



The Challenge of Leadership in Civil Society Organisations in the Congo Basin

This discussion paper sets out the importance and challenges of leadership in Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Congo Basin. It draws from the experiences of Well Grounded's Leadership Development Programme, which supports leaders, managers and staff of CSOs working in the field of natural resources or community rights in Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This paper explores our learning around leadership challenges within CSOs and the importance of effective leadership in ensuring an organisation's success. By exploring Well Grounded's approach to leadership development and the content of our programme, we draw lessons to inform the evolution of our work on the topic. We hope that by sharing our learning we can stimulate discussion on what is key to an organisation's success.

THE CHALLENGES

Since Well Grounded was started in 2010, we have worked with African CSOs on a variety of organisation development issues and we have concluded that one of the biggest challenges faced is around leadership. The issue is one that affects all aspects of an organisation and can therefore have either a strong positive or negative influence on the ability of an organisation to achieve its desired impact. We have identified the following four main challenges of leadership in the organisations we work with.

CENTRALISED LEADERSHIP

The individuals whom we are actively supporting through our Leadership Development Programme all work for CSOs based in Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Traditionally in the region there is a strong culture of hierarchy within institutions and organisations, including CSOs, which has a significant impact on how individuals and colleagues relate to each other.

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An example of this can be seen in the practice of people not questioning or contradicting their elders or those in positions of authority. And within this hierarchical dynamic, there are additional levels of who can be heard and whose voices are more or less important. Within organisations, and extending to the beneficiary forest communities, often times the voices of the youth, women and indigenous peoples are marginalised.

In this context, you will often see a style of leadership that is very centralised. Power is often retained by one person or a few people. Information is not widely shared and decision-making is not consensus-based or consultative. Certain responsibilities and tasks are not delegated due to lack of confidence in colleagues' capacities, for fear of losing control over the outcomes or because having information means having power and the ability to wield that power.

EXTERNALLY-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP

Leaders of organisations we work with often place a higher priority on their externally-facing role, compared with running the organisation, i.e. making sure that staff are supported in their work and there are systems in place to ensure a well-functioning organisation. Few leaders make the link between the internal operation of their organisation and the impact of their work on the ground, yet this can be key. What is often missed is that ensuring a healthy, functioning organisation will result in greater effectiveness overall; the two cannot be separated, yet this internal aspect is often ignored or deprioritised.

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“FOUNDER SYNDROME”

Another big challenge for CSOs in Central Africa is the longevity – and sometimes permanence – of certain leaders. This is known as “founder syndrome”¹. There is very little active cultivation or mentoring of a new generation of leaders and on top of that, there is limited experience in how to manage the transition between leaders. At an organisational level this can create barriers to the healthy development of the organisation. Having someone permanently at the helm could limit growth in that they continue to function in the only way known to them, which is based on their vision for the organisation. At times it can also mean that there is limited space for innovation, adaptation and reinvention in an ever-changing context.

CONFUSING ‘LEADER’ AND ‘LEADERSHIP’

We have noted that there is also an absence of differentiation between the notion of ‘leader’ and ‘manager’ whereby a ‘leader’ – though recognised as such by others – is an informal role. It is someone who can inspire and motivate others. A ‘manager’ on the other hand is a formal designation with clear objectives, whose main role is to coordinate, plan and organise. What should be made clear in all of this is that the two are not mutually exclusive. Not all leaders have good management skills; and not all managers have good leadership skills. However, to be effective, all managers need to develop their leadership skills.

Another distinction to make – and what will be explained further in the following section – is between a ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’. Being a ‘leader’ involves playing a mobilising role but ‘leadership’ is a set of attitudes, qualities and skills that any person can develop. There is often an assumption that all the elements of ‘leadership’ should be held by one person – the ‘leader.’ This limits CSOs’ ability to draw on a diversity of leadership held by people across the organisation.

In the next section we will explore how Well Grounded has chosen to respond to this set of challenges.

THE RESPONSE

The Leadership Development Programme that Well Grounded launched in 2014 was designed to address these challenges. We began with a belief that more effective leadership leads to more effective work and greater impact on the ground. We aim to contribute to this by creating opportunities for CSO leaders and managers to meet, reflect and learn from each other, while enhancing their leadership skills and capabilities.

At Well Grounded, we make a distinction between the terms ‘leader’ and ‘leadership.’ We view a ‘leader’ as someone who influences and mobilises others and is recognised by others for playing this role within an organisation; and we view ‘leadership’ as a set of qualities and skills that any individual can develop, regardless of their formal role or position.

Within a team, being a leader is something that is acknowledged because of these qualities rather than being a status. We place a lot of importance on the idea that anyone can develop leadership qualities and can become a leader should they choose to.

Some examples of leadership skills and capabilities include:

Developing greater self-awareness & self-acceptance

Taking responsibility when necessary

Understanding groups, dynamics & how people work

Supporting team members to identify and recognise their strengths & successes

Building trust

Taking time to build relationships

Admitting to our own vulnerabilities

Supporting people to name & face fears

Actively listening

Demonstrating that they respect confidentiality

Motivating self & others

Passing back responsibility

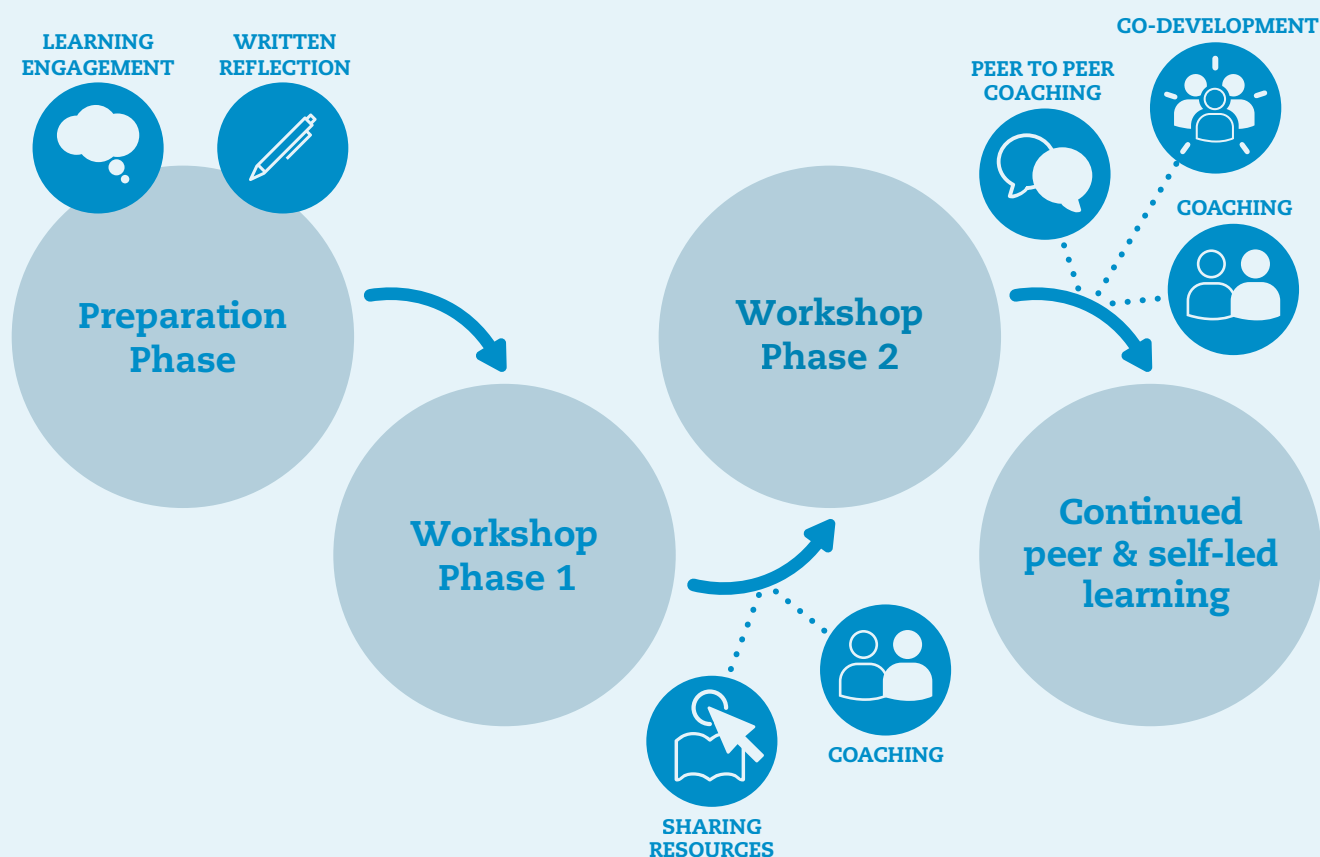
Supporting people to cross thresholds & continue progressing

Mobilising energy & potential

Asking challenging questions & encouraging others to frame their own challenging questions

Our work on supporting leaders thus far has been through our Leadership Development Programme. The structure of the programme² is as follows:

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



² For additional information on the aims and intended outcomes of the programme, please refer to the brochure of the programme, which can be found on our website: http://well-grounded.org/sites/default/files/wg_leadership_brochure_-_en_0.pdf

To address the challenges of leadership, and to develop effective leadership in CSOs, Well Grounded realised a one-off leadership training would be limited in its effectiveness. Instead, we developed a programme of a range of activities to promote deep self-reflection and learning (see diagram above). The key elements involved in this approach are:

THE LEARNING ENGAGEMENT: This is an important step in the process. By asking participants to take time before each workshop to reflect on their leadership successes and challenges and to bring these reflections into the workshop, it helps get them in the right headspace for exchange and learning. It is also a demonstration that participation is a conscious commitment throughout the duration of the programme and beyond.

THE RESIDENTIAL 4.5 DAY WORKSHOPS: Few people schedule the time or build in mechanisms that allow them evaluate how they are doing and how they are functioning within their teams. The residential aspect and the length of the workshops were intentionally chosen to create a space for participants to take a step back from their daily lives and take some time out for learning and reflection. Our aim is to encourage taking time as part of a regular practice of personal and professional development, of team building and organisational strengthening.

The residential workshops also create a space for group and individual reflection and sharing of experiences in the evenings. In Well Grounded's experience, many trainings and workshops that are offered to civil society actors do not integrate time for participants to reflect upon and digest the information that is being shared, and to think through how they would like to apply it to their individual contexts. We see this as limiting the training's effectiveness. The design and pace of our Leadership Development Programme ensures time for sharing and learning in each session. And since the workshops are residential, activities that are planned in the evenings allow participants to build on what they learned during the day in order to bring that learning into the next day. The different components and spaces for learning and reflection are also intended to engage the participants in a variety of ways, which allows them to get a deeper understanding of themselves as leaders.



The leaders, managers and staff of African CSOs need to demonstrate strong leadership to be able to transform their organisations so that they are more resilient, can adapt to the difficult environment in which they work and have real impact.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT



THE COACHING SESSIONS: After each workshop there are individual coaching sessions between a member of Well Grounded and a participant. These sessions are an important way to support the participants put what they have learned during the workshops into practice. The individual coaching sessions also create an opportunity to share additional resources (for example articles, videos, etc.) with participants if any particular leadership challenges are identified.

Additionally, there is peer-to-peer coaching (between participants), which also allows participants to put their learning into practice, and helps to build long-term relationships between participants so that they can support one another beyond the scope of the Leadership Development Programme. The pairs are encouraged to speak regularly in order to celebrate successes and also to support one another when they are facing particular challenges. The peer-to-peer support mechanism is complementary to the individual coaching sessions in that they occur more regularly. It also allows the sharing of experiences between leaders who work in the same context and reinforces the practice of collaboration between civil society actors and the CSOs for whom they work.

THE CO-DEVELOPMENT GROUP: This group is based on the co-development approach that gives a person the opportunity to be supported in assessing their leadership challenges, and allows them in turn to help other leaders respond to their challenges. Adrien Payette defines professional co-development as “a development approach for those who believe they can learn from others in order to improve their practice”. In this model, a leader plays the role of the client and the others play the role of consultants. The client presents a problem or concern and the others help the client to resolve the issue.

The co-development group creates a space for participants to continue to exchange about their experiences and the challenges they face as leaders. Like the peer-to-peer coaching, connecting participants is one of the most important components of the programme. The co-development group reinforces a network of leaders who can relate on various issues and support each other by tapping into a diversity of experiences.

LEARNING

Over the course of the past two years, 32 leaders in four different parts of the Congo Basin have completed our Leadership Development Programme. These different processes have taught us many things and continue to shape our reflections on the future of our work on leadership development. Below are a few of the key learning points.

TAKING THE TIME FOR LEARNING

A sufficient amount of time needs to be given to all stages of the process, from allowing adequate time for reflection during the workshops to the overall period of the two -year programme. New information requires time to be digested and tested out in practice, and this is not a process that can be rushed if the learning is to be internalised and sustained.

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING DIVERSE METHODS OF LEARNING

The different stages of the programme and the various methods of learning – from workshops to coaching sessions to peer-to-peer support to co-development groups – really help participants maintain the development of their leadership practice. Not only are they more likely to be consistent in working towards their objectives but each method is also an opportunity for participants to continue deepening their knowledge. The various follow up mechanisms after each workshop are particularly important and help to address the weaknesses often associated with other trainings and workshops that we have seen offered elsewhere. Also, following the leaders’ development through these methods allows us to better understand what they are finding difficult to put into practice and the elements that are still not clear, which we use to inform the next iterations of our programme.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-AWARENESS FOR GOOD LEADERSHIP

Starting off by focusing on the individual and getting a holistic understanding of each participant and how they bring themselves into

their work is crucial. Oftentimes, participants aren't aware of what personal habits they have and how these translate in the workplace, which is why we think it important to shine a light on both positive and negative practices. Also, those participating in our Leadership Development Programme are all doing work based on their own passions, beliefs and values, which are inextricably linked to the work of their organisation. Getting greater clarity around their vision for themselves in the world in which they work provides a clearer sense of purpose. This sense of purpose is an integral part of their identity as a leader.

LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

A strong connection needs to be made between leadership at the individual level, within a team and within an organisation. Building on the previous point, the programme has been designed based on the idea that the leaders must know themselves in order to effectively support their teams. By having a clearer idea of your traits and tendencies as an individual, you are better able to adapt your approach based on what is needed in particular contexts and group dynamics. A strong leader must also be able to recognise their role within a team and appreciate the role of others in order to better lead their organisations.

A CULTURE OF TRUST AND OPENNESS ALSO NEEDS TO BE CULTIVATED SO MEMBERS OF AN ORGANISATION ARE AT EASE HOLDING THEIR LEADERS TO ACCOUNT IN THEIR PRACTICES.

A LEARNING CULTURE

Leaders must continue to question themselves and allow others to do so as well. Because leaders are often at the head of organisations or of teams, they are not often questioned or challenged on their practices. There is still some work to be done on encouraging leaders

to challenge themselves, even when it is beyond their comfort level. A culture of trust and openness also needs to be cultivated so members of an organisation are at ease holding their leaders to account in their practices. One way we aim to facilitate this will be to bring the leadership work we have been doing to the organisations we support.

CONCLUSIONS

The Leadership Development Programme is the first of its kind in the Congo Basin offered to civil society working in the community rights and natural resource management sector. The response has been very positive and participants have said the training is unique in both its content and approach. While we feel that many aspects of the programme have been successful, we are also looking to learn from our experiences to date to inform our continued work on leadership.

During the course of the programme, we observed some discontinuity between development at the individual level and how this was being applied within their teams and organisations. We have made adjustments to the content to include stronger linkages between these various levels.

We acknowledge that leadership practice needs to move beyond the individual who participates in the programme and must continue to explore additional ways of sharing and applying the learning within the organisation. As mentioned above, we will also be exploring leadership development with leaders and their teams in their organisations.

In certain countries, women have been noticeably underrepresented and in all instances, indigenous peoples have been absent. Both groups are key stakeholders in the community rights and natural resource management sector in the Congo Basin. In addition to planned research on their different experiences and challenges of participating in civil society processes and within CSOs, we will be looking at developing leadership work catered to their particular contexts.

In early 2017, we launched a new iteration of our programme based on the learning we have drawn from the pilot programme outlined in this paper. With the continued improvements to our work on leadership, we expect to be able to have an even greater impact on civil society effectiveness in the sector, resulting in greater recognition of community rights and good natural resource governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT WELL GROUNDED

Well Grounded provides organisation development support to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa so they have real and sustainable impacts on natural resource governance and community rights. We offer support to CSOs in the following areas: strategy development, leadership, team building and development, planning and evaluation and relationship and interpersonal skills. We also believe that connecting people and organisations is an important element of achieving positive change.

THE DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

This is one of a series of discussions papers published by Well Grounded with the objective of prompting debate and discussion about key organisation development issues relevant to civil society organisations in the Congo Basin. The papers do not present much theory – many other authors do that very well elsewhere – but are rather the fruit of our own observations and learning in our day to day practice in working with CSOs. They are designed to share the lessons we have learnt through our practice and to promote further discussion and debate on the organisation development of African CSOs.