

**Hello Africa:
Shifting power, tackling poverty by linking Africa and the African diaspora
May 2002 Report**

Overview

This brief report follows AFFORD's contribution to the innovations fund meeting held Wednesday 14 February 2002 and seeks to provide more detail and context. In sum, we report that while progress has been slower than originally envisaged, we can point to modest achievements and useful learning. Moreover, looking forwards we feel that we are well-placed, in fact in a strong position, to implement the project.

Original plan

"Hello Africa: Shifting power, tackling poverty by linking Africa and the African diaspora" was originally intended to officially start in November 2000 and run through until October 2002. However, a delay to the project start and a need to rethink elements of the project mean that we now propose to complete the project in June 2003.

In spite of original intentions, we should best characterise the activities of the last year as an extended start-up phase. By the time we had resolved initial delays in securing final agreement with Comic Relief and delays in recruiting the UK-project consultant we found ourselves needing to identify new partners. In the case of both our Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean partners, shifts in operational focus resulted in them moving on. In the case of Nigeria, the partner in effect remained the same but formed a sub-group to work specifically on diaspora issues.

In the circumstances, our search for new partners proved rather difficult or at least time-consuming. We were keen to adhere to the original criteria that we had identified in our initial exploration. In particular, we sought partners whose interest in the project was based upon a shared vision with AFFORD, in particular the potential role of the African diaspora in supporting Africa's development. Specifically, Hello Africa envisions this diaspora-Africa relationship extending beyond simply a transfer of money or a donor-recipient relationship. Given the nature of the project, we wanted to engage with partners with an overview of development processes in the individual countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone). And obviously, it was important that the work on the project would have a good operational fit with partners' existing work plans.

We took advantage of the fact that one of AFFORD's board members works in Nigeria and occasional trips by individuals working for potential partner organisations to London to make and develop the necessary linkages. In some ways, it is precisely this sort of problem – willing diaspora organisations working in an environment of highly imperfect information about potential partners on the ground in Africa – that Hello Africa seeks in part to address.

Once we had identified new partners we realised the need to share the project ideas in some sort of interactive form. This led to a preliminary four-day Hello Africa workshop that took place in Accra, Ghana in January 2002. The workshop brought together all four partners - Network Movement Justice and Development (NMJD; Sierra Leone), SAMARU Group (Nigeria); Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (Send-Foundation; Ghana); and AFFORD (UK).

The workshop was a resounding success, we very quickly identified a strong consensus around the project's aims and objectives and this allowed us to spend time collectively discussing each partner's organisational workplans for the project. Thus we emerged from the workshop with a strong commitment to the project, a clear sense of mission, an agreed workplan and timetable, and a clear sense of roles and responsibilities.

What have we learnt?

It is of course too early to point to profound lessons. Nonetheless, we are a little wiser, one year on. We have definitely learned something about the need to allow time for new relationships to form and settle in. This is particularly important when the partners in some ways want to transcend the current focus (some might say obsession) with funding and money. Naturally, money is an essential means to an end, but an excessive focus on money can often obscure consideration of the bigger picture.

Something else we learned relates to the above point and that is that experiences AFFORD has undergone in setting up the project are themselves part and parcel of the challenge that many African organisations experience as they try to involve themselves more directly in implementation (or oversight) of development projects in conjunction with partners in Africa. As we are embarked upon an action-research project we must be mindful not to miss important learning opportunities available to us from simply reflecting more deeply about the day-to-day actions we take, even at set-up stage.

Third, we have learned not to take relationships or partnership for granted. During the final session of our preliminary workshop in Accra, we shared the overall budget (ie the total amount we had raised from Comic Relief) for the project with our partners. From our viewpoint, this was a fairly routine part of providing the wider picture and ensuring that we all took appropriate responsibility for resource allocation. We were slightly taken aback by our partners' reactions. For a start, we learned that for our partners, this act represented a departure from the behaviour of other "northern" NGOs that tended not to be that open about financial matters (the more usual pattern would be for the northern NGO to discuss just the budget required to do the piece of work each individual partner was responsible for). After some discussion, we all agreed that a mature relationship in which each partner had a fair share of the responsibility for the overall health and success of the venture required that level of transparency over the budget. The experience and the response has reinforced AFFORD's determination to seek to develop open partnerships characterised by frank communication about where power really lies in the relationship.

Undoubtedly, like many other small voluntary organisations, AFFORD's management capacity is over-stretched. Donors' determination to ensure that more resources are spent solving problems and building capacity in the south is commendable, but it does inevitably place strains on the UK partner. And when the partner is itself a relatively small, relatively new African organisation, the strain can sometimes feel that much more pronounced. We have learnt of the need to find more creative ways to manage a diverse and demanding portfolio of projects while remaining lean but with enough capacity to learn from our experiences. We have not yet learnt how to do this!

Achievements and implications

The main achievements that we can point to are the formation of strong relationships with new partners, based on a shared vision and a realistic plan. One implication of recent developments is that while we propose to work within the constraints imposed by the existing

project budget, we are proposing an extension of the project until June 2003. We foresee that UK costs will rise because the time extension necessitates renegotiation of the contract with the UK-based project co-ordinator. We also expect to undertake additional monitoring visits to the West Africa region during the project's life. Also, following input from our partners, we now propose that the timing of the West Africa workshop that will bring together UK-based African organisations and counterparts from Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone will now shift towards the end of the project and serve the purpose of pulling the strands of work together.

Conclusion

We are even more convinced now than when we started of the need for this project. The project has already generated significant interest, not least in Ghana where the incoming government convened a "Home Coming Summit" in 2001 to sensitise and mobilise the Ghanaian diaspora to deepen their support for Ghana's development (already recognised as significant). However, we know now, better than last year, how little we know about Africa-diaspora linkages for development. This project potentially will have far-reaching implications for African organisations in Africa and the diaspora, policy makers and donors all struggling from their diverse perspectives to find more effective means of enabling sustainable development.