

## The rise and rise of ActionAid Uganda

Remarks by Arthur LAROK, the Country Director of AAIU at the closure of a staff retreat held on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012 at Imperial Botanical Beach Hotel, Entebbe

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### 1. Introduction

It is with immense pride and humility that I give these closing remarks after 3 remarkable days at this staff retreat. I am honoured and privileged to be AAIU Country Director, at this moment in history. This retreat has been my first time to interact and address you as your new Country Director. In my remarks, I would like to touch on the following: a) A short statement about myself, and how I found myself at ActionAid; b) Share thoughts around observations and reflections I have had since I joined; and c) Present aspects of my vision and intentions for this organisation during my tenure as CD. For the last aspect, I would greatly appreciate your feedback to inform and shape a future that will make us proud.

### 2. So who is Arthur Larok?

I often use 7 areas to enable people to understand and appreciate who I am. I will share with you 6 and leave out the seventh for strategic and political reasons, unless someone can accurately state what it is.

**The first** thing to note is where I originate. I come from a small village called Opidi in Ongako Sub-county, Omoro County, Gulu District in Northern Uganda. There I spent a lot of my childhood.

**The second** is about by schooling. I studied in a Missionary founded schools for most of my formal education – starting at Negri Primary in Gulu for seven years, then St. Joseph’s College Ombaci in Arua for four and then Namilyango College in Mukono for two years. I was privileged to be among the 2,000 government sponsored students at Makerere University where I pursued a 3 year Social Science Degree Course majoring on Political Science and Sociology.

**My last** Degree is a Masters in Governance and Development from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) hosted at the University of Sussex in the UK.

**The fourth** is that prior to joining ActionAid, I worked at the Uganda National NGO Forum where I spent 9 years and held 4 different positions, the last being Director of Programmes. Previously, I worked for an American NGO called World Learning and an Education NGO called FENU through which I first interacted with ActionAid in Mubende in 2002.

**The fifth** thing is that I am part of 2 close families: I am the 4<sup>th</sup> born of 5 children and both my parents who are teachers of English (now retired) and still alive. My immediate family comprises of my companion Rachel, son Olara-Kuc, and daughter Amelia who are 2 years and 3 weeks old respectively.

**The sixth** thing about me is that I love football and it is one my most important hobbies - I used to play but now I watch and support KCC(A) as a local club and Chelsea as the foreign club.

**The seventh** are three things that shape my world view: spirituality, human dignity and Pan Africanism.

Colleagues, I say all this because in one way or another, these seven attributes shape my behaviour, understanding, and sometimes attitude. As it was remarked yesterday, sometimes knowing someone makes you appreciate and know how to relate with them.

### 3. So why did I join AAIU?

*First*, I am in civil society by calling. I didn’t just stumble upon and find myself in civil society. I am in the sector by choice for I relate with many values that it propagates and its internal contradictions. If opportunities arose, and they have in the past, to choose between working for government, being a frontline politician, working in the private sector or corporate world, in the media, with donors or with the UN, I would choose to and have always chosen to be in civil society. It is a location I want to make my modest contribution in the quest of dignity for the less privileged.

*Secondly*, ActionAid’s vision about ‘a world free of poverty and injustice in which everyone lives with dignity’ as well as its development philosophy anchored around the belief in the potential of the poor and

excluded to be at the frontline of their own emancipation are an absolute match with my own convictions. I thus saw ActionAid as an ideal space for me. After 9 years of constant work, I had intended to use 2012 to write two books, one about my experience in civil society and the other on a social issue. However, the attraction of ActionAid was irresistible. The *third* reason I joined ActionAid is that it's a great organisation - it has a very important vision and development philosophy, it has a tradition and a rich history, it has an impressive infrastructure that if we fully harnessed cannot just engender transformation, but sustain it. This infrastructure includes our human resource, our partners in several parts of the country that if put together purposely for a cause, we would most likely achieve a lot on the ground. If we add this to the global federation that we are proudly part of, we have infrastructure that can be potentially instrumental in the quest for change in society, politics and most certainly in economics. We should be proud of being ActionAid and take advantage of the infrastructure at our disposal.

#### **4. Some Early Observations, Reflections and Issues**

I have been at ActionAid for a month and a half today. While for the most part, I have been going through an intensive orientation process, which I thank you for, I have also made some observations, reflected on some issues a few of which I would like to share my tentative responses to:

- I have heard that a number of us are still uncomfortable with and don't fully understand or even appreciate our central idea of the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA). If true, this presents a major obstacle in our quest to deliver and report on why, what and how we do what we do. There is absolutely nothing difficult about HRBA but first we must understand AAI's development philosophy anchored around the two beliefs that inform our theory of change - that the indignity of poverty is a violation of human rights arising from unequal power relations from family to global spaces, and that an end to poverty and injustice is possible through purposeful individual and collective action driven by the agency of people, key among whom are the very poor and excluded that we are working with and for. Thirdly, to fully understand HRBA, please appreciate AAI's empowerment model, which focuses on condition and position. Here is where we say we look at the self, then immediate needs, and then work in solidarity to campaign and influence. Colleagues, it is simple...we just need to be positive about it, unlearn a few things and you will be confident ambassadors.
- I have also heard about this animal called workload and the problem it comes with, not least inefficiency, poor quality outputs and failure to manage the work-life-balance. My response to this is, we must go deeper and always understand what and where the problem is coming from. One group told us about the problem tree which helps us to go deep and interrogate the root cause. I have attempted this and figure that there are four possible issues; capacity and comprehension constraints, a poor culture of delegation, re-delegation or do nothing, work ethic, a less than optimal spread of roles and responsibilities where some have so much on their plates and others far less and finally a failure of leave management. All these underlying factors can be resolved and resolve we will.
- I have also heard that there are poor relations issues that are negatively affecting team spirit. My response to this is very simple - we must live our values and especially that on mutual respect, which we were told on day one starts with self-respect, then cascades to respect and valuing the other and finally respecting hierarchy, authority and line-management. Without degenerating to the phenomenon of 'orders from above' which rules quite a bit of the present country governance regime, we must be appreciative that at the end of the day, there is a logic for structure and ultimately responsibility lies somewhere and that we must respect.
- I have also heard that several teams and units work in silos. Of particular concern is the way we are structured to deliver programmes, which we all must accept that is the life blood of our organisation. So for instance, how does Sophie our Governance Coordinator work with Ednance, LRP Coordinator in Busiki? More seriously however are the silos between teams. So for instance how does Saida in sponsorship relate work wise with Policy Manager Paul Ojuman? How is Chris as a staff writer on the oil project connecting with Hellen Malinga under woman's rights? My response to all this is to

emphasize two things: synergy and secondly implore all of us to pick interest in what the others are doing. It is only then that we fully appreciate the way we contribute to the bigger picture.

- Finally, I have heard and experienced the uncomfortable reality of a poor culture of documentation and reporting. To use two examples, I understand that we almost failed to deliver our annual report for 2010 and struggled so much to put together something for the 2011 Annual Report despite having agreed to several deadlines. The second example is the challenge I have heard about in sponsorship where message collection and reporting remains a challenge and sometimes we are unable to meet our obligations to supporters. On this, my colleagues, we have no choice but to comply. It is a serious performance issue that reflects irresponsibility. I understand that there could be several reasons for this, but key among them is the lack of appreciation of how the organisation subsists. What is not reported is never known and what is unknown can never be used to positively influence change at all levels. Though a strong performance management system we should be able to apply a rewards and sanctioning system that will safeguard our image as an organisation and fulfil our development commitments. A good performance management system will also help put in place a support mechanism to help those that fail to comply because of negligence and indiscipline. We must be firm with an internal individual liability, but external collective responsibility.

## **5. So what is my vision and promise as your new CD?**

My vision and what I promise in my tenure if I am able to complete my 2 term as CD is informed by a number of factors. First is my unequivocal commitment to the vision, mission, and values of ActionAid. If there were an irreconcilable clash, I wouldn't have been here in the first place. Second, it is informed by what I have observed for the time I have been in the organisation: a few pointers I have illuminated earlier. Third, it is informed by the present realities in our country and the key issues that perpetuate injustice and indignity; fourth and finally it is informed by a larger struggle for the development of Africa in a difficult global system which in my view is an organised jungle. The first two, I have covered so I will give a few points about the last two.

Through some reflection, I have done with our colleagues I see Uganda's problem as one of an un-progressive power alliance that at best will keep the country where it is and at worst take us back. At the centre of this is an un-progressive power alliance between the powerful and comfortable and the powerless but comfortable. The challenge is to wrestle this selfish and un-progressive power alliance and replace it with one of the powerful, but uncomfortable and powerless and uncomfortable. So be it poverty, human right violation, exclusion, unemployment, poor service delivery, or whatever you see as a problem, it could be considerable informed by this power alliance.

On the global - as you all know, whether we like love or hate it, the global has and will likely remain an important influence in our day-to-day life. From the time of early explorers, missionary work, slave trade and colonialism, to this age of remarkable scientific and technological advancement, neo-colonialism and modern day slavery and indignity, Africa remains a net sufferer of the negative effects of globalization, more than any other continent. Yet we know that there are immense benefits from increased global interconnectedness. The question is why is Africa not taking full advantage of the opportunities of globalization and why does it suffer most from its negative effects.

Many explanations are given ranging from a victim doctrine, cultural difference, exploitation and many others. One that we must pay more attention to is leadership! We now know that as a whole, Africa has a significant share of global resources, but these are not being harnessed for the common good, but rather selfish perpetuation. Poverty exists amidst wealth, some have too much and others nothing at all. The system to ensure justice and fairness is failing. In a nutshell, the state is failing - but why? The state in Africa is largely predatory and it was modelled this way by a global project to control and stifle. We must nevertheless move beyond the victim doctrine that Africa is a victim of history and circumstances, and instead adopt a free agency doctrine - believing that we have enough endowments to transform African societies. What we need is good leadership to mobilize, inspire and unleash the potential African people

have, including in a buzzing young population. We can add an important aspect to our future global peace and security around a value based development paradigm. Modest as our programmes may appear, there is evidence that we are on the right path and direction. With greater attention to values of Ubuntu, Africa can be different.

## **6. So what are some elements of my vision?**

### 6.1 An organization moving in a direction of self-sufficiency

- It will start with investment in people behind the organization, our staff - you and all of us. I want to build a competent cadre of passionate personnel that will drive our change agenda. Competent, confident and exemplary staff who can be noticed out there for the positive contribution they make in different spaces.
- Financial viability with a focus on local resource mobilization. Our CSP IV target is at least 10% of our income being locally generated in the CSP period.
- Building an institutional home – a process that I already found ongoing and will continue. In 5 years, we should see this dream come true!
- Social enterprise and local income generation (we may progressively think of an investment arm that may work for us as individuals and for the organisation).

### 6.2 A Niche of AA Uganda: Something we shall be known for in Uganda

- When ActionAid is mentioned in public spaces, I want people to know exactly what we do and or how we do it. At the moment, ActionAid is known in many different ways, some identities far from what we should be.
- As we clarify our identity, we must progressively erase the ‘donor image’ that we appear to exude that has serious implications on how we relate with counterparts in civil society. This will require a mind-set shift starting with us internally.
- In five years, I want to see us being a reference point in civil society for something and that something should not be money! Rather: quality of our programming; effectively documenting and generating evidence of our impact; relating with civil society as critical contributors to substantive issues rather than as mere supporters of other people’s cause.

### 6.3 Building a stable and sustainable winning team!

- Team work and spirit must improve as should the work environment so that we see more motivated staff and dramatic reduction in voluntary attrition.
- Deepening knowledge and consciousness about what is going on globally, nationally and locally. Cutting age research agenda.
- Internal sharing and communication and exposure out and interface with experts on topical issues around the key areas of our programming.
- Succession planning for every unit and possibly position, we need to have a constant emergence of successors to avoid depending on individuals rather a system that self-renewing.
- A good performance management system that works justly. In particular get rid of free riding in teams. We shall work with a principle of *internal individual liability - external collective responsibility*.

### 6.4 Growing positive reputation within the federation!

- I understand that our reputation is already good as an Affiliate and so we must sustain and become a focal point for important federation wide undertakings.
- We must contribute more to making ActionAid as a federation known globally in critical spaces.
- Be a strong ambassador for a positive pan-African agenda within the federation.

I will rely on you all in shaping this vision going for and I would you all to believe that ActionAid is rise and will continue to rise, thus the theme of ‘the rise and rise of ActionAid’. I thank you all very much!

For God and My Country!