

‘Taking OD to heart’

By Anders Jacobsen, Process Consultant with IAS (International Aid Services)¹

‘OD is most important for partners’ may not be the public rhetoric of Northern NGOs, but it often describes the reality of their practice. The focus of attention follows the flow of money. Therefore almost all OD targets the Southern local partner and their needs. The Northern NGOs do not pay a lot of attention to their own need for organisational change though it clearly affects the work and ultimately the goals of the organisation. Through the Africa Encounter meeting of this learning group last November, I realised that OD tools was not just something I could use in working ‘outwards’ with partners, but also something that was essential to implement organisational changes ‘inwards’ within my own Northern NGO. This short paper explains why and how...

Hit and Run OD

In 2005 I was sent to Kenya by the Danish office of IAS to oversee the projects funded by DANIDA (Danish Foreign Ministry Aid Agency) in South Sudan, Somaliland, Kenya and Tanzania. I had always been interested in people and OD, so this work was truly exiting and extremely challenging. I quickly linked up with the local partners who were implementing the projects. Part of my terms of reference was to find areas in which they needed strengthening so that they might stand as strong advocates for the vulnerable and marginalised in the local community. My first two years could best be described as ‘hit and run’ efforts. My time to visit partners and give adequate support with advice, training and mentoring was very limited.

Yet although the focus was on the partners, I increasingly realised my own organisation was facing a number of challenges. My own organisation had grown rapidly. A new legal body was formed in 2008 together with an international secretariat to support and streamline the organisation. But there were also issues such as:

- Overlapping and confused roles between the headquarters and field offices of my own organisation
- No coherent approaches and procedures for cooperation with local partners.
- Almost no time or resources invested in learning from experience and capturing best practices in working with local partners
- Very limited preparation and training for Northern churches in professional partnering with Southern Churches

Eye-Opener - Africa Encounter 2010

In November 2010 I attended the Africa Encounter meeting of the OD and Christian Organisation learning group. It changed my perspective on OD. Since OD has never been part of my studies or job description in my previous commercial/ secular professional life, the exposure to fully-fledged OD consultants at the AE made me consider the OD role I played in my work.

¹ This article does not necessarily reflect the view of the IAS

One of the biggest eye-openers for me was to realise I did not only have to work “outwards” to facilitate OD with local partners, but also that it was essential and legitimate to work “inwards”. To be consistent, I also had to work horizontally to colleagues and peers and vertically to my staff and supervisors in my own organisation.

While our organisation of 300 staff has no-one focused on internal OD, I heard that this is not uncommon in activist NGOs. Does this mean that we might as well can throw our hands in the air and let the ship take its own course? Of course not. This is where we decide to take up the good fight against the lack of time, interest, and resources. There are always numerous constraints.

Taking up the good fight

But it is still possible to do something. Not having the leadership position and power to make executive decisions for the rest of the organisation, I have chosen to influence by example. Inspired by one of the participants at the Africa Encounter², who used simple and practical strategic means to reach his objectives, I have set out to change my own organisation. I want it to be the best to partner with when it comes to implementing development projects in faith based organisations. I have responsibility for our work in Tanzania. If I do this well, it may provide a road map for others to follow. Rather than just to wait and let opportunities pass, I have decided to do what I can.

Some of the ways I have chosen to prompt internal organisational change include:

1. Involving senior leadership - inviting them to take part in trainings to see and feel the difference of this approach, in official ceremonies for them to hear the good testimonies from the work and in monitoring exercises to witness the positive approach and development.
2. Involving peer colleagues - sharing approaches and training material and inviting them to key activities to get the sense of true partnership in development projects.
3. Involving staff -proper induction, support and follow-up makes a big difference. The good old way of “see what I do, do it with me, and let me see you do it” though time-consuming, still works.
4. Documenting approaches, methods and tools for compilation in a partner manual
5. Setting up our country office to be an example in striving for healthy and strong partnerships with local partners by defining roles, the shared responsibilities, and the meaning of terms such as transparency and accountability.

This focus on the ‘internal’, does not distract attention from, but actually reinforces, the external work with partners. If we can change our own Northern organisation, this may be the greatest contribution we can make to our partners’ change. Not only does it show consistency in our approach to OD, but it also helps our outward work of empowering local partners have a much greater impact. This will contribute to lasting effects on the lives of the vulnerable and marginalised groups in the local communities that we are ultimately set up to serve.

² The author of the April letter