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Learning Agenda Mini-Case #12

Kenya

Viwango

Introduction

“How might we enable local organizations to be more accountable to us as a society?” This simple question has driven years of collective action by a cross section of Kenyan civil society leaders and led to the establishment of Viwango according to John Batten, its Board Chair. Viwango, Swahili for “Standards,” is an independent, standards setting and certification organization for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Kenya. Formally established in 2011, its primary role is to promote the adoption of minimum quality standards by CSOs in Kenya¹.

According to Batten, by the early 2000’s Kenyan CSOs had fallen out of favor with much of society at large for a number of reasons—increased questioning of CSO integrity; a strong shift toward short-term, projectized, and donor-driven CSO activities; perceived gaps in CSO capacity, most notably in the areas of governance, transparency, knowledge management, and local resource mobilization; and poor NGO regulation and coordination. To Batten and his colleagues, strong, locally-driven efforts at self-regulation of the sector are the best way forward.

“I see the current climate [USAID and other donors’ focus on capacity building] as a positive development. It should help organizations become stronger and more independent,” says Batten. Despite their shared interest in a stronger, more accountable civil society and USAID’s recent investments in developing local capacity in Kenya, Viwango and USAID are not entirely sure how to collaborate.

Viwango’s History

The roots of what has become Viwango can be found in a study commissioned by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in 2007. The purpose of the study entitled, “Enhancing the Competence and Sustainability of High Quality CSOs in Kenya,” was to establish what were considered to be the standards and qualities of an exemplary CSO and to identify organizations offering capacity development in the region, the areas in which capacity development was being offered and to determine the gaps in capacity development services². The study was conducted by the Poverty Eradication Network (PEN), a local organization founded in 2001 for the specific purpose of strengthening not-for-profit organizations throughout East Africa.

¹ Viwango Web Page <http://www.viwango.org> accessed on June 13, 2013

² “Enhancing the Competence and Sustainability of High Quality CSOs in Kenya”. Poverty Eradication Network. May 2007.

In the course of the study PEN conducted a survey and then convened a group of CSO thought leaders and capacity development providers to deliberate the study's central questions. Drawing heavily on the results of this one day meeting, the study produced a set of consensus points³ including:

- There is need to establish clear standards and qualities for CSOs, promote best practices and provide holistic capacity development.
- An effective and enabling regulatory and policy environment is critical for ensuring compliance with any standards.
- Many CSOs lack requisite skills to manage their organizations and programs. Yet, there are few competent capacity development providers offering quality and sustainable services.

Recognizing the needs highlighted in the PEN study, AKDN convened the Strategic Thinkers Forum made up of a few key capacity development institutions. Each member institution had its own approach to capacity development, its own proprietary organizational assessment tool, and its own standards (implicit or explicit) of CSO conduct and performance. Among the forum's recommendations was the establishment of a new institution whose main responsibility and agenda would be to drive professionalism and integrity among CSOs using a harmonized set of CSO capacity development approaches and certification standards.

Out of this forum came the Kenya Civil Society Competence and Sustainability Programme (KCS-CSP), a low-cost attempt to carry out extensive consultations with a broad cross-section of Kenyan civil society and develop a set of minimum Civil Society Standards, a Code of Practice and a Self-Assessment Tool. This effort was a precursor to Viwango that brought together seven institutions and included engagement with international NGOs and the NGO Coordinating Board.

Institutionalizing its Core Intellectual Property- Viwango Today

With this core intellectual property in place—Civil Society Standards, a Code of Practice and a Self-Assessment Tool—the choice was made to institutionalize it and put it in the public domain as Viwango. In 2011 Viwango was officially registered as a non-profit company limited by guarantee in Kenya. Viwango at its establishment had 13 founding organizations and a provisional board with 11 members. By 2012 Viwango had a permanent board and its first CEO, Gerald Walterfang. PEN has stewarded Viwango since its establishment, hosting the Viwango secretariat in its offices and providing it with logistical, administrative, and financial support. Under its current CEO named in May 2013, Sheila Mugo, Viwango is structured around its two core functions: facilitating CSO self-assessment and CSO certification. According to Batten, Viwango early on made the strategic choice not to provide capacity development services directly, feeling it represented a conflict of interest for its CSO certification program.

As of May 2012 Viwango has trained 105 CSOs (both community-based organizations and larger local NGOs) in the use of its CSO Standards, Code of Practice, and Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool. These organizations have then conducted voluntary organizational

³ "Enhancing the Competence and Sustainability of High Quality CSOs in Kenya". Poverty Eradication Network. May 2007.

self-assessments. This work has been undertaken with grantees of associated partners such as Aga Khan Foundation, Peace Net Kenya in collaboration with European Union and Poverty Eradication Network under the Sikika Hasa Campaign, OXFAM GB, ACT, and Plan International, but not USAID.

Viwango is continuing to refine and promote its CSO certification process in partnership with The Kenya Community Development Foundation (KCDF). One effort is to develop a Standards and Certification Committee within Viwango that will operate independently of its Board of Directors and oversee the CSO certification process. Viwango feels this is critical in order to build a credible, objective, independent, and rigorous certification process. KCDF is also supporting the pilot CSO certifications of a cohort of local Kenyan CSOs. Once fully operational, Viwango's CSO certification program will confer Gold, Silver, and Bronze level certifications.

Public Benefits Organizations Act of 2013

The passage of the Public Benefits Organizations (PBO) Act of 2013 is the first major overhaul of the regulatory framework for CSOs in Kenya in more than 20 years. While the relevant government bodies have not yet formulated the necessary rules and procedures to operationalize the new Act, several civil society actors including Viwango played a fundamental role in the drafting and passage of the Act. Viwango is optimistic that it will significantly improve the operating environment for CSOs in Kenya. The new Act calls for self-regulation of CSOs and Viwango feels that its CSO certification program dovetails very effectively with the new legislation.

Viwango and USAID/Kenya

Viwango has had more associations with USAID implementing partners than with the agency itself. The earliest association between USAID/Kenya and Viwango was through the Capable Partners Program (CAP) Kenya project, an Associate Award implemented by Academy for Educational Development (AED). CAP Kenya, a USAID-funded CSO capacity development program, had participated in the AKDN Strategic Thinkers Forum, contributed to the development of Viwango's CSO Standards, Code of Practice, and Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool, and served as a Viwango founding member.

When USAID/Kenya was designing its current flagship capacity development program, Fanikisha, it was originally conceived of as a follow-on to the CAP Kenya project. Viwango and the CAP Kenya Team jointly designed the Fanikisha concept, which leveraged Viwango's experience and its core intellectual property, but the process was halted in 2010 when AED was suspended by USAID following a RIG investigation into AED's projects in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Fanikisha project design that USAID put out for solicitation was still heavily informed by Viwango's prior involvement (it included CSO standards and CSO certification). It was later awarded to Management Sciences for Health (MSH), but while they were still interested in using Viwango's intellectual property, MSH would not partner with Viwango directly. With Viwango

shut out of Fanikiska, MSH would develop yet another set of CSO standards and assessment tools for its use on the project.

Discussion: Viwango at a Crossroads

Viwango faces an uncertain future. The market for capacity development services is growing very quickly in Kenya and beyond as donors continue to take greater interest in CSO strengthening and other country ownership strategies. However, the market for CSO certification has not yet developed. A high profile association with a large CSO strengthening program like Fanikisha could have been a major boost, but then again being too closely associated with one donor may have branded the certification program as USAID rather than Kenyan.

Given the level of uncertainty facing this nascent institution trying to develop a new market, how should it proceed?

Some options to consider:

- Refocus again on Viwango's core intellectual property. Invest further in expanding and adapting the CSO Standards, Code of Practice, and Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool to encompass other organization types (e.g., community-based organizations or international NGOs with long-term presence and interests in Kenya) or technical sectors (e.g., water, sanitation, and health; HIV prevention and care; or public policy advocacy).
- Capitalize on the existing market opportunities and leverage Viwango's IP to form a new unit devoted to providing organizational strengthening services. Build a firewall between this new unit and the existing operations to avoid conflict of interest to the extent possible.
- Focus more on marketing Viwango's existing assets and capabilities directly to donors. If donors buy-in to Viwango, then they can encourage or require their funding partners to obtain Viwango certification.
- Lobby the Government of Kenya to incorporate Viwango's certification into the regulatory framework that is creating under the new PBO Act.
- Do nothing and continue to build the Viwango brand independent of any single government or donor.

Questions to ask:

- What are the potential risks and rewards to Viwango of the different options?
- Which of these options has the most potential to address the underlying problems with civil society in Kenya?
- What evidence can you offer to support your recommendation to Viwango?
- How might USAID/Kenya play a direct role in supporting Viwango?

- Are there options for USAID/Kenya to effectively support Viwango that do not involve any USG funding?