

### **Collaboration: An NGO's experience (2001-2003)**

#### **Background ...**

Mkombozi works to stem the tide of Tanzania's street children through housing, education, research, advocacy, and outreach. Initially established in 1997 as a live-in residential centre and safe haven for street children, Mkombozi has expanded its vision and mandate significantly over the years - in addition to working with children already on the streets, Mkombozi works to end the abuse and neglect of children, to ensure that children's dignity and rights are recognised, and to identify opportunities for intervention before a child migrates to the street. Today, Mkombozi is one of the leading child-focussed agencies in northern Tanzania, working with over 1,000 vulnerable children and families a year in Kilimanjaro and Arusha Regions.

This case study documents Mkombozi's experience working collaboratively with Government, non-government and private individuals during the first two years of the Arusha Referral Service (ARS) project. The ARS project was jointly developed in November 2001 by Mkombozi, Friends of KIDS<sup>1</sup> (FOKIDS) and Children for Children's Future<sup>2</sup> (CCF) in response to the widely reported police round-up of Arusha's street children that happened in September that same year. The round-up underscored the need for holistic, planned interventions with street children, and it also highlighted the fact that few, professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were working with street children in Arusha.

The project, therefore, initially focussed on reducing the number of children on the streets by building the capacity of NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) working with street children. It also incorporated a referral function such that other NGOs and Government could provide specialised services to vulnerable children. The desired project outcome was to fill existing gaps in services for street children and those at risk of migration, and to increase the professionalism, effectiveness and consistency of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in their delivery of appropriate services to vulnerable children. Mkombozi was the lead agency in this project.

#### **Early challenges in the ARS project ...**

During the first half of 2002, ARS project work centred around interviewing the children that attended FOKID's street-based soup kitchen. The interviews were designed to obtain personal information about the children that would assist in future interventions. The interview findings were shared with the District Commissioner, the Municipal Director and the Social Welfare Department in Arusha who were particularly interested in knowing the areas from which children were primarily migrating as well as the reasons the children were on the streets.

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<sup>1</sup> FOKIDS is a volunteer group that established and operated a soup kitchen in Arusha for vulnerable children and youth.

<sup>2</sup> CCF is an NGO that has been working with street children in Arusha since 1994. They run a transitional centre and a residential centre.



The ARS project team was comprised of FOKIDS soup kitchen volunteers, CCF staff and Mkombozi staff, all of whom met regularly with the children at the FOKIDS soup kitchen. In mid-2002, a full-time Project Coordinator was hired by Mkombozi and two social workers (one volunteer, and one Mkombozi staff) also undertook ARS work on a full-time basis. Problematically, the project values, code of conduct and methodologies had not been decided or formalised before the project team came together and the work began. Moreover, donor funding had not come through before the project commenced.

It is notable that, because the project was not funded, the ARS project team was primarily comprised of volunteers. Since the goal was to work with as many children as possible at this early stage, it happened that volunteers were not screened or trained before joining the team, nor were their expectations clarified. As a result, certain problems with ARS project volunteers gradually became evident:

- ① Although ARS was able to draw on the diverse skill sets of volunteers with varying backgrounds, most volunteers did not have the experience or skills required to work effectively with a vulnerable population, and some even held stereotypical perceptions of street children.
- ① Many volunteers did not share the values, vision or approach of the lead implementing organisation (i.e. Mkombozi) towards street children and vulnerable youth.
- ① Some of the FOKIDS soup kitchen volunteers did not believe that the approach ARS employed to interact with and interview the children was suitable - they felt that street children needed to be physically disciplined.
- ① Unfortunately, some volunteers (especially CCF volunteers) were motivated by the possibility that their time would eventually be rewarded with payment or employment at Mkombozi. When it became apparent that such remuneration was unlikely, volunteer commitment began to wane.

Challenges to ARS project implementation continued. Initially, both CCF and Mkombozi social workers undertook to visit the homes of the children attending the soup kitchen. Although the Social Welfare department also committed to help with the home visits, they later claimed to not have the time or the resources. In fact, it gradually became evident that both CCF and the Social Welfare staff regarded ARS project work as "in addition to" their regular duties, and not as "part and parcel" of the work they were already doing. As a result, the task of home visits was primarily accomplished by Mkombozi social workers, with occasional assistance by CCF staff.

By early 2003 there was negligible collaboration between ARS and CCF, largely due to a significant breakdown in communication between the two parties. The lack of shared values on how to work with street children and poor demarcation of boundaries on working together caused disagreement and conflict. Additionally, strategies for referrals between CCF and ARS and strategies for dealing with CCF drop-outs had not been addressed at the early stages of the relationship - this resulted in misunderstanding when facing these situations.

Moreover, CCF was experiencing a period of internal, organisational crisis at the time, and this contributed to a general lack of trust, poor communication and negative emotions. Since both ARS and CCF were working with the same children, CCF began to perceive ARS (i.e. Mkombozi) as "poaching" "their" kids. Overall, a power struggle over turf, resources and practice began to evolve.

Unfortunately, damage was done by the poor communication and the power struggle that had developed at this early phase of the project - CCF staff felt hurt, undermined and threatened by ARS staff. In an attempt to address the growing breakdown in communication and collaboration amongst the project team, a meeting was held and the key mistakes made early in the project became readily apparent:

- ① failure to screen and assess the skills and attitudes of FOKIDS, CCF and Mkombozi staff;
- ① failure to proactively ensure the capacity of each agency to supply staff for project work;
- ① failure to discuss and align the priorities and future directions of the project organisations; and
- ① failure to clarify expectations / motivations of the project organisations for engaging in the project.

Subsequently, much time and effort was expended in order to re-establish a strong working relationship and effective communication among the ARS project team. In fact, at a follow-up meeting to develop a strategy for collaboration between the three implementing agencies, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established. In addition to establishing a collaboration strategy, the MOU provided an opportunity to clarify the relationship of FOKIDS, CCF and Mkombozi, and it proved to be an effective means of establishing boundaries between project team members.

## Re-thinking ARS & "collaboration"...

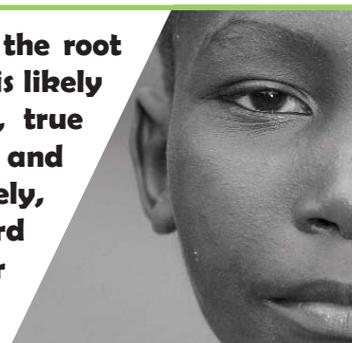
The early challenges in the ARS project encouraged the project team to re-think what ARS was trying to achieve, especially since it began to seem as though the initial project proposal was too optimistic, that it was not entirely relevant and that it was too large to manage as a program. Revising the project proposal was also necessary in order to work seamlessly with other NGOs and Government actors - all of whom had varying capacities, values, priorities, and approaches, as well as variable amounts of time and resources to dedicate to street children. Ultimately, refocussing the project afforded Mkombozi the opportunity to learn the importance of respecting the varying values and priorities of those with whom they collaborate. It also underscored the need to think creatively and to develop innovative approaches in work with vulnerable children, since many of the existing approaches were not appropriate for Arusha's vulnerable street children.

By mid 2003, the ARS proposal was revised. The new proposal incorporated many of the lessons learned early on, it recognised that children must be a priority in community development, and it appreciated that Government and local authorities need to be empowered and capacitated in terms of skills and resources in order to effectively address child migration to the streets. Rethinking the ARS project proposal at this time also highlighted the need for and importance of an operational framework that would enable Government, Civil Society and private sector actors to share experiences and responses to working with street children.

Unfortunately, at this time in Arusha, the District Commissioner's (DC) office was complaining that there were "too many street children on the streets". He wanted a "quick fix" solution that would "get rid of the problem". Attempts were made to explain that to the DC that: (1) it is not possible to simply "get rid of" all street children in Arusha; and (2) there are no quick, effective short-term solutions to what is actually a deep, complex social issue. The DC suggested that ARS work closely with Ward Executive Officers (WEOs) and other village level authorities to "tackle the problem".

The ARS social worker made a concerted effort to work with the WEOs and - although collaboration with some WEOs was good - many of them were not in their office when the social worker would visit. Additionally, WEOs were able to help identify families of children on the streets, but they were not able to provide any assistance to these families in terms of the social services they needed. In one instance, for example, the WEO visited the mother of a child who had been spending part of each day on the streets. The mother was held in detention for a day and instructed to ensure that her child does not go to the streets anymore. The child was "caned" as "punishment" for spending time on the streets. The day after this "intervention" by the WEO, the child actually left home altogether and turned to the streets full-time. In effect, the WEO's "intervention" worsened the situation - it led to an exacerbation of the problem for this child and his family by causing him to transition from a part-time street child to one who lives on the streets permanently.

**The fact is, with respect to family reunification, one must address the root factors that cause a child to migrate to the streets, otherwise he/she is likely to return to the streets even after intervention. For this reason, true collaboration is key to ensure that advice and support is sought and shared by social workers who are aware of the issues. Unfortunately, during the ARS project, it became clear that although the word "collaboration" was being used, there was no actual cooperation or application of expertise and resources in addressing the problem.**



Finally, in terms of continued challenges to collaboration during the ARS project, it is notable that a steering committee - established at the project's outset and comprised of representatives from Government and each of the three implementing NGOs - also ultimately failed to contribute to the project's development. Since the role of the committee was not clearly defined, interest in attending committee meetings actually waned after the first two meetings. Lack of participation, lack of interest, tardiness and absence without good reason became a consistent problem at committee meetings. It is likely that committee members did not understand the value and potential of the steering committee, and as such were not motivated to contribute. In fact, many committee members had numerous work-related responsibilities in addition to sitting on the committee, and as such, a lack of shared values, approaches and priorities once again hampered the collaborative success of the ARS project.

## Lessons learned ...

Overall, the ethos of ARS was to work in collaboration with various actors and, during the two years of the project, efforts were indeed made to develop these relationships. Mkombozi's experience with ARS has shown that in order to establish effective collaboration, it is important to clearly define working relationships, to set boundaries and to identify how much time and resources will be required to put systems of implementation in place.

Several key lessons have been learned about how to work successfully at collaboration:

- ① Establishment of a "framework for collaboration" at the outset of the project is critical to the success of working relationships. Key factors to consider in a collaboration framework are coordinating logistics, defining the roles and responsibilities of each individual, and setting priorities for the project group. These parameters will ultimately ensure that participants do not feel undermined or threatened by each other, and they will save time that will otherwise be spent resolving miscommunication and misunderstandings.
- ① The benefits of collaboration for each project member must be clearly delineated, so that they understand the value of their participation and are motivated to do so. Individuals are unlikely to collaborate if participation is perceived as a burden or additional cost for them.
- ① The expectations of each project member must also be clearly defined, so that relationships and relationship boundaries are understood and avenues for communication are established. It must be acknowledged openly that collaboration requires people to be transparent and accountable, and that this is not always desirable to some organisations and individuals who are naturally more "territorial" about their work.
- ① The variable value systems, ideas, ideologies and approaches among members of the project team should be shared and discussed at the outset. In this way, the team can define a mutual and common vision to guide the activities of each member, the work of the group as a whole, and the objectives of the overall project.

Ultimately, it can only be consistent and cooperative collaboration which enables Government and Civil Society to build on each others strengths, to share experiences, and to establish appropriate and innovative services required to target and satisfy the variable needs of street children and those at risk of migration.

