

# Perspectives on trust building as a power issue: lessons from the VOICE program.

Take away of the Trust Accountability and Inclusion  
Collaborative (TAI) Funder Calls - March 2024



At TAI, we believe that building trust takes time and human relationships that are based on equity, and inclusion and guided by transparency and accountability. That said, we wonder how trust plays out in practice when we have to manage complex structures? The funder call we hosted together with VOICE aimed to address this question.

VOICE is an innovative grant facility, funded since 2016 by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (60 million EUR) and managed by Oxfam Novib and Hivos. VOICE operates in over ten countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, East and Southeast Asia, supporting rights holders and groups facing marginalization or discrimination in their efforts to exert influence in accessing productive and social services and political participation. In 2019, the Hewlett Foundation offered additional funding to VOICE (800,000 EUR) and TAI participated in the design phase of this additional initiative

As the VOICE program is winding down, we explored at these calls (we hosted two to serve different time zones) how the different actors in this process – intermediary funder and final grant recipients - experienced and built trust. What factors enabled trust? What factors reduced it?

Speakers included **Ishita Dutta**, Global Program Manager of VOICE, final recipients of the grants: **Olive Namutebi**, Executive Director, Albinism Umbrella in Uganda; **Bob Bwana**, Program Director at Ice Breakers Uganda; **Gloria Mutyaba**, Program Director at FARUG, on behalf of the consortium project supporting the LGBTIQ community in Uganda; and Hewlett Foundation's **Ousseynou Ngom**.

# Ishita Dutta

## VOICE

### PRESENTATION SLIDES

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to support VOICE, as part of their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and their foundational principle - leave no one behind. Hewlett Foundation came in with additional support for good governance focused work in Africa.

During the program period, VOICE has worked with five rightsholder groups: indigenous people and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTI people, women, the young and the elderly. To date, VOICE has allocated 61 million Euros to approximately 700 grantees – prioritizing groups who were being left out from mainstream funding for human rights and development.

VOICE built a decentralized structure, comprised of a global coordination team dispersed across the 10 countries and the Netherlands, and has country teams comprising of three people in each of the 10 countries where VOICE works. Decision making power has been placed in the hands of the country teams, at least that was the intention. If you read the recommendations of the [final evaluation report](#), you will see that there are still miles to go in making sure that the people who are in country teams, are truly leading certain processes.

That said, throughout the journey of VOICE, trust has been pivotal. The Ministry opted for a public services contract (instead of a grant) for VOICE, as a way of ensuring greater accountability in implementing development projects. However, recent assessments show that these initial decisions on structure/approach had no impact on trust building. What was important instead, was that throughout the program cycle, the funders of the program showed flexibility and allowed testing ideas – even when some of them failed.

It was also important being entrusted by Oxfam Novib, and Hivos, renowned organizations with extensive track records. This helped VOICE to mobilize grant applications from marginalized groups.

Trust was not only fostered between VOICE and its funders but also with its grantee partners. VOICE recognized the importance of decentralized decision-making and has been empowering its country teams.

VOICE developed and tested ideas to adapt and ease application process, accessing grants for rightsholders. This included inviting audio and video applications, conversational reporting, outreach through local radio, using national and local languages (including accepting applications in these languages). Some of this worked well, while other ideas had less traction. For instance, video and audio applications posed challenges in processing them and they were not universally accessible - in the end, VOICE opted for written applications.

VOICE team focused on linking partners and learning to allow grantees to connect with each other, and work on their longer-term advocacy and sustainability goals.

In conclusion, the final evaluation found that relationships were complex, and it is hard to take a single conclusion. Some grantee partners are demanding greater accountability from VOICE, asking to simplify processes and due diligence. Some (often very small and/or start up) organizations see some of these due diligence and organizational processes that VOICE put them through as contributing to their organizational growth and strengthening, something that helped them to leverage funding from other sources.

The VOICE program demonstrates the possibilities and limits of having financial accountability as the center of trust and relationship building in all direction. The Adobe grant management system has helped Oxfam Novib as the lead implementer of VOICE to maintain strict financial controls throughout the grant cycle, so that VOICE can account exactly where funds were expended to auditors and to the ministry every year. Interestingly, each financial year the number of audit findings from the external auditor have been becoming fewer and fewer. And these audit reports helped VOICE to build legitimacy and trust with other funders.





In relation to the grantee partners and rightsholders VOICE serves, the program has managed to remain relevant, adaptive and open notwithstanding the strict requirements of the legal tender setting up VOICE and notwithstanding Adobe, because of the immense fortitude of the people in the VOICE program. Rooted in their communities and countries they have used their own passion and goodwill to build personal relationships and trust with partners. And thereby, made the program live up to its principle value, inclusion.

# Olive Nambutebi

## Albinism Umbrella Uganda

"Trust operates on multiple levels: within our community, between Albinism Umbrella and VOICE, and with the government. When we first engaged with VOICE in 2018, persons with albinism in Uganda faced significant stigma and lacked recognition. Albinism Umbrella sought to change this narrative, and VOICE provided crucial support, even though we were a small and newly established organization. This initial support demonstrated trust in our ability to deliver change."

"We worked tirelessly to build trust within our communities, many of whom had been exploited in the past. VOICE's emphasis on soft influencing and its linking and learning component allowed us to connect with partners and establish a solid foundation. With this trust, we were able to advocate effectively for legal recognition of albinism as a disability category, leading to significant milestones such as inclusion in the People With Disabilities Act and recognition by government entities."

"As a grantee, we appreciate VOICE's grantmaking approach, which allowed us to learn from failures and challenge the status quo respectfully. This collaborative approach, rather than a strict adherence to requirements, helped us progress toward our goals effectively. However, there's room for improvement, particularly in exploring methodologies like outcome harvesting to capture the broader impact of our work."

"One of the main challenges building trust with communities we serve, was overcoming the deep-seated stigma and self-stigma within the albinism community, as many individuals had been exploited in the past. VOICE provided crucial support through its emphasis on soft influencing and linking and learning, which allowed us to connect with partners and build trust gradually. Additionally, VOICE's trust in our organization, despite being newly established, empowered us to advocate effectively for change within the community."

"While Voice may be winding down, our partnership and commitment to advancing the rights of persons with albinism in Uganda will continue. We've built a strong foundation through trust and collaboration, and we will seek to leverage this partnership with other stakeholders to sustain and expand our impact. We will also explore new methodologies, such as outcome harvesting, to better capture the broader impact of our work and further strengthen our advocacy efforts."

# Gloria Mutyaba

## FARUG

"VOICE's willingness to engage with and support community-led organizations speaks volumes about their commitment to inclusivity and trust-building. The open communication channels, flexibility, and genuine interest shown by the VOICE team have been instrumental in fostering a strong partnership and empowered our consortium to innovate and adapt, especially in response to external challenges such as the proposed anti-homosexuality bill."

"The emphasis on co-creation and community ownership in designing and implementing projects reflects a deep commitment to trust-building within the LGBTQ+ community. By actively involving community members in every step of the process, from data collection to advocacy, the consortium has not only built trust but also empowered individuals to take ownership of their narratives and advocate for their rights."

"VOICE's ability to respond swiftly to emerging challenges, such as data protection in the face of legislative threats, demonstrates the agility and effectiveness of community-led initiatives. It's evident that the trust built between the consortium and Voice, as well as within the community, has been pivotal in navigating complex socio-political landscapes and driving meaningful change."

"Lastly, I want to highlight the power of linking and learning to facilitate cross-country collaborations and knowledge sharing underscore the transformative potential of collective action. By fostering connections and amplifying voices across movements, VOICE has contributed to a broader culture of solidarity and advocacy."



Elaborating more on how the consortium navigates challenges related to safety and security, especially in the context of the proposed anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda, Gloria shared:

"The safety and security of our community members are paramount, particularly in the face of legislative threats like the anti-homosexuality bill. We've taken proactive measures to ensure data protection and anonymity for individuals participating in our projects. Additionally, our collaboration with VOICE has allowed us to swiftly respond to emerging challenges by adapting our projects and strategies to mitigate risks. By prioritizing community engagement and empowerment, we're able to navigate these challenges while amplifying the voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Uganda."

"That said, sustaining momentum within the LGBTQ+ community requires ongoing dialogue, capacity building, and advocacy efforts. We prioritize continuous engagement with community members through outreach activities, peer education programs, and collaborative initiatives. By empowering individuals to become advocates for their rights and providing platforms for dialogue and solidarity, we foster a sense of ownership and resilience within the community. Despite the challenges we face, our collective determination and solidarity drive us forward in our pursuit of equality and justice."



# Bob Bwana

## ICE BREAKERS Uganda

Bob underlined the importance of access to, analysis and presentation of data on LGBTQ+. Ice Breakers Uganda addressed previous shortcomings such as data loss and misrepresentation, among others, by involving the community and building trust and legitimacy over time. Their collaboration with government stakeholders further strengthened trust and facilitated the collection of reliable data for advocacy, through the use of various tools like visualization and audio/video recordings to present evidence effectively.

“For us human connections, organizational transparency, cross-sector learning, and the collection of data for evidence-based advocacy are key elements of our work. The power of community involvement, trust-building, and evidence-based approaches in driving positive change”.

# Ousseynou Ngom

## Hewlett Foundation

“As a takeaway, I'd like to revisit some of the principles guiding Hewlett's philosophy of trust-based philanthropy, since trust has been a central theme. Our partnership with VOICE and other partners has contributed to strengthening these guiding principles.”

Ousseynou explained how the Hewlett Foundation advocates for trust-based philanthropy, advancing meaningful and socially beneficial changes in their thematic areas. Hewlett also emphasizes tackling problems in a pragmatic and non-partisan manner, which aligns with VOICE's approach of co-creation and treating partners as problem-solving equals.

“Focusing on outcomes, transparency, and learning is crucial. VOICE has been forthcoming in sharing both successes and failures, which is invaluable for improvement. Collaboration and mutual respect, as highlighted by Olive and Gloria, are vital when working with underserved communities”.

“Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is integral to trust-based philanthropy. Our relationship with VOICE exemplifies these values. VOICE's work in geographies with shrinking civic space has provided valuable lessons for navigating similar challenges in other regions. In short, VOICE has been a success due to its commitment to placing trust at the center of their relationships with us and grantees”.

**“I call for funders to consider contributing to this ongoing endeavor. Communities supported through these programs need continued support and institutional strengthening”.**

# Selected Questions:

- 1** How can due diligence be more trust based and how can funders encourage adaptive management?

Communication is key to building trust. Both parties need to understand obligations and process flows. Open communication can alleviate burdens and foster trust. Trust is crucial, especially in shrinking civic spaces. Clear communication, contextual understanding, creating spaces for questions and learning, and willingness to admit mistakes are essential.

- 2** How do you find good communicators for these positions, given their importance?

Transparency about mistakes and cultivating a learning environment is crucial. Additionally, hiring team members from grantee partners can bring valuable perspectives.

- 3** Regarding due diligence, it's interesting how it can contribute to organizational growth. Could you provide more examples of how this was beneficial?

Due diligence, when approached as organizational strengthening, can be transformative for smaller organizations. For instance, in Uganda, VOICE provided hands-on support in financial management and compliance, treating due diligence as a capacity-building exercise.

- 4** If you could give one key recommendation to other funders interested in replicating or expanding VOICE's approach shifting power, what would it be?

Transparent and open communication, as well as breaking hierarchical barriers between funders and implementing partners are crucial. Being open to new ideas and offering flexible funding that allows partners to adapt to contextual changes are crucial too.

# If you would like to learn more about the VOICE Program we recommend these materials:

- 1 Visual summary of the final evaluation report of VOICE
- 2 Reflections on final evaluation of VOICE, by Alex Loer and Peris Kariuki, Roving Monitoring and Evaluation Officers for Asia and Africa
- 3 Full Final Evaluation Report VOICE