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Organizational growth and institutional wrestling

Tiina Kontinen and Alice N. Ndidde[1]

Introduction

A typical goal in the strategies of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all over the world is to become a *learning organization*. However, what this actually means and, further, how organizational learning takes place are complex questions. In the field of development NGOs, the notion of a learning organization typically refers to one whose management mechanisms, such as its monitoring and evaluation systems, are geared towards learning, in addition to accountability (Ebrahim 2005; Hayman et al. 2016). Moreover, among NGOs this has been depicted as an ongoing spiral of experiential learning (Fowler 1997; 2000), engagement with local knowledges in beneficiary communities (Chambers 1997; 2017), or the ability to reflect on prevailing power asymmetries in North-South partnerships (Eyben 2006; Fowler 1998). Drawing on Easterby-Smith and Lyles's (2011) distinction, we differentiate between the notions of learning organization and organizational learning. The former refers to mere normative depictions of what a learning organization ought to be (e.g. Senge 1990), while the latter is a phenomenon widely researched from multiple theoretical perspectives and debated in different disciplines including management, social psychology, organization studies and sociology.

In this chapter, inspired by John Dewey's notion of growth (1922/2012; see also Holma & Kontinen, this volume), we investigate organizational learning which takes the form of a reformulation of habits in response to disruptions and problematic situations (Brandi & Elkjaer 2016, 147; Lorino 2018). In this instance we examine learning that occurs in what Deweyan pragmatism characterizes as a "community of inquiry" wherein participants jointly negotiate and experiment with new ways of doing things. Thus, we are interested in learning which is embedded in organizations' daily practices as a result of joint reflection and experimentation caused by experienced disruptions.

The communities of inquiry in NGOs do not, however, exist in isolation from their institutional and societal contexts. Indeed, we suggest that learning in individual organizations is both enabled and constrained by the

institutional environment (Kontinen 2018). Organizational habits acquired and disruptions encountered in development NGOs are often related to tendencies in international development in general and also to the degree of contestation over the role of civil society organizations in a particular state. In order to address these phenomena, we draw on the notion of "wrestlings" (Brandi & Elkjaer 2016, 153–155), using the term "institutional wrestling" in reference to the enduring tensions that are part and parcel of the processes of organizational growth. This can include, for instance, balancing between managerialism and human-centred management approaches (Claeyé 2014); between perceiving projects as the implementation of blueprints or as adaptive processes of experimentation (Rondinelli 1993); between contributing to incremental change in people's lives or more profound societal transformation (Mitlin et al. 2007; Choudry & Kapoor 2013); and between being a professional development NGO or a member-based organization embedded in people's daily needs (Banks et al. 2015).

Action for Development (ACFODE), a Ugandan, gender-advocacy NGO, has provided a fruitful entry point to exploration of the dynamics of learning and wrestling, and is the case study discussed in this chapter. Over three decades of operation, it has changed from a participant in the transformative Ugandan women's movement (Tripp & Kwesiga 2002) into a more reformist professional organization, altering its strategies and organizational forms in response to encountering the above-mentioned general tensions. ACFODE describes itself as follows:

> "We measure, monitor, analyse and improve productivity, process, tasks and ourselves to satisfy stakeholders. We work with enthusiasm and intellect, and are driven to surpass what has already been achieved"
> (ACFODE 2016, 4).

Today, the NGO has well-functioning monitoring and reporting mechanisms, produces considerable knowledge to back both its advocacy and community development activities, and engages in critical debates with its donors.

In this chapter we examine the kinds of instances in which organizational growth has taken place in ACFODE and the institutional wrestling that has ensued. In what follows, we briefly depict our organizational learning perspective before introducing the NGO case study and the research methods used. We then reflect on the complexities in ACFODE's core concern of addressing the habits of others, and discuss learning in terms of project implementation, advocacy approaches and organizational restructuring. We show that learning as the reformulation of organizational habits includes continuous balancing and negotiation between, for instance: transformative and reformist agendas; strategies of traditional training and the embedding of NGO work in existing community practices; collaboration and contestation in relationships with the state; and being an efficient modern organization and one based on more traditional membership.

Organizational growth and institutional wrestling

In this chapter, we take a pragmatist perspective on organizational learning, one that is distanced from the idea of an organization as a rational decision-maker in search of maximal effectiveness, the view typical of management approaches to the subject (Lorino 2018). Pragmatist accounts rather provide definitions of organizational learning such as a "process that transforms an uncertain situation into a more settled situation", where new knowledge and habitual practices are jointly created (Brandi & Elkjaer 2016, 149); this is one in which existing "organizational beliefs and practices become problematic" (Morgan 2014, 1047), and the "normal ways of doing things are disrupted because of surprises or unusual events that are difficult to comprehend and to deal with" (Rumens & Keleman 2016, 13). We therefore define organizational learning as potential growth (Holma & Kontinen, this volume) in organizational contexts which takes place in everyday practices in an organization when an encountered disruption triggers joint reflective inquiry. This inquiry is potentially characterized by democratic interaction among those involved, and leads to new, better practices, conceptualizations and habits.

In our framework, the notions of habit, disruption and community of inquiry (Dewey 1922/2012) are central. We understand habit as an "acquired predisposition" to respond in a certain way under certain conditions (Dewey 1922/2012, 20) due to repeated experience. In NGOs, habits can be materialized in organizational guidelines and plans, but they are also embedded in the implicit, taken-for-granted ways in which "we do things here", performed to the degree that they meet the needs of action in a specific situation (Morgan 2014, 1046). However, when such "normal" ways of doing things encounter disruptions, surprises or unusual events, doubt arises and existing habits become the focus of attention and reflection (Rumens & Keleman 2016, 11; Lorino 2018, 81) – potentially in an organizational community of inquiry where negotiation and experimentation results in new, better ways of doing. In organizational contexts, a community of inquiry can refer to a group where both members and non-members participate in an attempt to address a shared task encountering a problematic situation (Rumens & Keleman 2016, 11; Brandi & Elkjaer 2016, 149). In NGOs, a community of inquiry can comprise the members of staff involved in certain tasks, but can also include beneficiaries, donors and other stakeholders insofar as interaction is characterized by democratic negotiation and experimentation rather than the imposition of one actor's agenda in face of a shared challenge.

We seek to combine the notion of organizational growth with that of institutional wrestling, in line with Brandi and Elkjaer (2016, 150–151) who suggest that negotiations in communities of inquiry within organizations are characterized by "wrestlings" between different ideas concerning the content or purpose of the organization's work. Drawing from Kontinen's (2018) elaboration of how organizational learning in development NGOs is intertwined with the need to align with institutional tendencies in search of legitimacy vis-

á-vis different audiences, we suggest that many organizational tensions are manifestations of what we call *institutional wrestling*: that is, the need to balance between pervasive tensions and tendencies characteristic of organizational environments and the institutional field of development (Tvedt 1998; Lewis 2016; Cornwall 2007). These tensions can present disruptions to organizational practices which may be explicitly reflected within the organizational communities of inquiry; however, organizations cannot do away with these tensions merely by reformulating their own habits.

The development research literature has discussed a number of such tensions with which NGOs, especially those in the Global South, must wrestle. For instance, in countries that follow policies restricting their civic space (Hossain et al. 2018), NGOs have to define their purposes and activities in a way that ensures their chances of survival. Further, NGOs wrestle with their potentially dual role in society as contributors to incremental improvements in people's lives and as mobilizers of transformational change at a more systemic level (Mitlin et al. 2007; Choudry & Kapoor 2013); they must also continuously balance between adhering to management practices aimed at effectiveness and measurement, and more human-centred approaches based on interaction and oral narratives (Claeyé 2014; Girei 2016; Dar 2014). Therefore, when NGOs emphasize one or the other approach explicitly, it gives rise to situations where they have to wrestle with the ensuing tensions. Consequently, we argue that, in the processes of organizational growth, the formulation of new habits is both enabled and constrained by the need for institutional wrestling. Therefore, in our understanding, growth and wrestles are not separate nor alternatives to each other, but intertwined in organizational learning processes.

Introduction to ACFODE and methodology

Action for Development (ACFODE) is a kind of success story among Southern development NGOs. It is a Ugandan organization established in 1985 to "stimulate, energise and catalyse action on women issues". ACFODE engages with national level advocacy in relation to gender aspects of legislation and policies, and implements community development programmes addressing gender inequality, currently covering all the regions of the country.[2] The organization was started by a few concerned activists, many of whom were academics, in the aftermath of the UN's Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985. Since then, the NGO has established itself as one of the leading, all-inclusive[3] gender advocacy organizations in the country. It has grown from a "hand-bag organization"[4] hosted in the office of one of the founder members at Makerere University to a professional organization that owns an office building and has a fully functioning secretariat.[5] Probably due to the fact that many of the founder members were academics, knowledge production and dissemination have been high on the organizational agenda from the very beginning. The *Arise*

Magazine, covering a range of gender-related issues, has been a consistent bi-annual publication since 1991, and ACFODE has produced a number of research reports and studies. As is common to many well-established NGOs in the Global South, the organization to date is highly donor-dependent, with almost 90 per cent of its budget covered by external funding. Long-term and constant support from its development partners, especially the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, has played an important role in ACFODE's organizational stability and success.

The research material collected from the NGO includes documents such as reports, field notes on organizational workshops conducted in November 2016 and April 2017, and individual interviews with members and members of staff (n=12). In the first workshop the participants analysed significant events in the organization's history and discussed interaction with different stakeholders. After the workshop, individual interviews with selected staff and ordinary members were conducted. In the second workshop we presented a report based on the preliminary analysis of the material collected in 2016 in order to validate our interpretations and receive additional analysis.

For the purposes of this chapter, we read organizational documents and transcribed interviews and workshop discussions in an attempt to identify instances of "problematic situations" and the habits that were prevalent in these situations. Further, we identified potential changes in organizational practices as a consequence of reflecting on these situations,[6] and the enduring tensions embedded in these instances of habit reformulation. Over a time span of 30 years, such instances were many. In what follows we discuss selected examples that illustrate the dynamics of growth and wrestling, first in this particular NGO and then in development NGOs in general.

Complexity of the core concern: Dealing with patriarchal habits

Management views of organizational learning emphasize the need for clear definitions, specific goals and measurable indicators. In contrast, the pragmatist perspective suggests that goals and strategies are always fallible and frequently changing, and that organizational learning should be examined in connection with more enduring but also unarticulated existential concern rather than explicit cognitive goals concerning what should happen in a near future (Lorino 2018, 83). The existential concern, or the *core concern* as we call it, refers to the fundamental reason for an organization's existence: what it seeks to achieve through a variety of explicit goals that change during its history. From the pragmatist perspective, the main question is not about polishing goals and measuring them, but about how an organization learns to promote its core concern in a flexible manner and in the best possible way in changing situations. For ACFODE, such concern has been related to gender equality which it has addressed according to different goals and a variety of strategies over the years.

Claims that learning is more effective when goals in development NGOs are well-defined are challenged by the complex nature of typical core concerns related to social change. Development research has increasingly emphasized "messy realities", uncertainties and realistic views in development management rather than aspirations of linear change with well-defined goals (Davies 2005; Green 2016; Ramalingam et al. 2008, 65–66). ACFODE's core concern is a complex phenomenon in which biological, social, cultural, political, economic and legal elements intertwine and are impacted by different forms of power. One member depicted the learning to do with the core concern in the following way:

> ACFODE's dream of transformation of the whole nation, with people changing their mind-set about women has not been realized. For example, gender-based violence is still rampant; women are working in the garden, [they] harvest crops, and when they sell, men get all the money and drink it out; when a wife complains, a husband beats her; when she asks money for the family, he says, "Shut up. You are only a woman, I paid for you". ACFODE is learning that this is still continuing, despite all its efforts for the last 30 years.

The above reflection illustrates common challenges and frustrations in NGOs devoted to social change and the realization of rights. While their visions mostly relate to radical transformations in oppressive structures and systems, as well as ensuring the realization of rights, they often see their results in incremental changes in welfare or service delivery and use. With its origins in the women's movement, ACFODE was eager to address what could be called patriarchy on a more systemic level. In interviews, members frequently repeated that ACFODE had, from the start, "a rights mantle, as opposed to a women's welfare mantle" (Arise 2015, 7). In the early years, it conducted welfare-related initiatives to facilitate women's empowerment under the existing conditions, such as providing bursaries for girls to go to school, or micro-loans to women to start small businesses. At a more systemic level, it influenced legislation review to take a gender perspective, and advocated placing women in leadership positions. However, the core concern of ACFODE is such that achieving it is beyond the control of any single organization given that it aspires to changing the attitudes and practices of so many "others": of individuals, communities, legislators and, further, cultures and social systems.

Thus, from the pragmatist point of view, organizational learning in ACFODE is geared to the question of how best to change the habits of others. In its strategic plans, the NGO frequently mentions deep-rooted gender inequalities "resident in socio-cultural practices". For example, as articulated in ACFODE's strategic plan for 2012/13–2016/17, one of its strategic objectives articulates an aim "to contribute to the reduction of socio-cultural practices that cause gender-inequality". Often, culture as "knowledge

and values shared by a particular society" is mentioned, and a distinction between negative and positive socio-cultural practices is made (ACFODE 2016, 6). The negative practices identified by ACFODE resonate with those observed in many other contexts: early and forced marriages, virginity testing, widow rituals, female genital mutilation and witch-hunting against women and girls (ACFODE 2015, 12). Gender-based domestic violence, rights to land ownership, and women's absence from decision making have also been among the practices addressed. ACFODE has seen gender inequality as an economic and political concern, not only a cultural issue.

From the pragmatist point of view, these socio-cultural, economic and political practices can be defined as patriarchal habits. Experience over generations has stabilized certain habits in gender relations, which limit the "imagination of people of doing otherwise" as it is "convenient to use the roads that are already there" (Dewey 1922/2012, 27). Therefore, the habits that for ACFODE were manifestations of undesirable gender inequality were not necessarily perceived as problematic in the communities. This reflects Dewey's (1922/2012, 44) suggestion that we should realize the full force of institutions as "embodied habits", and take into account their stability and resistance, which hinders "rapid and sweeping social change". The gendered cultural practices addressed by ACFODE are taken-for-granted, and rarely contested during the course of everyday life as "such practices persist because they are not questioned or challenged and, therefore, take on aura of morality in the eyes of those adhering and promoting them" (ACFODE 2015, 2). Sometimes, the force of habit was physically manifested when ACFODE staff members were harassed by local men who perceived them as importing a threatening message alien to local daily experience.

At times, the resistance has led to frustration, as the outcomes of the NGO's work are hard to identify and they occur across long time spans; little or no change seems to take place despite considerable efforts. In response, the organization has developed patience, practiced long-term planning and tried to be satisfied with "partial" success. It has also attempted to adopt a form of reporting that pays more attention to qualitative life stories indicating change than quantitative indicators. As one staff member comments with regard to the challenges of measuring the "success":

> When you meet around 50 people, you'll get those who are championing [our cause], at least 15 [out of the 50]. But then the 35 are saying, "No, for us we believe in our culture; a woman is an assistant; a woman is just a worker, a woman isn't supposed eat from where you eat from." Now those are the 35; the 15 will say, "We can educate girls." The 15 will actually challenge and share; eh, they will always be champions. But the champions are always few. Yet even if out of ten you only get two, those two are enough; you would work with them because now the two will try to engage slowly with the eight and among the eight at least you will get four or five saying, "Yes, let's support this."

When we look at ACFODE's organizational learning in relation to its core concern of gender equality, it becomes clear that learning to address such a complex and enduring phenomenon, one embedded in the institutionalized habits of others, means dealing with constant uncertainty and resistance. Therefore, in order to keep going, ACFODE has had to wrestle with the discrepancy between the desired goals of profound transformation in patriarchal habits and the incremental changes taking place in everyday lives, continually experimenting with different strategies in order to address the concern on different fronts. In the following section we discuss learning and changes in terms of actual practices geared towards creating a disruption in the habits of others.

Changes in the habits of implementation: Embedding project activities in daily lives

Modes of addressing its core concern have changed in ACFODE over time. In the beginning, the organization employed strategies that one of the members called "preaching". They were enthusiastic about educating women about their rights, empowerment and emancipation. In practice, the work in the communities included a lot of training. Typically, one or two active ACFODE members from Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, went out to the communities to provide a training workshop lasting a few days, to which local women were invited. These approaches, however, seemed to be problematic when it came to whether actual change took place in consequence, and whether the exercise reached the people whose cooperation was essential for transformation to take place.

Thus, notwithstanding the specific content of any particular project, the organizational habit of conducting training workshops encountered a range of challenges; for instance, women's attendance at training venues outside the community was problematic due to the difficulty of totally abandoning their daily household duties. Sometimes their husbands forbade their attendance; at other times they surprisingly appeared in the training venues along with all their children and baby-sitters. Inviting only women also created suspicion among men: "The works of ACFODE were misunderstood; people perceived it as inciting women against men, they misunderstood women's empowerment as teaching women to disobey". Moreover, an empowerment message delivered by "somebody from Kampala" was not always considered relevant in the community settings. Usually, the workshops resulted in considerable enthusiasm being generated among attending individuals whose new ideas, however, were constantly challenged by everyday practices, as discussed in the previous section:

> It was new for them and the women were excited to know that they had such rights. But again the people who were violating their rights were not involved in the training from the beginning. So women would tell us, "Okay, you have told us it is our right to have a, b, c, but when we reach home these men violate them. What do we do?"

From the pragmatist point of view, the disruptions that ACFODE encountered in its training approach exemplify the challenges to changing institutionalized habits formed by long-term practice more generally; they do not reside only in individual conceptualizations but are also incorporated into action and circumstances. ACFODE's experience resonates with Dewey's (1922/2012, 12–13) reflections that "we cannot change the habit directly, but we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions", and further, "we must work on the environment, not merely on the hearts of men". For development NGOs, this implies that the strategy of training individuals is not sufficient to bring about enduring social change. While increased information is needed, actual change requires a more holistic approach. ACFODE has reflected on this disruption after observing that a training approach might not be the best possible way forward, and has reformulated its educational initiatives in ways that a member described as "conducting workshops to go where people are". Today, while the organization continues to provide structured training events, it has also increasingly introduced educational models such as dialogues conducted within the communities, "just under the tree". Moreover, soon after the workshops commenced, men were also invited to take part in training sessions, and later, a more comprehensive idea of the "strategic engagement of men" was introduced. Implementation strategies, such as promoting "model couples" of gender equality to be examples in communities, were adapted, and the enrolment of cultural and religious leaders started. Thus, the activities promoted by the NGO were increasingly embedded in existing daily practices and social power constellations in communities instead of being conducted as separate events.

Another disruption experienced by ACFODE was related to the form and content of the message delivered. The fact that most of its community projects across Uganda were funded by foreign donors and international NGOs and used across Uganda, meant that much of the training material used was originally produced outside the country and was in English. In practical training situations, the staff realized that sometimes the materials were useless because community members did not understand them at all. In order to address this, ACFODE staff took the initiative to find extra resources, as well as convincing current donors to fund the translation of material into local languages. Yet the challenge was not only due to language, but also to content. ACFODE realized that at times too much prior knowledge was assumed of the participants. For example, the training materials on democracy and good governance for local women councillors started with a depiction of the birth of democracy in "ancient Greece" – a place that had little resonance with the experiences of participants. Moreover, at the beginning of another capacity-building project for women councillors, it was realized that many of them "did not even know how to read and write", highlighting the pressing need to change approaches.

These examples illustrate problematic situations ACFODE encountered in its attempts to address its core concern through training approaches. In the

face of these disruptions, ACFODE staff and its members have actively reflected on and experimented with better ways, continuously reformulating its organizational habits of project implementation in the communities – not only through discussion among staff members, but also in negotiation with beneficiaries and donors. During the interviews, ACFODE staff gave credit to both "vocal" beneficiaries' open critique of approaches that do not work and "flexible" donors who were ready to adjust project plans, without which reformulation would not have been possible.

Changes in advocacy approaches: Balancing between survival and impact

As part of the emerging Ugandan women's movement in the late 1980s, ACFODE was involved in many activities that today would be labelled advocacy. These included lobbying the newly formed National Resistant Movement (NRM) government to appoint women to government bodies, advocating the improvement and restructuring of national networks for women, engaging actively in the constitution-making process and contributing to affirmative action that ensured special seats for women at every level of governance. At that time, the NRM government offered a conducive and supportive environment for the women's empowerment agenda. However, it was soon felt that the NRM and President Yoweri Museveni himself wanted to be seen in the "driver's seat", which somewhat sidelined the significance of the women's movement (ACFODE 2010, 79). Moreover, developments within the political environment and the introduction of multiparty politics in Uganda in the late 1990s changed the government's attitude to one of suspicion and confrontation. When operating during the time of a one-party – or non-party – regime, ACFODE did not question political power relations while advocating women's rights (Tripp 2001), but its role changed in parallel with changes in broader state-civil society relations, while changes in international development discourses affected ACFODE's project portfolios. Issues of women's empowerment were accompanied by questions of human rights and good governance; thus, desirable transformations of interest expanded from the rebalancing of asymmetric gender relations to overall democratization and realization of human rights.

In the changed situation, habits of mutual collaboration with the NRM no longer worked. For example, ACFODE became increasingly dismissed as an elitist organization: "You would hear government officials asking, who you speak for anyway?" The NGO responded to the challenges by adopting advocacy strategies such as bringing members of rural communities to meet decision-makers to lobby for themselves instead of lobbying on their behalf. They also invested in knowledge production, documentation and dissemination in order to base their advocacy on facts and evidence. A strategy of joint advocacy, networks and coalition building with other NGOs has also been critical in a hostile political environment; meanwhile coalitions[7] have likewise

strengthened the power to influence and facilitate collective positions on key gender issues, offering women leaders safe fora in which to discuss their challenges and seek collective support in cases of political backlash. Networks have been crucial in protecting the organization while advocating and lobbying on "politically sensitive" issues.

The current relationship between NGOs and the government in Uganda comprises a continuous balancing act between collaboration, co-optation, control and confrontation. Consequently, ACFODE needs to walk a fine line between advocating democracy and having a non-partisan identity, as required by the NGO Act of 2016. For instance, during awareness training in communities about general elections, ACFODE emphasizes the need for voting a competent woman, while it avoids supporting any particular party. The same applies to the training of women caucuses established in local councils: "We said no, as women councillors we are all representing women, we are not representing parties; you are representing women's issues." At the local level, ACFODE's efforts to educate ordinary citizens to claim personal rights, state accountability and good governance were often considered threatening and perceived as anti-government activity. As noted above, in the early days, ACFODE used to go straight to the communities, but this approach became problematic and they explicitly changed their ways of collaborating with the local government sector. As one of the members of staff reflected, "They need to know, even if you are not inviting [the government officials], there will be security people around, listening to what you are saying." More recently, ACFODE has put constant effort into incorporating the organization's actions into local government activity plans by signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and inviting government officials to attend training events and community dialogues. As one of the interviewees explained, "You should at least pay a visit to their offices. Even if you don't find them there, you can deliver an information pack." This is a prerequisite for being able to function, as in some instances a failure to disseminate relevant information has led to the abrupt suspension of training activities by officials.

Whether ACFODE has advocated on issues to do with electoral processes, public financing or holding leaders accountable, its strategy has always been geared towards advancing its core concern: gender equity and equality. The core concern has also been affected by changes in international debates on gender and development. Meanwhile, affirmative action (e.g. special seats reserved for women), strongly advocated by ACFODE in the early years, has been challenged by the fact that while it provides political opportunities for marginalized groups, it simultaneously strengthens the political power of the authoritarian regime; for instance, the special "women's seats" are easily co-opted by the ruling party (Muriaas & Wang 2012). Furthermore, overall "gender mainstreaming" – on ACFODE's agenda for a long time – has encountered critique on the basis that it domesticates and hampers the transformative potential of feminism (Cornwall et al. 2004; Davids et al.

2014). Indeed, ACFODE has been criticized by radical activists who claim that its reformist strategies scarcely address deep-rooted, oppressive, gendered power structures but, rather, continue to entrench them further. Moreover, some international NGOs have demanded that ACFODE take a more transformative stance and confront the authoritarian government. These debates illustrate, once again, the continual wrestling between supporting incremental or transformational change that NGOs undergo. While ACFODE has learned to reformulate its organizational habits when advocating its core concern of gender equality, it has simultaneously wrestled with survival as a civil society organization in a semi-authoritarian regime that requires constant balancing between transformation and reformation, and between contestation and co-optation.

Reformulating the ways of being an organization: Organizational restructuring

> As with any major change, the prospect of letting go of the old and concretizing the new ACFODE was greeted with anxiety, scepticism and even fear. Members had grown fond of ACFODE and they identified with her story. It was their story; it seemed, to many of them, that changing ACFODE would be like stripping naked and losing the identity that no doubt had been entrenched in their minds over a long period. It was painful to accept that the character and personality of ACFODE that they had come to cherish had to change.
>
> (ACFODE 2010, 65)

The process of reformulating habits of being an organization relates to the critical discussion of the professionalization and modernization of Southern NGOs in light of donor demands and global managerialism trends (Banks et al. 2015; Girei 2016). ACFODE's experience of organizational restructuring seems like a typical example of adaptation to donor demands; however, a closer look at the process provides a more nuanced picture. A model of the best ways to organize was not simply imported to ACFODE with any single donor capacity-building initiative, but also resulted from continuous self-reflection which started in the NGO's early years. The vocabulary used at the beginning of the 1990s by leadership, staff and general membership embraced openness and a willingness to learn from mistakes, and stemmed from both internal and external environments. Language like, "to continue the struggles, add more firewood and blow harder, so that the founding fire does not go out"; "re-engineering"; "shedding off old skin"; "coming of age"; "pruned off removable buds", "period of refinement"; and "identifying strategic spots" is found in most of the organization's publications around that time. The outgoing chairperson's hand-over reports (ACFODE 1997) provided a frank assessment of organizational experiences and the need for "re-engineering" in order to become a more effective organization in terms of gender advocacy. Different, gradually accumulated challenges triggered an organizational restructuring process implemented in 2000.

The restructuring process addressed a number of organizational habits experienced as problematic; one concerned the use of the office building. Members frequently convened in the premises, perceiving it as their "living room". At the time, ACFODE used its members in its programme implementation. Thus, members came to the office to inquire about the possibilities of fieldwork assignments, but also to conduct their personal activities using the NGO's facilities, or just to socialize and meet other members. This led to a difficult situation in which organizational resources such as water and electricity were overused, and office tasks were not effectively accomplished while considerable time was spent in general socializing. Secondly, ACFODE had the habit of being a "fire-brigade". In the early years of the new Ugandan women's movement, ACFODE, as one of the very few local women's organizations, tried to be everywhere and address every issue related to gender equality, carrying out a variety of activities on an ad hoc basis with short-term donor funding. These activities seemed not to work in the long run, and beneficiaries were not satisfied with limited short-term attention. Moreover, "being everywhere" led to minimal overall impact. The establishment of a number of other gender NGOs enabled specialization, while changes in external circumstances, especially in donors' strategic foci, hindered the continuation of specific activities such as bursaries and microcredits.

In these changing circumstances, habits formulated during the organization's early experiences seemed not to work anymore. Encouraged by one of their donors, *Hivos*, ACFODE decided to go through a total restructuring process led by a Change Process Management Team (CPT) made up of representatives from among the general members, the executive board and staff, as well as an external consultant from a well-known organizational development institute in Tanzania. The process took months and included participatory workshops and negotiations. As a result, the organization structure was revised from units to programme committees; the Board was "re-engineered into a non-executive one that was more policy-oriented"; the vision, mission, core purpose, mandate and strategic objectives were revised to focus more on advocacy than service delivery; and the new focus was articulated in organizational artefacts such as strategic plans that guided long-term work.

During the restructuring, the position of members also changed. Their involvement in project implementation was to be based on qualification and competence, not only on willingness – with recruited professional staff taking on most of it – and their use of office space and equipment was restricted. While restructuring the NGO was considered inevitable if ACFODE were to be able to address its core concerns, it called for balancing between different ideas of what constitutes a good and proper organization. In a number of interviews members remembered the "good old times" of wide-spread enthusiasm and member-engagement in field assignments:

> Before, when there was an activity, maybe in eight or ten districts, we were setting off on the same day . . . and each district is taking a minimum of three people. You find that twelve people would be setting up at six in the morning going down to the South, West, a few going to North, so you all would go . . . Now, a whole project might only take up like maybe four people from the membership, the rest would be staff.

Overall, ACFODE repositioned itself as an efficient, professional organization with a core purpose of "advocacy for gender equality and equity", a clear structure and a staff recruited on the basis of competence in both substance and project management. The current organization aligns with the global model of a "modern organization" that follows the principles of rationality, has explicated goals, explicit borders, and tracks its use of resources (Bromley & Meyer 2017; Meyer & Bromley 2013). However, it is still torn between – and wrestles with – being an open-for-all space for members and an organization with specific borders, as some of the initial sense of belonging and solidarity has been lost. It also encounters contradictory tendencies from the donor community due to its being simultaneously in accordance with the requirements but at the same time subject to the critique of being "too professional" to be able to address the needs of communities (Banks et al. 2015). The latter trend has surprised the organization, as one informant noted, "If I was . . . an NGO in the northern hemisphere, I would be happy to work with a professional organization because you know your resources will be effectively used." Overall, restructuring was not a one-off exercise, and the NGO continually seeks to maintain close relationships with its members and the communities with which it works, through participatory processes of designing organizational strategies, among other means.

Conclusions

Based on our analysis of ACFODE, we can summarize four types of interplay between organizational growth and institutional wrestling. We began by demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of ACFODE's core concern. As organizational learning is geared towards finding the best possible ways to address core concerns, development NGOs must consider the complexity of social change in their efforts to transform social habits. Further, they continuously encounter situations in which their approaches do not work as expected, thereby giving rise to uncertainty as to best practice. Second, we showed how NGOs can learn during the implementation of their projects, in this case by shifting from training approaches to those more embedded in people's daily practices. Third, we provided an example of how NGOs have to learn to change their advocacy strategies in political environments that are becoming more restrictive. Fourth, we scrutinized how NGOs learn to be modern organizations with explicit borders, measurable goals and competence-based division of labour, in contrast to more informal, membership-based operating principles.

All these instances resonate with the idea of organizational learning as growth. In these examples, ACFODE encountered situations in which its taken-for-granted ways of working did not function: the training approach did not bring about the desired change in gender relations; collaboration with the NRM became difficult in the changed political environment; and perceptions of the NGO as an open space benefiting all its members was considered problematic in terms of resource use and loss of focus. Throughout the process, ACFODE showed the ability to learn, forming communities of inquiry that addressed these situations either internally, or with other NGOs, beneficiaries and donors, and jointly searched for better ways to operate. This was supported by ACFODE's continuous commitment to its core concern. While it reformulated its project implementation practices, advocacy approaches and ways of being an organization, it retained gender equality as a guiding principle. Encountering problematic situations, ACFODE initiated reflection, followed by negotiation of, and experimentation with, better ways to address gender inequalities. Thus, we contend that organizational growth was the prevailing response to problematic situations.

However, the processes of organizational growth were also characterized by institutional wrestling. As one of the ACFODE members asked in our feedback seminar:

> All these learnings, do we really want them? . . . If a development partner says that they are restricting your finances, we have to react to that – but is that a positive learning process?

In an ideal process of organizational growth, the organization would be able, through negotiation and experimentation, to identify the best possible ways to address its core concern in the context of changed circumstances. However, as our case study shows, formulation of new ideas and practices are constrained by institutional tensions, unsolvable by any single organization. These included the restriction of NGO activities by project models that often include the implementation of training events that can be counted for the purposes of reporting; the compromises made to transformative agendas both in order to survive in a political environment restrictive for civil society organizations and also be accepted in communities resistant to their main messages; and the loss, on professionalization, of some of the feelings of belonging and solidarity characterizing membership-based organizations. Therefore, we conclude that organizational learning in NGOs requires the tolerating of continuous uncertainties while navigating between a variety of demands and interests. At the same time, the organization needs to be faithful to its core concern. Organizational learning, thus, is not so much about defining objectives and measuring the achievement of ideal goals, but, rather, a continuous engagement with practices and a readiness with ongoing response to problematic situations and joint experimentation of novel ways of doing things.

Notes

1 The first author is the principal contributor to the conceptual discussion and participated in the data collection in the NGO together with the second author. The authors contribute equally to analysis and writing up the findings.
2 These include, in the Central Region: Kiboga and Mubende; in Karamoja Region: Kaabong, Kotido and Moroto; in Westnile: Nebbi and Yumbe; in Northern Region (Acholi Sub-Region): Pader; in Lango Sub-Region: Apac, Dokolo, Kole and Oyam; in Eastern Region: Namutumba; and in South-West Region: Kanungu and Kisoro Districts.
3 ACFODE membership includes all women without discriminating on the basis of age, education level, employment status, personality, etc. While it started as a women-only organization, in the course of restructuring processes, it has admitted like-minded men as members as well.
4 One of the first members narrates how, in the beginning, all organizational assets such as documents were kept in members' "handbags" (ACFODE 2010, 10).
5 By 1997, ACFODE's Secretariat was headed by an executive secretary with 17 support staff.
6 We illustrate our analysis with direct quotes from the material. When the quote is from a document, a source is explicated. Other quotes are from individual interviews and workshop discussions and the speaker is not identified in order to ensure anonymity.
7 For instance, networks such as the Coalition on the Domestic Relations Bill (DRB) whose main objective was to lobby the government and other stakeholders for a just domestic relations law to be passed; the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) which is an advocacy and lobbying coalition of national women's NGOs and institutions in Uganda; the Uganda Land Alliance whose mandate is to advocate fair laws regarding women's ownership of land; and the Coalition for Political Accountability to Women (COPAW).

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