

Adapt or Perish on Highway Five:

Essential Shifts in the transition from AA Uganda's Country Strategy Paper IV to the 5th Strategy Paper¹

1. Prelude

This week starting 27th of August 2017 will go into our historical trajectory as the one in which leaders of AA Uganda convening, on behalf of 120 staff, numerous communities and people living in poverty and facing oppression made a choice between two diametrically opposed propositions. On the one hand, we have an opportunity to take a bold step to deliver on a new ambitious country strategy that requires important shifts in the way we imagine, think and operate. And on the other, is a choice to engage a reverse gear and move back into being a complicit iNGO content to remain in a 'comfort zone' with little or nothing to offer in a fast-changing and tough operating context.

The above stark choices represent what is at stake for AA Uganda as we start a week of deliberations as leaders of this organisation that will hopefully set us forth in the direction of the choice of the first proposition. Only then, shall we be held worthy and remembered as courageous leaders that delivered an effective transition from CSPIV - Embracing Rights, Improving Lives to our 5th Strategy Paper - Strengthening Struggles for Social Justice.

To drive the point home better, allow me share with you two different but perhaps interrelated memories I picked from my journey as Country Director in ActionAid. First up, June 2014 - Pretoria, South Africa at the AAI Director's Forum. The Secretary General of CIVICUS, Dr Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandarajah, invited as a Guest Speaker likened Big International NGOs (BINGOs) to the prehistoric mammals we know as Dinosaurs that for millions of years menacingly traversed the face of the earth. Today they are confined to the annals of history either with images in museums or in images that my daughter, Awiro Gen worries about every evening in her pep talks with me. Danny postulated then, that unless we so called BINGOs reformed from their archaic bureaucracies, we would suffer the same fate of prehistoric dinosaurs which were so large but with small brains that couldn't fathom the changing environment and adapt. While there are several theories that attempt to account for how dinosaurs became extinct, two probable ones relate to gradual or dramatic climate changes about 65 million years ago that these hitherto invincible mammals could not adapt to. Second up, April 2016, Bangkok, Thailand where, after selection by fellow CDs from Africa, I attended the Asia CDs Forum in which another Guest Speaker, speaking again on a similar subject predicted three possible endings to iNGOs: a) becoming appendages of corporates and governments that wield visible and hidden power; b) a large iNGO cemetery; or c) reforming and lending our experience to authentic people's struggles. Hers was a rallying call iNGOs to reform or perish.

The moral of these two stories affirms the reality that 'Context is King' and if we do not adapt to it, we too could be confined to the annals of history in a similar manner.

2. Our Changing Context

The AAI Strategy, 'Action for Global Justice' a changing world in which, on the one hand presents us with serious problems of a dominant neo-liberal order that is responsible for multiple crises from corporate captures of the state, climate change, rising inequality and social disharmony, all of which affect women disproportionately more than men but on the other a context that presents opportunities that we can take advantage and build on, including courageous push-back by increasingly creative social movements and people's struggles as well scientific and technological advancements that can

¹Remarks by the Country Director at an AA Uganda Leaders' Meeting to discuss a rollout plan for the 5th Strategy Paper

accord those who embrace it and are innovative enough with tools that can help them overcome the increasingly difficult operating context for those committed to achieving social justice.

AA Uganda's 5th Strategy Paper itself recognizes both the challenges and opportunities and challenges presented by the context in which we operate. It states in part:

... has been designed at a time when the world community and our country not only face immense challenges, but also great opportunities for progress. The unprecedented climate change challenges, rising inequality, high youth unemployment, a failing economic system, weakening governance institutions at grassroots, national, regional and global levels, and a severe test on the commitment by ruling elites to the value of democracy - all these defy conventional thinking. As traditional spaces to influence shrink, technology is however opening new opportunities for mobilisation, interconnection and service delivery. Social movements and citizens' struggles against injustice are gaining strength, with young people in the lead, claiming greater stakes in the varied processes of governance.

AAU's 5th Strategy Paper therefore reflects a context of multiple crises - as well as opportunities - which calls on our imagination and determination to advance the cause of social justice. This document, with its commitment to greater justice for people living in extreme poverty, articulates an agenda which we believe will make a significant contribution to our country's development ...

It is therefore up to us to be creative and imaginative to thrive and not just seek to survive in a context that provides us with immense possibilities.

3. The Ambition of our 5th Strategy Paper

The 5th Strategy Paper is an ambitious undertaking that if you read carefully contains far-reaching commitments that if we fulfil will not leave ActionAid's work in Uganda the same. My top five (there could be many others) defining features that we must keep at the back of minds as we think about rolling out our 5th Strategy and these are outlined below:

- a) **Commitment to social justice especially for those living in extreme poverty** - this commitment attempts to distinguish our focus generally on poverty, often with a charity oriented mindset but one in which we stress the doctrine of human equality, socially, politically and economically. We must reject as false, the view that some are by birth 'more equal than others'.
- b) **Joining and supporting people's struggles** - the 5th Strategy Paper calls upon us not to just think about funding organisations but being part of and standing with struggles that we consider important to resist injustice and achieve dignity for all.
- c) **Robust implementation strategies** - we articulate ten operational strategies in the 5th Strategy Paper, including adopting feminist principles and analysis in our work as well as providing 'credible' information as a public good. This robust articulation of strategies is unprecedented and requires us to invest in knowledge generation and use.
- d) **New requirements for partnerships** - ActionAid re-affirms its belief in working with partners but this time we re-articulate what we mean by working with partners and which ones. A new partnership policy developed stresses the need for us to be modest and share successes and failures across the board and not overblow the money transfers that we extend and patronizing attitude that accompanies it.
- e) **Internal re-organisation and critical shifts** - finally the 5th Strategy Paper with all its ambition can come to naught if AA Uganda does not undertake robust reforms internally to prepare to, for instance support social movements and differently organised groups that we often erroneously call informal groups. This means we must re-examine a lot of our internal policies considering the ambition we make in the new strategy to ensure we are 'fit-for-purpose'.

4. The Five Essential Shifts

There are several interpretations of what shifts are and what critical shifts we are making as we transition from the Country Strategy Paper Four to the 5th Strategy Paper. A few that I would like to highlight for the leadership team are listed below and the most important ask is that we must design concrete responses in our operational plan to address the challenges:

- a) **From being tolerant to mediocracy to rewarding performance** - it is important to make an important and bold step to take performance of staff and units more seriously. Our standards, for instance in procurement are clear, but compliance varies, some do and others don't but regardless of the case, nothing happens. We need to understand and respond to the challenges of poor performance: sanction poor and reward good performance.
- b) **From conventional to 'out of the ActionAid Box' fundraising approaches** - we have been a comfortable organisation with secured regular giving income for many decades but so much has changed and we must think very differently; invest more in fundraising and find creative ways of reducing our dependence on external source of funding that are changing in modality and focus.
- c) **From a bureaucratic to an agile and adaptive organisation** - like the dinosaur story in the prelude, there is so much more we can do to address internal bureaucracies that inhibit rather than improve our performance and due diligence, which often is a reason provided for delays. Working with differently organised groups demands that we ease a lot of the demands of our systems without losing out on our values and commitments to transparency and accountability.
- d) **From analogue to digital** - with the advancement in information and technology, it is shocking to see the volumes of paper and the reasons for inefficiency in as simple processes as approvals of concepts and financial transactions. We need to make some essential capital investments and in a few years, we could cut operating costs by more than half.
- e) **From posturing to organising, training to preparing** - at present, we spend considerable amounts of resources (time and money) on press conferences which represent more posturing than organisational capability to deliver and in trainings where there is more theorising than planning. We need to make a shift from trainings as outputs to preparing for action. In short our capacity sessions should be connected to ongoing processes and actions so we bridge the gap between theory and practice.

5. Concluding Note

So back to where we started - we are here today and this week to start a journey that will be as exciting as it will be challenging. Like water running down the valley in significant volumes - no matter what context it finds - aid or obstacles, it finds its way leaving debris in its wake, we must be relentless. We shall meet many challenges in a conservative internal tradition and a difficult external context especially economic and political but we must stay the course.

We have what it takes: an inspiring vision, clear cut mission and the essential value base and experience to see us through. This journey is not for the faint-hearted though. We need strong mental alignment to the new direction and all staff who are ready to make this shift will be supported on the journey BUT those who feel we have taken too difficult a path for their comprehension or one that is diametrically opposed to their understanding of what needs to be done, will also be supported, in a different way.