receive communication and communicate with everyone at the same time.** This makes it easier to organize meetings and facilitate implementation, even at short notice. Members feel they are party to all the processes of the network.

SUCCESS SO FAR

- Oxfam, in the second phase of the project, is allowing **the lead organization (ZCSD) to sub-grant to two individual network members in order to promote independence and accountability.** It has also helped individual members understand the importance of fundraising for themselves and the network in the absence of international organizations like Oxfam, which contributes to the sustainability of projects and of the network/member organizations.
- **Dialogue between all network members is now happening, not only on programme implementation, but also on members'**

collective responsibility, and their expectations from, and governance of, the network. This means regular and continuous conversations around the work, and also on members' expectations and inter-network partnerships. Keeping members engaged and interested in the focus and uniqueness of the CS-POG agenda is still a major challenge for the secretariat and the steering committee.

3 CONCLUSION

Delivery of a programme or a particular initiative through a network has to be preceded by an assessment of whether or not the network model is the best way to get results. Networks are but one of the many models of delivering programmes. In some cases, and at certain points in time, they may or may not work. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the successes and failures of networks in Zambia, what works and doesn't work, including those that serve as models for learning, should be undertaken and the information utilized as a tool for engaging and supporting networks in relation to other options of partnerships. It is also important to regularly **assess the health of the networks we are already working with to ensure continuous engagement on partnership issues**, in addition to engagement on programme delivery.

NOTES

¹ A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.

² More information about the global campaign can be found here:
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/find-an-action/even-it-up> (last accessed in May 2016).

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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