The Road to Building Resilient and Strong Partnerships; Hopes and Dilemmas; Story By Delphine Mugisha.

This year in August we held our first inaugural meeting that brought together all our fifteen (15) implementing partners to take stock of the quality of our partnership and chart ways of enhancing collective performance and pursue a shared vision. It was one of the most open and honest sharing meetings I have attended and both Partners and CARE staff exhibited highest levels of openness, transparency and maturity about what has worked, not worked, reasons why it has not worked and suggestions to make the relationship more vibrant. As the saying goes it takes two to tangle – this workshop was not a blame game but rather a platform to reflect and self-examine ourselves as a fraternity. Some of the areas where it was acknowledged that CARE had done excellently was firstly, on running long term partnerships allowing for growth, testing innovative development models, value addition from CARE technical staff, scaling up to other stakeholders including Governments and shared learning to happen. Some of the partners like UWESO have been in partnership with CARE for more than 10yrs. It was also acknowledged that CARE demonstrated commitment to empowering women and over the years supported organizations like GWEDG, WORUDET, AMWA, and UMWA on combating GBV and supporting advocacy on highly instrumental processes like the ICGR and the Kampala declaration. But we were also open and candid about our areas of attention which included; late disbursements of funds, implementing in a hurry, confusing communication channels between CARE staff and Partners, poor time management, poor quality of reporting such as incomplete financial statements, mistrust, minimal flexibility in funding modalities, and abrupt changes in donor funding leading to unexpected closure of some projects.

At the same time it was an eye opener for me on where we need to focus our attention as we support institutional strengthening – because I realized that there are a number of expectations and lenses we use as programmers upon which we have built these relationships and not really gone back to revisit these expectations to see whether they have worked for us or against us.

For instance, one of the expectations we make as we enter into partnership with any of our partners is that by the end of the partnership they will be capable of sustaining the intervention after the project has come to an end. We rightfully do this because partners by virtue of being local organizations enjoy certain peculiar mandates than international NGOs. For example, their legitimacy and existence is guaranteed, protected and enshrined in chapter 4 article 29 (e) of the national constitution about the "*freedom of association that includes freedom to form and join associations or unions, including trade unions and political and other civic organisations*" Therefore, in principle local organizations are contextually aligned and closer to the communities than CARE is. In fact in some cases they are actually formed by members from the communities we work with- making mobilization quite easy for them. In that regard, CARE as an international organization naturally has certain limitations. However, in this meeting it was really interesting to see how that expectation was challenged. Partners openly contested this expectation and said that they are still very heavily dependent on international NGOs for capacity building, funding and influencing donors hence quite often are unable to sustain project interventions once funding dries up. They said that in reality the typical scenario when funding from CARE comes to an end; it also means they can't continue work on their own if they don't get additional funding from elsewhere. So clearly this expectation is not being met and not working for us as a viable sustainability strategy.

The second expectation is about the duration of partnership. We tend to naturally equate the quality of partnership as being synonymous with the amount of funding and volume of support to a local partner. In other words, the longer the partnership and the more the funding; the stronger the organization. But this expectation too was challenged. Even organizations that had been receiving funding from CARE for over 10 years could not confidently affirm that they are now stronger, self-reliant and can find funding without CARE's support. They cited staff turnover, unstable financial base, weak governing boards, shrinking political space and inability to sustain internal control systems as being some of the challenges that were hindering them from being the anticipated strong civil society organizations they ought to be.

The third expectation was the ability to beat the stiff competition for funding. The number of registered NGOs in Uganda according to the NGO Bureau is about 30,000. All these NGOs depend on donations and funding from bilateral and multilateral agencies, foundations and private companies. Even then the funding envelope is not adequate enough to meet all the funding needs of NGOs. So only a small proportion can successfully bid and win. Again this is an expectation we have always held that when we expose the NGO, build their internal control systems, equip them with professional staff to help them write program well and write proposals, and strengthen their governance structures they should be attractive enough for any other donor. Quite a number of CARE partners to some extent have succeeded in attracting funding from the EU, DFID, Government projects etc but they said it was still a huge challenge and they were struggling to keep organizations running.

The fourth expectation was about the ability of our partners to successfully conduct succession planning and manage transitions from the first generation of "*founder leaders*" to the second *"generation of professional non founder leaders*". The founders of these organizations have continued to have a tight grip on decision making, recruitment, expenditure of funds, determining geographical scope of projects and composition of boards. As much as the founders have exceptional passion necessary to kick start off the organization and are the vision bearers - to some extent and in the long run this tends to stifle the growth of these organizations because the founders continue to run them as personal entities and not allow them to fully blossom and attain independent status. This does not only present a conflict of interests but even erodes the trust most funding institutions would have in them. Our expectation as CARE is that through our interventions and interactions – the founders would loosen their grip and give way to professional growth. We value the role of founder members but a good founder member ideally would be one who recognizes the need to groom younger staff with potential to take over leadership. But on the contrary this is not happening.

The final expectation is the ability of NGOs to rapidly navigate through changing global, national and local trends. The rapid pace of change and the multiple socio-economic and political trends influencing the complexity and patterns of poverty demands a highly dynamic, unified, focused and organized civil society. The expectation CARE has is that using the growing networks, coalitions and alliances, IT linkages, and body of information and knowledge that currently exist NGOs would be better organized and effective. But the reality is that they are still not being seen at the forefront of influencing these trends. And as such our partners are quite often working more from a reactionary mode rather than a proactive mode. The challenge with working in a reactionary mode makes NGOs remain at the receiving end rather than at the round table where they ought to be shaping and influencing macro and micro decisions, presenting position papers on alternative poverty approaches, determining interventions and budget allocations.

Nonetheless as CARE fraternity we acknowledged that we were all a work in progress – and had the potential to do better together. In that same spirit we pledged to reinforce our communication channels, improve time management, tell and broadcast our story more, foster greater respect for each other, enhance and support one another in influencing change agendas of donors, Governments and all other power wielders, continue exhibiting the highest levels of openness and transparency in our systems and structures. Our aspiration and vision is to be a resilient, accountable and inclusive network of civil society partners for enhanced joint engagement.