

ActionAid and ActionAid Uganda: How to scenario-plan for attacks and the narrowing of civic space

ActionAid is a global justice federation working to achieve social justice, gender equality, and poverty eradication. Presently in 46 countries, ActionAid works to strengthen capacity and agency of people living in poverty and exclusion, especially women and young people to assert their rights. ActionAid Uganda is a member of this federation.

Overview: ActionAid was early in identifying the closing space issue in 2013 and invested time and resources as a federation to research the problem, developing ways to build resilience and resist external threats. ActionAid Uganda, a member of the federation's working group on this issue, would soon put the organization's early efforts to the test when their offices were directly attacked by the government in 2017. Their experience, and the lessons learned, have fed back into the federation's thinking and strategising on this topic, and they are now sharing that learning with other national offices, and supporting the development of a Rapid Response mechanism.

(i) The organisation takes action

The Trigger: After observing the growing hostilities faced by multiple country offices the ActionAid federation noted that it was getting harder to carry out their mission. Staff and programmes were increasingly being treated as threats to authority. Research revealed that 65% of the country offices reported a narrowing of civic space; for example Cambodia was struggling on land rights, Gambia was facing restrictions around their youth work, and Ethiopia was experiencing funding restrictions. So, as early as 2013/2014, the issue was placed at the top of the federation's agenda. The key question was: how could they deal with threats to their operations and increasing closing civic space, as a federation?

The Response: A working group was established, tasked with articulating the issue and thinking through potential solutions. Members included ActionAid Uganda, ActionAid Zimbabwe, ActionAid Denmark, ActionAid Vietnam and ActionAid Guatemala.

The working group produced:

- A **Position Paper** - this set out what the problem was, how ActionAid offices were being impacted, and then developed ideas on how to respond.
- An **Advocacy Strategy** - closing space did not come out of the blue. It is part of the wider global picture, including the growing influence of corporations on nation states. The advocacy strategy proposed that ActionAid reach out to peers, such as Amnesty International, to work collaboratively in order to tackle this.
- A **Capacity-Building Plan** - it was clear that offices had limited capacity for responding to the issue, and so the working group joined with the ActionAid training centre in producing a curriculum, which was tested and piloted in Tanzania and Zambia.

As part of a separate strategy on working with social movements and exploring how to strengthen the resilience of the people they were working with, ActionAid had established a team to analyse how to strengthen **institutional resilience**.

ActionAid Uganda, ActionAid Denmark and ActionAid Sweden identified multiple layers of resilience that required development, from that of individual staff and activists, to institutional resilience, to the resilience of the systems within which institutions operate. The team created the following framing in order to help support the development of solutions for increasing resilience:

- **Internal Resilience** - this is about building knowledge and developing the capacity and skills to predict and respond to threats, with tools including legal responses, communications, staff safe-guarding, and diplomatic engagement.
- **External Resilience** - this is about establishing and facilitating country-level responses via coordination mechanisms and connections to other actors. Organisations need links to allies in other movements in order to build resilience into their programmes and operations.

Connecting with the national level: National offices formed the working groups that were researching and proposing solutions to the threats and issues faced by the federation; through this process, those offices developed a clear and in-depth understanding of the issues, and the solutions required, such as risk assessment and scenario-planning.

Figure 3: AA International Secretary General visits AA Uganda

(ii) The response in practice

Trigger: In September 2017 ActionAid Uganda endured an attack by government forces aimed at halting their operations and undermining their work. First, there was a siege on their office, with staff held by armed officers, and computers, phones and files taken. This was followed by the freezing of their accounts on October 6th. The attacks came as a result of advocacy work that ActionAid Uganda was carrying out. The Ugandan government had proposed several constitutional amendments; one that would allow them to forcefully acquire private land for public projects, and one that would remove the age limit for a President. Having consulted widely with citizens, ActionAid Uganda was campaigning in opposition to these amendments.



On hearing that the ActionAid Uganda offices had been sieged by the Uganda Police, Adriano Campolina, the Secretary General of ActionAid International took the first flight to Uganda.

"I booked my flight immediately because I had to be here with you in solidarity", he said.

In a meeting with key staff on Friday morning, Adriano stated that the federation would stand by AAU at this moment and this should keep the team strong and going. He however asked staff not to underrate the effect that the siege may have on individual staff and should take time off to heal.

The Response: There were several key elements that helped ActionAid Uganda during the initial office attack and when their accounts were frozen:

- **A risk analysis** had been carried out, and so senior staff were psychologically prepared for an attack of some kind, given the nature of their constitutional work and their understanding of the closing context;
- ActionAid Uganda campaigns collectively, and has strong connections to peer CSOs; there was therefore an immediate show of **solidarity** from others in civil society, with supplies brought to the offices, and calls made to the media on their behalf;
- The organisation has **connections to lawyers** thanks to their work on women's and land rights; lawyers arrived on the scene and engaged the police from a legal perspective, thereby changing the nature of the engagement;
- The organisation has **robust systems and nothing to hide**. They also had an underlying confidence in that they knew they had not acted illegally;
- After the office raid staff conducted further **scenario-planning**; they foresaw the freezing of their accounts and were able to put some **contingency plans** in place to ensure that rent and staff were paid;
- The scenario planning methodology also helped ActionAid Uganda to embrace an **opportunity mindset** and thus transform the crisis into an opportunity.

In the aftermath, the organisation defended their right to continue operating and de-escalated the situation on multiple fronts:

- **Political** – ActionAid Uganda mobilised their constituents, including women and farmers, and in less than two weeks, 17,000 people petitioned the government to unfreeze the group's accounts. ActionAid had this support because their work is rooted in communities; for example, when their accounts were frozen, work had to be suspended at women protection centres that they support, and women were instead referred to the police; the police did not have the capacity to cope with these referrals and so called on ActionAid for help. This clearly demonstrated their relevance and legitimacy to the authorities.
- Furthermore, by openly engaging with government offices, their bank, and the Financial Intelligence Authority, ActionAid proved that they had nothing to hide. They also carried out influence-mapping, and reached out to donor allies and other individuals, such as board members, for help in accessing offices normally out of reach.
- **Financial** – they had to come up with creative ways to fundraise in order to ensure that staff were paid and obligations such as office rent were catered

Figure 4: Tweet recognising staff



for. They received some domestic support, but also received support from affiliate members within the ActionAid federation. This highlights one value of engaging as a federation, as doing so enables swift mobilisation of resources in times of crisis. In addition, ActionAid Uganda's clear record and compliance was important in ensuring they could not be pulled up on any financial issues; when government authorities visited the office, they could not find anything untoward.

- **Communications** – the government was pushing out negative, damaging propaganda to undermine the organisation, and so ActionAid needed to defend their reputation and legitimacy. Engaging in a bold yet measured way in order to represent themselves was vital.
- **Staff training and capacity-building** – the Global Security Advisor travelled to Uganda and run a series of training workshops with field-based staff.
- **Legal** – ActionAid Uganda hired a team of top lawyers to challenge the actions of their bank and the Financial Intelligence Authority. Through direct court action and legal discussions, a consensus was reached which contributed to the unfreezing of their accounts.

Most importantly, they used a **scenario matrix** to plan for all eventualities, remain adaptive and with an opportunity mindset.

(iii) Organisational Learning

Outcomes:

- The organisation's bank accounts were unfrozen.
- The amendment on land acquisition was eventually shelved, pending 'further consultation'. However, the amendment concerning the President's age passed, and has recently been upheld by the Supreme Court but the civic resistance movement continues to grow.
- ActionAid Uganda saw the importance of civic space as an issue and have since **integrated this into their programmatic work**. For example, they now run a Sida-funded programme that coordinates the response to shrinking political space. Through this they developed a response mechanism that covers documentation, analysis, strengthening resilience and extra-legal support, and which helps to bring actors together.
- They are now **budgeting** for the defence of rights and activists in an *intentional* way, for example by setting aside resources to enable them to respond to actors facing threats from the state.

Outcomes outside Uganda

- The experience of ActionAid Uganda helped to inform an internal Learning Paper which has been shared across the federation. Lessons from the national level have fed back into the federation-wide discussion.
- ActionAid Uganda is supporting other offices to develop scenarios and planning, based on their experiences.
- Work is ongoing on strengthening federation resilience; for example, a Rapid Response mechanism is in development. ActionAid Uganda has supported mapping work and analysis of potential structures, looking at how this tool could monitor civic space and make predictions for the federation.

Challenges:

- **Collective resilience** – simultaneous attacks were carried out on peers and partners of ActionAid. These partners were not as resilient as ActionAid Uganda, and whilst ActionAid were able to manoeuvre through the crisis, there remained an element of risk or exposure because of these partners. ActionAid Uganda managed to support one organisation in retaining their office space, however, given that their own accounts were frozen, they did not have the resources to do more. There was a collective gap in resources and resilience.
- **Long-term impact** – ActionAid Uganda underestimated the medium to long-term impact of the government's propaganda against them. Some citizens still think that their accounts are frozen and some donors still feel sceptical of their work. They needed to do more in terms of counter-engagement and communications beyond the initial attacks to reverse that impact.
- **Staff insecurity** – following the office raid, some staff no longer felt comfortable engaging with sensitive issues for fear of the backlash they might personally experience. Even though psychosocial support was provided, more was needed to build staff resilience.
- **Chill-effect** – since the attacks, several civil society actors have been compelled to tread more carefully and civic engagement has become more subdued. ActionAid Uganda has had to consider how they can provide assurance and courage to others in the sector, to build sector-wide resilience.
- **Remaining uncertainty** – the case brought against ActionAid Uganda was never resolved and the police never released a report. Although the accounts were unfrozen following political and legal engagement, the unresolved case means the office has a level of uncertainty hanging over its existence. Could they have “exploited the opportunity in the crisis” and pushed back more at the time of the attack, to resolve the case and regain more civic space?
- **Resources** – how can you ensure, when in an emergency, that the office can remain operational, a response to the external threat can be mounted, and the governance or programmatic work for which the group is mandated can also continue? While ActionAid Uganda had healthy reserves as per federation policies, this was just about enough for the three months.

Key Lessons:

- **Always keep your house in order**; raids or inspections are mostly impromptu, and authorities seek immediate access to various documents and reports. Ensuring that these are readily available avoids potential additional scrutiny or suspicion.

- All staff and all board members **must understand all processes**; questioning of organisational representatives in different locations must produce a consistent picture of how the organisation operates, in order to avoid contradictions that may further raise suspicions.
- A rapid **legal response** is necessary.
- A positive **relationship with the media** is essential; in order to reduce reputational damage and have a platform for underlining an organisation's legitimacy and value, links to media or social media platforms are important.
- It is vital that an organisation **be relevant to civil society** and to local and national citizens; if it is, then there will hopefully be a show of solidarity that demonstrates its relevance and value.
- **Be transparent** about operations and mission, and defend the organisation's values.

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