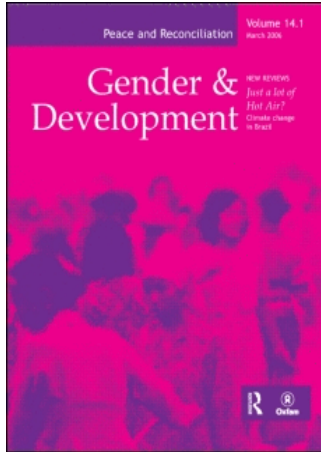


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# Gender networking and advocacy work in Uganda: controlling the agenda and strategies of resistance

Mary Ssonko Nabacwa

*Relations between donors and national NGOs undertaking gender advocacy are very complex. The same is true of relations between the advocacy networks, their member NGOs, and women at the grassroots. This study draws on research carried out by the author for her doctorate. The research considers advocacy to promote gender equality, and shows how this activity both affects, and is shaped by, the power relationships among the various actors involved. It examines the relationships between various actors in Uganda who have an interest in advocacy on gender issues: donors, international and local NGOs, and members of grassroots communities. Both donors and national NGOs accept that there is a need for advocacy, to raise the profile of key gender issues and to try to influence policy and practice. However, they have different motives for doing this work, and their agendas may diverge from each other at times. Ultimately this affects the quality of the work that they do to represent the interests of Ugandan women.*

Working in coalitions, partnerships, and alliances to pursue advocacy objectives is currently fashionable. Networks set up to achieve international and national advocacy objectives involve both local and international organisations. Because of the role of international NGOs as donors, these relationships involve unequal power relations, and sometimes conditions can be imposed by the powerful, who promote certain agendas. However, in addition to collaborating and complying with the more powerful players, the less powerful can resist. The choices that both players make affect the advocacy work undertaken.

This article<sup>1</sup> examines the Ugandan experience of networking designed to promote gender equality through advocacy. The formation of networks at the instigation of international bodies has had several major effects on local NGO relationships in

Uganda. An increased number of local NGOs focusing on gender and women's issues are now engaged in advocacy work – actively or passively – via their membership of newly formed networks. In Uganda, several gender-equality networks have been funded and promoted by one or more international NGO. The article focuses on one such network: the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET). It traces the relations of competition and co-operation which exist between this body and its member organisations, and the network's relations of patronage with its donors. Each of these actors is motivated by very different interests.

Donors can be divided into two broad categories in the Ugandan context. The first category is small donors (international NGOs); the second is the big bilateral and multilateral donors, who are usually called 'official' donors (Edwards 2002). I use the analysis of Edwards as an aid to

understanding the NGO–donor relationships within these networks. He argues that, in relation to advocacy work, ‘the real strength of Northern NGOs [international NGOs, in the terms of my study] lies in their simultaneous access to grassroots experience in the South and to decision makers in the North’ (*ibid.*: 98). International NGOs depend on local NGOs for illustrations and evidence of the points that they wish to make in advocacy at the international level. It is critically important to them to obtain the right information, in a cost-effective way, and package it appropriately to make it suitable for advocacy purposes. International NGOs need to develop institutional structures that will enable all this to happen in a timely manner. This involves the creation of national-level structures such as networks and coalitions, which are perceived to be the best means of furthering the advocacy agenda.

## Features of donor-nurtured advocacy networks

### *‘Familial’ relations*

A feature of relationships between small donors and national NGOs who work together in alliances is pseudo-familial relations. International NGOs’ relations with local NGOs tend to have a lasting influence on the activities and operation of the networks and their member organisations, and many participate as ‘senior partners’ in the activities of these networks. This is especially true in advocacy networks which the international NGOs have helped to create in the first place. These relationships are by and large cordial, and relatively unconflictual.

A key aspect of familial relations is nurturing and producing. In advocacy networks this is often expressed in terms of the influence wielded by international NGOs over the areas of operation of networks and alliances. They do this by organising the writing and application of country strategy

papers, which use the conceptual and analytical frameworks employed by the international NGOs. Local NGOs are expected to adopt, and perhaps contribute to, these guiding discourses. International NGOs take a senior role in network meetings and workshops, and undertake training work to ‘build the capacity’ of local organisations. In certain cases in Uganda, the international NGOs directly influence the areas of operation of the networks. International NGOs may also carry out research in ‘partnership’ with local agencies.

UWONET is an example of a donor-nurtured network in Uganda. UWONET acts as a membership-based advocacy organisation for women’s organisations. Other interested organisations may be enrolled as associates. UWONET is a product of the Ugandan preparations for the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. Following the Third UN Conference on Women, which was held in Nairobi in 1990, some donors who were working closely with women’s organisations in Uganda looked around for a vibrant women’s organisation in Uganda which could move beyond traditional welfare programming. Donors in Uganda felt the need for an umbrella organisation, or network, which would be willing to venture into work that involved challenges to structural gender inequality, and in the process would build the capacity of its member organisations (interview, M., June 2003).

Because such an organisation had not yet come into being, donors reasoned that they needed to set about nurturing one. In their turn, local NGOs focusing on women’s issues recognised the need to work together. UWONET’s members agreed to form a ‘loose network with a focal point to which the member organisations would convene to review progress on priority issues and the members were to play the lead role’ (UWONET 1996). One of the founders of the network, who used to work in a donor agency, commented in an interview with the

present author that 'we had an idea of a small advocacy unit, a secretariat not supposed to become an NGO' (interview, M., June 2003). The network was seen as a strategic rallying point for women's organisations for addressing gender inequalities, focusing on women's strategic rather than practical needs.

UWONET's members did not want to bring an independent umbrella organisation into being, fearing that it would compete with them for resources (UWONET 1996). Competition for resources among NGOs is caused by the market/buyer relations between NGOs and donors, described in the next section.

### *Buyer/seller relations*

Relationships between donors and local NGOs can be characterised in terms of those between buyer and seller.<sup>2</sup> The sellers are the local NGOs, who constantly adjust their 'brand' – that is, their programmes and their guiding discourses – to fit the demands of the buyers (the donors). This is a relationship of domination, in which local NGOs fear losing the donors. Domination is expressed through the donors' requirement that local NGOs should conform to financial-accountability mechanisms and other frameworks such as proposal formats and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Donors can also determine the broad themes on which NGOs may work, and determine the kinds of result that NGOs work towards, and the scheduling of their work. This results in the NGOs having increasingly limited room for manoeuvre.

Edwards (2002) suggests that relationships in such situations are characterised by mistrust and confrontation. Local NGOs do not really trust their donors, and they may use both direct and indirect means to confront them. Indirect means are favoured, because they are less risky. They use spaces that are perceived to be safe ground on which to confront donors: for example, conferences, workshops, or research. During my research they expressed sentiments such

as: 'Development partners? They are donors, it is not a relationship. He who pays the piper calls the tune. They pay the piper, they call the tune. It is an unhealthy relationship' (interview, O., June 2003).

In the next section I consider relationships between local NGOs in the networks.

## **Relations between local NGOs in advocacy networks**

NGOs in Uganda seem well aware of the complexity of their relationships with donors, and have devised their own coping mechanisms to maximise their interests. My research findings showed that while donors may be dominant in the NGO/donor relationships in advocacy networks, NGOs use strategies to limit donor power in the networks, and maximise their own access to donor resources. In this section I discuss some of the strategies used.

These strategies are characterised by relations of competition and resistance among the NGOs, caused by a need for resources (which are limited), plus the need to assert status and identity. Both these factors enhance the likelihood of receiving funds from donors. Competition is greater among NGOs with similar interests and characteristics. Such competition manifests itself in both overt and hidden ways. Much competition is hidden from view and can be inferred only by reading the organisational documents and interviewing a cross-section of staff and members of the selected NGOs.

In the case of UWONET, there was hidden competition between the network as an entity in its own right and its member organisations (MOs). There was also competition between member organisations. Yet the relationships were also characterised by co-operation. These dynamics are discussed below.

### *Relations of competition*

The competition between UWONET and the members has gone on for a very long

time. It was envisaged at the early stages of the network that 'the operations of the network do not and should not weaken the autonomy of its members' (UWONET 1996). However, the process required for registration made the network an independent legal entity in its own right. The hiring of staff by the network enhanced its independence from its members. This marked the beginning of stiffened and persistent competition between UWONET and its members. As already noted, the members wanted a network that depended on them. But it was evident that, due to its registration as an NGO and its independent receipt of resources from its donors, the network had become a separate entity that indeed had the potential to compete with its member organisations for resources, identity, and status.

My research findings showed that the members have a 'love-hate' relationship with their network, depending on what they want, or what it wants from them. At times the network and MOs have agreed to collaborate, as a better alternative to competition. At other times, hostility, passive resistance, lack of involvement, and poor communications have dominated. The relations between the network and its members have played a critical role in shaping the gender-advocacy agenda of NGOs in Uganda.

Members of the network use various mechanisms in resistance. The first is to undermine the network in the eyes of donors. Fears and suspicion that the network will overshadow them or hijack their work are prevalent. The cause of competition and resistance is mainly the need for recognition. Member organisations fear that networks may put their name or logo on the members' work and claim the credit for it. The networks, as well as the members, need recognition of their input to the advocacy campaigns. With limited monitoring mechanisms, the closest proximity to measuring the impact of one's role in advocacy is the extent to which one is perceived to be advocating.

One way to resist the tendency for the network to become more prominent in its own right than its member organisations is to undermine the network, through provision of limited information and non-attendance at meetings of member organisations. Information is critical for effective advocacy planning. Limited information has put the network in precarious situations where it adopts a particular advocacy issue at the suggestion of the members, but is then forced to cease active advocacy because it has been provided with insufficient information to support the initiative. Another method of resistance is to duplicate activities: member organisations have organised their own advocacy activities, similar to those of the network.

In the context of these difficult relationships, to compensate for the members' lack of support and active involvement, UWONET's secretariat habitually makes decisions in its advocacy work without input from the members. UWONET's secretariat is aware that the key factor in the work of the network is the availability of donor funds. Since the network is important for donors' advocacy agendas, the input of the constituent members is desirable, but not essential. Assured funding means that whether the members support or do not support an idea, it will be implemented. Thus, while the members may resist the network by not attending meetings, or sending junior staff who are not decision makers, this is not necessarily an impediment to the continuity of the activity. It may affect the strategies used, but not the actual continuity of the activity itself.

However, while this strategy solves short-term problems, it creates further dissatisfactions among members, and provokes a quiet withdrawal of members who feel that they have no control over their network. UWONET has tried to improve its relations with its constituents by sharing its strategy and annual report with the member organisations, in which texts it acknowledges the member organisations'

activities, to avoid claims that it is stealing their work.

### ***Relations of co-operation***

One person described the relationship between UWONET and its members as 'a marriage' in which there is some degree of allegiance. Even while the member organisations are often aware of problems and unhappy with the way the network uses its identity to build its own status and access resources, they continue to belong to it. The members believe in the issues that the network is working on. In an informal group discussion, my interviewees said that the problem is not the issues, but the mechanisms and strategies employed to handle the issues. They also pointed out that the members benefit from the network through profile raising and capacity development: for example, they learn advocacy skills, get ideas for strategies, and so on.

Member organisations clearly recognise the power of the network, in comparison with their own power as individual organisations. There was also recognition of the importance of the web of relations among the various actors, which are mainly nurtured and maintained by the networks. It enables organisations to deal with politically sensitive gender-related issues as a collective; members can take advantage of numerical superiority to challenge government and other centres of power. Providing a platform to share common concerns and speak with one voice on women's issues is important if the members are to become established players in the public debate.

There was also a feeling that members benefit from networks more generally – beyond advocacy – through the opportunity to publicise their work, and to learn. Networking provided opportunities to pool resources, although one research subject noted that, due to competing relations, the network has not taken full advantage of the human capacity that is available within its membership organisations. Another local

NGO worker said that networking provides a 'bigger voice', while another called it 'a collective voice'. A collective voice achieves greater results, and some members derive emotional and professional satisfaction from being members of the network.

There was also acknowledgement that networks provide opportunities to link with civil-society organisations more widely. This means that gender issues come to the attention of others. Community organisations, donor agencies, universities, and NGOs have all benefited from their interaction with the networks, and some have incorporated gender concerns and findings into the policies of these institutions. Thus, in spite of the unsatisfactory relations that have developed, the members' recognition of the importance of social capital nurtured by the networks and the alliance has persuaded most of them to maintain relations with the network.

While networking is valued by the various member organisations, members are also pragmatic: UWONET is very popular among donor organisations, and it is these donors that provide the life-blood of the member organisations. Hence, member organisations prefer co-operation to competition, because the latter may be costly to the identity and status of the individual member organisations, in terms of the respect, status, and recognition that they command with donors. Member organisations would not like to be identified by UWONET and their fellow members as unsupportive of the network.

### ***Strategies for increasing co-operation and reducing competition***

Some mechanisms for reducing competition and increasing collaboration within the network are noted here.

#### ***Building close relationships with local staff in donor agencies***

Local staff in donor agencies are often in a strong position to influence and shape the agendas of donors, and their relationships

with local NGOs. It is evident that the local staff in the donor agencies have a comparative advantage in relation to their counterparts because of their local knowledge. Local NGOs take advantage of relationships with such people, who can function as interlocutors, mediators, or even interpreters. They can also assist staff of local NGOs by advising them on ways of relating to donor agencies, or on adapting their agendas in line with the issues that are most likely to attract donor funding.

### **Building close relationships between staff in organisations within the network**

Strong relationships between individuals can also strengthen networks. One research subject said that the relationship between the individuals within the various organisations in UWONET had been critical in ensuring organisational support for the network's activities. In addition it was important for staff of UWONET to develop strong relationships with individuals, because this helped the secretariat to understand the various member organisations and how to relate to them. Informal individual relations are important in agenda setting and management. One interviewee from UWONET commented: *'When you look at the organisations that we really worked with, I made them to be personal friends, that you know them beyond the organisations'* (interview, R., July 2003).

However, individual relationships have their own shortcomings. One research subject noted that when the mutual trust was based on a relationship between individuals, this did not filter through to wider relationships between their organisations. This factor created discontinuity when those individuals left their organisations. In addition to problems of discontinuity, one research subject told me that the process of developing relations between individual 'buddies' resulted in the formation of cliques, which made some other individuals who represented their organisations in

UWONET feel isolated and unimportant. The cliques were mainly based on similarities in age or ethnic origin, or on shared histories: for example, they were formed by people who had all attended the same school. The cliques also made agenda formulation less transparent and democratic, so that the views of only a few individuals tended to prevail.

### **Organisation of joint initiatives**

In order to overcome the mistrust between the members and the network, while meeting the needs of the donors, a network secretariat and any of the member organisations may agree to organise collaborative advocacy activities. UWONET's members were not willing to share their information with the network freely, and accused it of stealing their information. On the other hand, the UWONET secretariat accused its members of using the information from the network meetings to make individual proposals intended to impress donors and obtain funding. To address this problem, UWONET had tried organising its advocacy initiatives in collaboration with a member organisation, so that they could both report on the same activity. This helped them both to manage concerns about accountability to donors, while ensuring the donors' recognition of the contribution of particular players.

This last point is particularly important, since undertaking joint programmes can be problematic. Some donor agencies require member organisations to show tangible results. This may lead to conflict among member organisations in competition for results and recognition, and the fear that their identity might be swallowed by the network (UWONET 1999). The same concern was noted by one research subject, who said that donors' accountability mechanisms made it difficult to ensure that member organisations who might have a comparative advantage in undertaking a particular activity were actually free to do so, since donors expected accountability

from the organisation that originally received the funding (interview, R, June 2003).

### ***The creation of issue-based sub-networks***

The need in Uganda for advocacy on particular issues has led to the creation of sub-networks or coalitions, which amount to a restructuring of UWONET. Such groupings include the Domestic Relations Bill (DRB) Coalition, the Coalition of Politics and Women (COPAW), and the Coalition Against Violence Against Women (CIVAW coalition). Although dominated by women's organisations, membership in all these different kinds of network is open to gender-focused NGOs (both international and local), government institutions, and individuals. UWONET provides leadership in all these coalitions and forums.

## **Conclusions**

Networks set up to pursue a shared interest in challenging structural gender inequality offer an opportunity to member organisations to increase the impact of their work. However, at times the relations between the networks and some of their members become relations of political convenience for both parties. This article has attempted to uncover some of the unequal power dynamics that exist in one Ugandan network, UWONET. Local NGOs are in constant fear of losing funds from donors, either because the donors' priorities change, or because of their own poor accountability in terms of activities and funds. Relations of patronage result in strained relations among the various actors.

The article has argued that competition among the NGOs involved in UWONET manifested itself in both overt and hidden ways. Much competition was hidden, and could be uncovered only by reading and comparing organisational documents, and

interviewing a cross-section of staff and members of the selected NGOs. The fear of overt dissent from donor agendas was also obvious to me when I presented my research findings to a cross-section of NGO staff in Uganda. While they were interested in my findings, they were also mindful of the implications for donor funding. The NGOs did not want to expose what was going on in their organisations and networks, just in case the donors decided to stop funding them.

In conclusion, local NGOs may run risks of being co-opted by big donors into support for agendas which they do not share. Becoming a member of a donor-supported network can have a dramatic effect on the programmes of the membership organisation. Commitment to advocacy and the presence of powerful networks and coalitions at the national level does not necessarily translate into processes of change at the grassroots level. In Uganda, local NGOs feel obliged to sustain and support UWONET, since it is the donors' baby – even if they do not like the baby's behaviour. Probably if their relations with the donor were less dependent, they would have nurtured this baby differently. Understanding the power relationships (formal and informal, hidden and overt) between organisations is critical to our understanding of advocacy on gender-related concerns in developing-country contexts. Lack of resources, the need for recognition, status, and identity, and the current politics of aid are key determinants of the ways in which these relationships are shaped and manifest themselves. The way in which the NGOs involved – and individuals within them – manage these relationships has major implications for the extent to which the agendas of gender-equality advocacy reflect the interests of women at the grassroots.

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## Notes

- 1 This article is based on work for the author's on-going PhD study at the University of Wales, Swansea. For permission to publish it here we acknowledge the NGO Practice Research Team, which included it in a report on Uganda for ESCOR, DFID, by Tina Wallace and others (see [www.ngopractice.org](http://www.ngopractice.org)).
- 2 Buyer/seller relations are characteristic of relations between local NGOs and major, bilateral, or multilateral donors. The research subjects in my study expressed concern that donors are funding NGOs which act as safety-nets for people who are suffering the impact of the macro-economic policies that the major donors have themselves supported in Uganda. *'Many official donors only want to ensure that the policies do not adversely affect the poor, but they want to continue with their economic and social policies; local NGOs then become agents of these agencies'* (interview, J., June 2003).

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