

## ActionAid Uganda - AAU Country Director's Annual Message

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**To:** All Staff  
**CC:** The AA Uganda National Governing Board  
**CC:** Charles Businge, AAI Regional Director - East and Southern Africa  
**Date:** 10/02/2015  
**Re:** **'Business as usual' is NOT an option!**

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### **A. Introduction**

It is exactly three years and 1 week since I took up the mantle and responsibility of leading ActionAid Uganda after signing a 3 year Contract. Together with you all and with the incredible support from the Board, I have presided over three rewarding years for the organisation. On account of what we have achieved together and the positive direction in which we are moving in, the Board has given me an opportunity to serve a second and last term of 5 years as Country Director, an honour I have accepted with humility.

In the last years, I have prepared and shared with you a New Year's Message, reviewing the year and setting forth the agenda and priorities for the year ahead. This year, I have called it an Annual Message and it covers not just developments in the past year but also a forecast for the one ahead. It also includes a deeper reflection of my three years at ActionAid as well as my new and renewed commitments for the second and last term as Country Director of ActionAid Uganda.

The theme I have chosen for this Annual Message - 'Business as Usual is NOT an Option' - reflects not just my persuasion but also a reality in our operating context from the local to global levels. Development is facing strains globally as the operating environment (internal and external) for especially NGOs is getting murkier and financing is suffering a double tragedy of a difficult economic situation. Millions of our former sponsors largely in the west, as well as West and a development financing paradigm that continues to favour a move to private sector - (read commercial profit) oriented trajectory. A Business as Usual Approach in these circumstances is therefore not an option!

### **B. A Look Back at 2014 and Before: Accounting on Promises!**

First, I would like to congratulate you all for going through 2014 and the festive season. Like in 2013, I am aware that a few staff lost loved ones during this period and I extend my sympathies on behalf of the Board, Management and all Staff. Whenever faced with trials and tribulations, accept them as part of our life's journey, strengthen your resilience, and keep going, especially in the course of serving humanity at all levels through civil and non-violent means.

Secondly, to set the foundation to assess progress and achievements that we have recorded in the last years, it is critical that we remind ourselves of the commitments made in last year's New Year's Message which can be accessed [here](#) as well as the remarks I made when I joined ActionAid in 2012 - you can access them [here](#).

It is a difficult task to summarize our achievements in the last year and before. However, below I present some important milestones and highlights that we all should be proud to have associated with and contributed to:

- **A Stable and Stronger Affiliate!** AA Uganda attained Affiliate status in 2009 and since then we have matured into a stable and stronger institution. Our National Governing Board and General Assembly are hallmarks of our development into a credible and well-governed entity. Our visibility in the country has grown and more is known of ActionAid for what it does and – what it stands for. In 2012, we were runners up in the NGO Category of the prestigious FiRE Awards, and in 2013; we came top in the same Award and again in 2014 we were recognised for our presentation and communication as a special category. In 2013 the Uganda Human Rights Commission recognized us for our bold work on accountability, jointly getting an Award with the famous Public Accounts Committee of Parliament. In 2014, we emerged the top NGO in the maiden World Saver's Award, tramping a lot more resourced and older international agencies in Uganda.

All the above is testimony of the hard work and dedication of all our staff, Management and Board and fulfils the commitments made at the 2012 All-Staff Retreat in Entebbe when we talked about progressively building a niche for AA Uganda in the country.

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- **Growing contribution to the AA Federation!** As an Affiliate, we are expected to be a net giver rather than receiver in the federation. The last 3 years have seen a tremendous increase in AA Uganda's contribution to wider federation efforts. We have become very active players in critical federation spaces such as the Director's Forums and the International Assembly where we have contributed to strategic discussions and governance reforms and changes. Since 2012 we have provided support to sister organisations in the Federation in a variety of areas, including audit support to ActionAid Somaliland, IT back-up support in the region through our IT Coordinator who has some delegated responsibilities from the International Secretariat. Our staff in the Finance and Sponsorship Units are SUN and NK Champions respectively. We have participated in country reviews in Lesotho, Ghana and Tanzania, our staff have been seconded to work in Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia in the last 4 years and we have played host to a multitude of learning visits in programming and governance from other countries and federation experiments like Program Objective Plans (POPs), Programme-led Funding, among others.

In 2014 we finically contributed to the Ebola Response Effort in West Africa and also supported our staff who is part of ActionAid's Syria Response efforts. Finally, in line with new vision of a more networked federation, country leadership and driven processes, AA Uganda Senior staff have been mandated to sit on 4 important International Platforms: Land, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Democratic Governance, Women's Rights and Developing and Integrating Federation-wide Systems where our Policy and Campaigns Manager, Country Director, Programs Director, and Head of Finance respectively sit. Within the Democratic Governance Platform, we are co-chairing and leading, with AA Zimbabwe, the work on Shrinking Political Space.

Through these representation and commitments, we are taking strides in the commitments made in 2012 to contribute to the internationalization agenda by playing an active role in the federation and in the process strengthening the Federation itself.

- **Improved Work Environment!** ActionAid has traditionally been an incubator of human resource that often moved on to 'greener pastures'. In 2012 staff turnover was a major concern raised by the Board and management and we were tasked to find a lasting solution to it. We knew that while remuneration was critical to keeping staff, so was the work environment. We thus committed in 2012 to respond to this challenge and in 2013 developed a Staff Retention Strategy that had key elements we believed were necessary to motivate our workforce and improve their comfort. We designed and started implementing a new Performance Management System, worked hard and in addition to the usual annual increment of salaries, made special increments in 2012 and 2014 taking effect in 2013 and 2015 respectively. We have improved our Leave Management and adjusted our work hours in the week to ensure work-life-balance and in particular considered staffs who work far from their families. The half-day work on Friday's has been particularly appreciated in this regard. In 2014, still in line with the Staff Retention Strategy, we introduced Health and Wellness Sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Head Office that have not just contributed to better wellbeing for those that actively participate but also helped with team bonding and building. We are growing as a family and loving it. Ideas are being considered of what can be done at LRP and other locations. Because of these measures, we have seen staff attrition drop from over 13% in 2012 to under 4% in 2014 with voluntary attrition at a much lower rate!

In 2012 we took a bold step to move on from a bad experience with a Staff Savings Scheme and inspired by our neighbours in ActionAid Kenya, courageously decided to form an AA Staff SACCO and registered it with the Ministry of Cooperatives. The SACCO is growing and helping our staff with much needed financial resources and a great alternative to exploitative financial agencies including banks and sharks on the market. The membership has grown from less than 20 to about 80 now with a significant leap in financial portfolio from less than UGX 11 million when we started 3 years ago to nearly UGX 400 million today.

- **Fundraising Success!** Building on a remarkable recovery after a difficult pre 2007 period for AA Uganda, the last 3 years have seen us record remarkable gains in diversifying our income and raising institutional funding, including from local grant agencies. We have been able to maintain important partnerships with important Foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation who have funded our work on Public Financing for Agriculture between 2010 and 2013 with a renewal for another Phase in 2014. In 2011, we entered into a partnership with Ford Foundation whose initial one-year grant was doubled over 2 years and now the Foundation, even when it contemplates dropping several of its current grantees, has identified AA Uganda for a longer term partnership in 2016 depending on how we perform in a 2015 bridging and transition period. In 2013, we won a major grant for our Governance work from a donor consortium in Uganda - DGF and we remain an important part of their future, especially as negotiate for a possible grant extension beyond 2016.

Our Project Fund-base has grown considerably to eradicate shortfalls in sponsorship income. This - when our Projects and Contracts Management capacity is low - is a remarkable feat. With the development of a Fundraising Strategy to be approved by the Board in the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter of 2015, and which enjoins us to work more to diversify our income base and venture into more local supporter

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fundraising, our dream towards more self-sustenance remains in sight. Finally, Management is working hard to build a more sustainable entity through some investments in capital enterprises that will in the long run significantly cut operational costs such as rent and generate modest revenue to cover our running costs. We have secured a prime 1-acre piece of land on Entebbe Road and look forward to developing it into our Dream AA Uganda Dignity House in the next 4 years.

- Institutional Innovations!** Finally, together, we have demonstrated that we can innovate to respond to challenges and replicate new ways of working. The last 3 years have seen many institutional innovations, most of them connected to documentation and communication. We saw the introduction of the CMT Tracker inspire others to do the same and now no less than 3 other units are doing the same - LRPs, Partnership Funding and Sponsorship, Policy Unit. The AA Uganda Weekly has not just been sustained as an innovation keeping key stakeholders updated on a weekly basis, but has also inspired similar actions in sister organisations in the country and in the Federation. The RaMH Model as an innovation by our Sponsorship Team is developing as a new way of improving the mass message collection, an area that has historically been a challenge while other innovations like the Board and General Assembly Dispatch have kept our governance bodies and stakeholders regularly informed of 'goings about' at ActionAid. We will need to do more, especially programmatically as we seek to deepen impact and remain at cutting edge in terms of thought.

#### Challenges...

The year 2014 and the preceding ones since 2012 have not been all easy. Development can be challenging at times. In addition to several operational challenges in 2014, most notably the infamous and negative publicity we got from the support we gave to a 'high profile' GBV case that was carefully orchestrated to undermine and divert our work, as well as targeted media publicity following the dismissal of our former Audit Manager, both of which we managed fairly well, AA Uganda continues to suffer systemic challenges impeding our potential, including:

*Externally*, we face an increasingly difficult operating environment in which to challenge an unjust status quo is interpreted as an attack on the government. As such, an important campaign such as the Black Monday is as risky as it is important in advancing better public accountability. The political context is also undermining fundamental freedoms of association, speech, assembly, and even thought through informal and formal means such as subtle threats and explicit legislation like the Public Order Management Bill.

*Internally*, we continue to suffer expenditure and absorption inertia, often leading to rushed spending that compromises quality. We are not as compliant as we ought to be on critical requirements like retiring advances in time, and while we have made progress with our recently developed Management Information System (MIS), documentation and reporting as a culture remain poor and our efforts must quadruple in the next few years. Finally, we seem to often be inward looking and 'narrowcast' rather than engage effectively and consistently with the external and influential environment. In between the internal and external is the enduring challenge of proper conceptualization and management of partnerships, both as an approach and as a relationship in achieving our mandate. These and more will need systematic and bold redress if we are to achieve all we plan and dream of.

#### C. Conclusion: The year ahead and Beyond!

As I conclude, allow me recommit to strengthening all the gains illuminated above and much more, and outline an agenda for the year ahead and priorities in my next term. Reflecting on my maiden remarks in 2012, I notice that what we have achieved together represents work in progress and so an agenda that builds is the pragmatic thing to do. We will continue to prioritize investing in people and their capabilities as well as the work environment. We shall continue our journey to self-sustenance, sustainability, and strengthening our role within the Federation.

In addition and as already shared with CMT, the following important focus areas and actions will define my second and last term as Country Director:

**Focusing - doing less and better!** As we transitioned from CSP III to IV, there was a commitment to narrow down and focus and while attempts have been made, it didn't work as well and as result we (especially through partners) appear to be doing so much everywhere. We must take more bold actions to focus and deepen programme quality and impact. Interestingly the idea of doing less and better has been discussed and considered at various levels within the International Federation.

**Re-examination of our structure and ways of working to achieve greater efficiency!** AA Uganda has evolved from a predominantly service delivery organisation in the 1980's to one that emphasizes a holistic Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) delivered with and

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through partners in an elaborate Local Rights Programme (LRP) structure. Concerns have been raised about whether this is the best way of organising in a changing context and so we shall examine our structure and partnership approach in line with our desire to do less and do better and set in motion a progressive reform process to make us more efficient and effective.

**Investments in 'out of the box fundraising'!** The architecture for financing development is fast changing, as is the development trajectory in Uganda today. We can't remain stuck in older mode of fundraising and so a lot of focus will be cast on local fundraising and exploration of 'solidarity money' in the model of cooperatives to drive our agenda. This requires mental shifts as well as institutional reforms and capacity development of our teams.

**Strengthening constituency and outreach!** Following ActionAid's remarkable leadership amongst the iNGO community in the internationalization process, I believe it is time to deepen this by becoming a stronger national organization of relevance. To become politically relevant and deepen our external impact, we must consolidate our rootedness at grassroots level and connectedness at policy levels. This means working more with social movements and CBOs rather than typical 'trustee' and/or intermediary type organizations, most of them with an assumed mandate. Most of our current partners are in this category and they look at us more like a donor than a partner in advancing the social justice agenda, if we share such an agenda in the first place. This will require a radical shift in our approach and in whom we work with. Once internally coherent in organisation and agenda and with a strong domestic constituency, we sure can make more serious policy wins and deepen our external impact from local to national and international level.

**Deliberate engagements with political society!** Civil Society, including Social Movements has an inherent limitation in their work to direct political change that makes development more sustainable. While all the work we do is important, it can only take us thus far! Actors in political society, mainly political parties occupy critical spaces that they mismanage to the detriment of the entire society. Rather than lament and react to problems caused by poor leadership and weak political parties, an organization like ActionAid should work with academia and engage better with actors in political society and especially political parties. This is an area I would like new programming. Ultimately, a strong civil-political engagement is critical to realize substantive citizenship, deepen democracy and political accountability.

#### **First things First**

To be able to achieve all the above and more, we must start this year and have already set in motion an important process to enable us prepare adequately for the opportunities ahead. We are undertaking an extensive midterm review of our Country Strategy Paper Four (CSP IV) with a focus on three important parameters: a) a progress check on commitments and targets we committed to in 2012; b) an examination of our fast changing environment and cast our relevance within the wider politico-economy context in Uganda, regionally and globally and respond appropriately; and finally c) examine how we are organised and delivering our mandate with aim to attaining greater efficiency - delivering more with less!

Finally, we know that 2015 is an important year, both from a global and national context in Uganda. Globally, a 'new' compact is being developed to replace the MDG framework and it is important that issues of justice, inclusive and sustainable development take their rightful place. Nationally, 2015 is a pre-election year and while majority often worry about political turmoil and accompanying matters, we should also focus on the opportunities an election year comes with to put a citizen agenda on the table to shape the next five years. It is a moment for leaders to account before they promise at a time when they are 'vulnerable'. We should make this year count.

I wish you all a very Productive and Rewarding 2015 and many more happy returns in the subsequent years ahead! I implore you to remain supportive of all the efforts we shall embark on to make ActionAid more relevant, efficient, and effective. Should you have any questions about this message or any developments, remember the Open Door Policy to my office and indeed all CMT Members.

For God and my Country!

Arthur LAROK  
COUNTRY DIRECTOR, ActionAid Uganda

*February 10<sup>th</sup> 2015*