Stories from Africa: Engaging in International Nonprofit Collaborations

Submitted by:

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Maria:

I sat under the tree with over 40 women surrounding me. The squeals of delight and tribal cries announcing my return to our place of meeting had just stilled. My large straw hat shaded my head from the Ugandan sun as my Brandoesque silhouette abhorrent back in the US yet a sign of beauty and reverence here only added to my new status as a woman of respect. One by one they knelt, some as old as my grandmother, in front of me as if I was a foreign potentate. With each knee bent, thankful prayers for the one who would protect them from the Muzungus (Whites) were offered, “She will talk to them for us.” “They will listen to her for they are HER student.” “She has been found worthy of them for marriage into their tribe, she is our covering.” “We will prosper and lead ourselves now that she has returned.” Beaming with pride and self-importance, I had not noticed the elderly gentleman leaning against our mud covered meeting place, who glared each time Alycay translated the well wishes. Finally, as I rose to leave he spoke low and strong, “You are like me, yet you cannot speak to me. Have you forgotten your language? Have you lost your home? Who are you daughter?”

The Ugandan Alliance* is one of the greatest successes and failures of my 6 year teaching career. Started by a member of my first non-profit communication class in 2004, Ellie, as her class project; UA rose over $5 million; built 2 orphanages for 160 AIDS orphans; provided water for 3 villages; and provided economic development opportunities to over 80 widows in Northern and Southern Uganda before its founder turned 25 years old. A product of the Emergent Church Movement and the wealthy suburbs of Atlanta, her zeal and connections allowed her to cultivate an organization that catered to the desire of her like minded friends, who wanted to experience life outside of their parents’ gilded bubbles by making a difference in the lives of ‘people different from them’. As international NGO with offices in the US and Uganda its board grew concerned that its young executive director lacked the maturity and intercultural awareness to continue to cultivate strong and trusting relationships with its Ugandan stakeholders. Simply put, the chair of the board grew increasingly concerned that the executive director’s lack of interaction with African Americans on any social or professional level, as well as his youth, was having a negative effect on the continued working relationships with the Ugandan staff, the widows, and the local tribal leaders. In 2009, I joined the board as its first African American member and donor with the hopes that I could be its ‘cultural translator.’

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Lexa:

Red sweaters, hundreds of young girls in red sweaters. They sit the large lecture hall in their schoolhouse waiting for us. They ask us stories of the U.S. “Do you all live in your own houses?” “What are your hospitals like?” They gasp when they hear that I am introduced as “Dr.”; A woman who is a college professor! They ask us the all too familiar questions about HIV: “Can you get HIV from a mosquito?” “Is it true that you can use lemon juice to cure HIV?” Others are even more troubling and speak to a culture with which we are not too familiar: “Can you get HIV from the meat of a cow if that cow was sexed by a man with HIV?” They give a performance of poetry and HIV. We lead them in a chant, “knowledge is power,
knowledge is power, knowledge is power.” This moves to a competitive chant with one half shouting “GIRL” and the other half shouting “POWER.” They touch my hair while they touch my heart.

In Fall of 2005, several university colleagues and I began an ongoing capacity-building partnership with a large, religious institution based in Kenya. The core of the relationship is to build this organization’s capacity to design, implement, and evaluate school and family-based curriculum on HIV/AIDS education. The partnership is funded through the President’s Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). PEPFAR grants are based on a model of capacity-building and volunteerism. Volunteers from institutions in “north” (or resource-rich) countries are partnered (or “twinned”) with institutions in “south” (or resource-poor) countries to help build the organizational capacity for the south countries to eventually manage and run their own programs.

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Discourse, Identity, and Power in a Global Context

Both of our experiences invite a number of conceptual lenses for reflection on organizational practice, theory, and communication within non-profit organizations. In fact in our emails developing this position paper, we each outlined a number of possible routes of examination for our work including public health communication, founder/board relations, and organizational effectiveness. We talked about how in an increasingly global forum, it is no longer unusual to see multicultural and multinational work teams and organizational partnerships in non-profit organizations like the ones we describe. Yet, in the end, no matter the plethora of directions discussed, we continually found ourselves back at questions of power, discourse, and identity. Despite working in neighboring countries with NGOs with similar organizational emphasis, the discourses of our organizing shaped us in unique ways.

Stohl (2005) notes that most models of globalization focus on convergence and divergence in which differences were collapsed into universals (convergence) or accentuated cultural differences (divergences). She found both models lacking, arguing that both failed to conceptualize the paradoxes implicit in global, organizational work. We are not just similar or different; we are both/and. We must consider the dialectical tensions inherent in such organization as well as the considerations of gender, sexuality, and race. Furthermore, we must recognize the issues of globalization as they are related to inequality: “disparities of affluence and also gross asymmetries in political, social, and economic opportunities and power” (Sen, 2002, p. 4, cited in Stohl, 2005, p. 241).

It is also not uncommon to collapse theories of globalization with the increased volume of research within intercultural communication. Much of this work has focused on how the diverse make-up of a work team makes a difference in terms of productivity and team satisfaction (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Ravlin, Thomas, & Ilsev, 2000). What is missing from much of the research, however, is a focus on the actual practices of communication, the “talk in action” or the discursive formations of meaning, especially of intercultural encounters (Aritz & Walker, 2010, p. 22, emphasis added) and the implications of this for identity construction and power relations.
Therefore, in an effort to provide more “talk-in-action”, the following will present more narratives from our individual experiences as well as combined theoretical reflections on what they seem to indicate for working with nonprofits in an international context. We do this in an effort to open a dialogue that we hope we will continue with each other as well as the rest of the group.

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Lexa:

A week before a scheduled exchange, the agenda is sent from the South partners. The communication module has been expanded to three hours and the HIV modules have been eliminated. This is curious as one of the North U.S. partners is an internationally recognized scholar in HIV prevention. He was replaced with a local person with far fewer credentials. Once in country, they learn that “someone complained” when the U.S. North partners were facilitating a conversation about HIV/AIDS in a rural community group. Members of the group were “offended” because the U.S. partners were “promoting teachings against the church” when they taught about the three types of sexual acts that can lead to HIV/AIDS. They wrote anal, oral, and vaginal on the chalk board in the community classroom. Including “anal” as a form of sex was “promoting homosexuality,” something that goes directly against the values of the church and is illegal in Kenya. I look from side to side, two of the members of the U.S. partners are gay men. They remain silent.

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Maria:

When Bruce saw the Land Cruiser’s bent axle he turned a bright shade of pink. Caleb was still outside the compound gate speaking to a tribesman about the ‘adventure’ in the North that caused to the jeep to get stuck on the hidden sand bar. As Caleb limped in, Bruce demanded immediately to know how Caleb was going to reimburse UA for the damage. The smoothness of Caleb’s face disappeared into a furrowed brow and tightened lips. As Bruce continued to rail about the cost to the ‘organization’ and how Caleb should not have depended on old tribal paths rather than taking the newer highways, Caleb’s ebony complexion never changed from its stoney silence. Assured that Bruce’s admonitions were finished, Caleb stalked away back toward the house. Passing me he said, a statement that would come to symbolize who Bruce would become to the tribe—“He cared more about his precious car and his precious organization, than he did for my own health. He does not love my people. He does not love me. Not once did he inquire after me.”

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Discourse is an institutionalized way of speaking that can mark membership in a community or organization and indicate power relations. For Foucault (1972), discourse is controlled by objects (what can be spoken of), ritual (where and how one may speak), and the privileged (who may speak). We can see how role status and networks of influence relate to issues of authority and voice (Murphy and Eisenberg, 2008). The disciplinary and community structure does not afford voice to someone lower in the hierarchy. However, discourse not only shapes our organizational role and voice through traditional hierachal dyadic structures.
manager-managed; NGO staff-NGO volunteer. Instead, Foucault (1988) argues that discourse serves as the conduit for non-task related pleasurable relationships such as organizational friendships and alliances to facilitate the cultivation, expression, or suppression of the deepest desires of our interiority even when those expressions or desires are not in our own best interests (Dixon, 2007). What intrigued Foucault (1988) near the end of his life was the way in which variables of desire and pleasure showed the power inherent in all human entanglements. Foucault pointed out that the relationships that are the most compelling and powerful are the ones in which individuals endeavor to “transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (1988, p. 18). Foucault’s explanation infers that our interpersonal relationships, which provide a sense of pleasure and well-being are stronger determinants of how we experience and enact power than fear and domination which are thought to typically characterize our organizational entanglements (Dixon, 2007). Therefore, the most powerful organizational relationships are not necessarily those of hierarchy but those of pleasure-the more pleasurable and transformative the relational tie, the more power that actually flows between the relational partners.

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Maria:

I could not believe my ears. Ellie explained that to her UA was not so much about helping the orphans and widows of the villages but it was a place in which young people like her could come and find themselves as they lived and worked in Uganda. “This is not the mission the board agreed to and this is not what we are raising money for”, I replied. “I know but as the founder the mission is whatever I say it is”, Ellie said shifting in her chair. “Ellie, based on that statement, I should go back and change your grade in Non-Profit, I can’t believe you just said that!” I felt dizzy—was it the fact that I had shifted from Board chair to Professor in a matter of two sentences or was it that I was so angry I was going to have a stroke? “Ellie, there is no way in hell donors are going to give money so that a bunch of wealthy white students can come over to Uganda and plant some gardens, buy some cloth, say some prayers, and take pictures with the poor natives. That’s not why I signed on that’s not why the United Methodist Church signed on. Our first goal is to fulfill the mission that seeks to create sustainable opportunities for these women not only to survive but to thrive—I hope one day, they are running UA and we are sitting on a board filled with the very women we helped. Ellie laughed. “Running UA? Everybody knows you can’t trust them with the money or the organization.” Feeling the tears burning in my eyes, I looked beyond Ellie to the Nile and replied, “I am THEM. If you can’t trust them with the organization, maybe you can’t trust me as the Chairman of the Board”. Without missing a beat she replied, “I don’t.”

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Lexa:

While sitting in the meeting, the chimes ring and over the loud speaker a prayer begins. All members of the partnership pause the conversation, bow their heads, and make the sign of the cross. I am not religious. This is also something that is not openly shared. Yet, I travel over 8000 miles twice a year to work with a religious organization. I bow my head respectfully when
they pray. Rather than make the sign of the cross, I discretely raise my hand to “scratch” my noses. The upward movement is enough to satisfy the ongoing performance. I am committed to the cause, but not the religious culture. Two of my colleagues are also gay. But, not in Kenya. They keep this part of their selves shared only within the safe space of our small, U.S. group.

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When working in international collaborations, we cannot ignore the complex ways in which our social identities intersect, conflict, form, and resist power relationships. Allen (2011) draws on theories of social identity and social construction to explore how issues of power and identity are integral to understandings of diversity in organizations. In a more global context, Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) state “The complex intersections between multiple subjectivities of issues of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and language remain underhighlighted in much of organizational communication scholarship and, yet, these are central to becoming sensitive to a postcolonial vision of our disciplinary future” (p. 261).

In sharing our experiences with each other we learned that just like the global communities within which we work, we ourselves are not just similar or different, but are both similar and different. Our stories are different as they are shaped by our own positionalities; yet, they converge in such remarkable ways when we consider our common political, social, and cultural struggles with our sense of who we are and how we “fit” (or not) into the social communities and cultural relationships within which we are working. In the end, this is just the beginning. The stories we share in this short position paper are just a start in our effort to address the call for more studies in diversity in organizations and the need to situate these studies in increasingly popular collaborative, cross-cultural and international contexts.
Works Cited


