

Spinning Sisterhood

The Partnership of the YWCAs of Canada and Zambia

by Beverly A. Suderman

En 1990, le YWCA du Canada lance une initiative de partenariat international avec le YWCA de la Zambie. Cet article donne un aperçu des attentes et préoccupations des principales participantes à la fin des premiers dix-huit mois de ce projet pilote.



Photo: Michael E. Kelly

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As part of the YWCA culture, I think this way of work [partnership] is a better way of work. It implies sisterhood. It implies working together. It implies sharing, whether it's financial resources or human resources, or technical assistance, whatever, so I would say it's probably one of the best alternatives to doing international development work. (YWCA personnel, Canada)

North-South non-governmental organization (NGO) partnerships are a fairly new idea, just over ten years old. They emerged out of a grassroots movement against orthodox development theory—the practice of which has resulted in a dramatic increase in poverty world-wide, disproportionately impoverishing women—and in favour of development

which empowers people to meet their own needs. Developing alternative theories of development also requires new strategies for engaging in development work; the old strategies are no longer appropriate. International development NGOs and the feminist community envision forming new North and South NGO partnerships which will benefit both parties.

An equitable North-South NGO partnership should have (1) recognition of differences, particularly differences in power; (2) sensitivity to the environmental, political, and economic context of the other partner(s); (3) transparency of each partnering organization to the other(s); (4) consensual, joint decision-making; and (5) communication, respect, and trust of the other partner(s) (Partnership Africa Canada).¹

Not surprisingly, translating the vision into practice is proving to be a challenge. Power differentials, differences in skills and visions, as well as leadership styles, exist anytime groups of people get together to engage in social change activity (Albrecht and Brewer). Furthermore, addressing power differentials is “crucial when one works cross-culturally” given that we are working in “a world of overwhelming power imbalances” (Carillo 204). It is also important to recognize that there is a psychological dimension to the partnership as well. Conscious attention needs to be applied by the partners to developing self-knowledge, in order to shatter stere-

otypes about others, as well as to put an end to the cycle of internalized oppression or domination (see Pheterson).

The Young Women's Christian Associations (YWCAs) of Canada and Zambia decided to pursue a North-South NGO partnership-relationship focussed on the common issue of violence against women. To fund partnership development and communication, the YWCAs of Canada and Zambia jointly developed a proposal to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for anti-violence work in Zambia. This project funded a Zambian study of the incidence of violence against women there, and study tours of regional anti-violence initiatives (Zimbabwe, Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa). Additionally, the project provided for an exchange visit for two Zambian YWCA staff members to study the Canadian YWCAs and other organizations' responses to violence in women's lives. Both YWCA organizations saw opportunities to address some of the challenges facing them through such an arrangement.² The funding climate within CIDA was favourable, in part due to CIDA's interest in funding partnerships—although their definition of a partnership differs significantly from PAC's—as well as their willingness to fund initiatives to combat violence against women.

As International Development Coordinator for the YWCA of Calgary, I was actively involved in these early stages and in the coordination of the Zambians' visit to Calgary. This experience was challenging and left me with many questions, particularly about how partnerships could be structured to provide greater clarity for all participants about roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

In 1993, with the support of a CIDA Awards for Canadians grant and a Women Helping Women scholar-

ship, provided by the Calgary Women in Psychology Group, I was able to ask other participants in the Canada/Zambia YWCA partnership about their perceptions of the relationship to date, and their suggestions for improve-

national organization was to provide membership services, in this case accessed funds, wrote reports, administered the CIDA grant, and mediated Canadian international relationships within the World YWCA movement.

The YWCA of Calgary, a local member organization of the YWCA of Canada, provided programmatic expertise. The branch was selected because of its experience with the issue of violence against women, together with the size and diversity of its programming on



Photo: Michael E. Kelly

ments. In all, I spoke to 16 women (eight from Canada, eight from Zambia) in interviews which ranged in length from 45 minutes to three hours. These interviews gave me an enormous amount of information. My feelings about the difficulties and challenges inherent in undertaking a partnership of this sort were reinforced, as was my belief in the value of pursuing North-South partnerships. The participants all believed in what they were doing, even if they were critical of what had been accomplished so far. It is my hope that other women's organizations can learn from the experiences of the Canada and Zambia YWCAs and move forward in expanding their own North-South connections.

The YWCA Canada/Zambia partnership

The players were numerous. The YWCA of/du Canada, whose role as a

around the issue of violence.

The YWCA of Zambia, also a national organization, explored and piloted new programmatic areas, provided support to branch offices, and mediated Zambian international relationships within the World YWCA movement. The Lusaka branch of the YWCA of Zambia was also involved. It is somewhat parallel to being a local member organization but without organizational autonomy. One of the contested areas of the partnership arrangement was whether or not the Lusaka branch could be considered a partner.

In October 1991 the partnership officially began with a preliminary ten-day visit to Zambia by two Canadians, representatives of the YWCAs of Canada and Calgary. By March 1992 CIDA funding had been received and the YWCA-Canada sent out a Memorandum of Agreement to the YWCA of Zambia regarding the conditions which would govern the project.

Project activities began in May 1992. These activities were carried out by the YWCA of Zambia in southern Africa. They were not partnership activities, although funding was acquired through the partner, and one of the project activities was designed to enhance the partnership, namely the exchange visit.

As I discovered, the project's relationship to the partnership, and vice versa, is very slippery. One of the supports that a northern partner can provide to a southern partner is the development of funding proposals. Often the northern partner has easier access to the skills and funding sources than does the southern partner. Sensitivity to the capacities of each partner, and responding to these in a constructive way through discussion and negotiation, is a way of being a partner in an equitable relationship.

In October 1992, two Zambian staff representatives of the YWCA of Zambia and the Lusaka branch, arrived in Canada for a two-month exchange visit. The visit was also the primary vehicle for establishing relationships which would develop the partnership.

I arrived in Zambia in February 1993, approximately six weeks after the Zambians' return home, and 18 months into the partnership.

The participants' analysis

With Canada I can see it like we have built this [together]. It's like a family type of thing where even in future, we won't be here ... but other people will still come to Zambia and say ... this is what we built together. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

At the end of the first 18 months, the partnership had strong and enthusiastic support from participants—North and South. The women I in-

interviewed had many positive points to make about the benefits of this partnership, and its potential for further benefits.

Partnerships are going to enhance more international development because now it will be a two-way process. The other side, even if they can give in the funds, they can still learn from our knowledge. We might not be able to give the funds, but we can share our ideas on how they can progress, and it will be a two-way thing... On our part, as the Third World country, they will be able to develop somehow through us, and ... they would still refer to it as an international development on their part. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

The partnership concept appealed to participants because of the reciprocity inherent in the concept. The idea of a partnership-relationship stands in stark contrast to the traditional practice of giving aid, with all of its power differentials. Partnership presupposes equality, and therefore give and take is possible within the relationship. The Canadians would share funding and expertise, the Zambians would share their knowledge.

The partnership seemed a natural fit because all the partners were members of the World YWCA with shared values, perspectives, and philosophies. This shared foundation, it was believed, would provide a solid basis from which to work together. Since the leaders of both national YWCAs were experienced in working from a global perspective, they and their colleagues approached the partnership with confidence.

These positive feelings did not, however, prevent participants from critically analyzing the partnership, or expressing their fears about the possibility of the partnership straying from its ideals. For example, while there might be reciprocity in the decision-making part of the partnership, was it present in the learning part of the relationship?

I think that although it's [the partnership] a two-way "get," our thinking was often more of a one-way "give." (YWCA personnel, Canada)

The shared issue of the partnership, violence against women, was an area of work new to the Zambian YWCA. In contrast, the Canadian YWCAs had more than 20 years of experience working in the area. The Zambians were, thus, very clear about what they were hoping to learn from their Canadian partners: how have the Canadian YWCAs addressed this issue in their communities?

We are going to learn from you. We might not apply it the way you do in Canada, being a different environment, but I think it's a starting point for us. So I think we'll do more learning from you. Then I don't know what you are going to learn from our way of doing things. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

The Canadian YWCAs, at least in the short term, would learn very little from their Zambian counterparts on this particular issue. Yet, no other specific issue was negotiated so that the Canadians could learn from their partners. There were some vague expectations, for example, about learning how global economic disparity impacts Zambian women, and about applying learning from the Zambian experience of violence to cross-cultural experiences in the Calgary shelters and counselling services. However, since these were not negotiated and contracted for in the same way as the Canadian expertise of combatting violence, the outcomes were, unsurprisingly, less satisfying.

The danger I see, which has happened in other organizations, is that especially the work of the North tends to paternalize the South, and they take them as ownership and say it's "our" YWCA. I hope that won't come to that. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

Another concern was the imbalance of access to financial resources. With the Canadian YWCA always obtaining the necessary finances to carry out partnership activities, participants feared that imbalances in other parts of the partnership could develop.

It's the northern partner that has the dollars, and I don't know if there'd be any motivation to work with us if we didn't have them. I have a great discomfort about that. So I think that's part of the reality of what we're working with. (YWCA personnel, Canada)

The participants in this partnership struggled with the question of how to set aside the issue of money so that it would not interfere with establishing a relationship of equality. Were they successful? The barriers to success were formidable: (1) a long history of giving or receiving aid; and (2) internalized beliefs equating access to money with decision-making power, and its converse i.e., lack of access to money prohibiting decision-making power. Nevertheless, recognition of the difference in access to funds, and the willingness to set that difference aside, provides a strong foundation for an equitable relationship and is one of the attributes PAC identifies as important to partnership.

Culture clash is the term I finally settled on to describe a range of experiences during the exchange visit to Calgary. I was partially responsible for coordinating. Tensions arose out of ignorance, particularly the ignorance on the part of the Canadian hosts about Zambia.³ Differences in perceptions of what constitutes appropriate host-guest behaviour also led to misunderstandings as well as communication breakdowns, and the pace of life in Canadian cities assaulted the sensibilities of our Zambian guests. The inability to discuss these experiences together also contributed to the tension.

That was something that became very clear to us, that there were experiences that women from Zam-

bia were going to have here that we couldn't even imagine. And so we couldn't anticipate those and try to do something with that.... Somehow we have to be able to discuss that in a way that we can help each other in partnerships. I don't know how you do that, when you don't know what it is that you don't know. (YWCA personnel, Canada)

One Zambian reflected that exchange visits should provide the mechanism for discussing and learning about differences, by allowing each group to see and understand the other.

For us to understand each other, you have to come right down to see why we are doing things the way we are doing them. Because some of these things you can only explain if you understand how people were socialized to start with. But if you don't understand why people are doing things the way they are doing them now, it's very easy to blame. Just like us. It's very easy to blame you for some things which are something to do with your background. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

Exchange visits in the course of a partnership are a key strategy for building the inter-personal relationships essential to cooperation between partnering organizations. By 1996, two other extended visits by Zambians to Canada had taken place, without any Canadian exchange visits being made to Zambia. The Zambian YWCA thus developed a fairly good understanding of the Canadian YWCA's organization: advantages, constraints, organizational structure, decision-making strategies, fund-rais-

ing methods, support received from the community, and so on. The Canadian YWCA, on the other hand, was not able to attain nearly the same breadth of knowledge about the YWCA in Zambia.

Participants were also critical of the way in which the partnership was organized. Inattention to detail can lead to larger issues within a partnership. One Canadian participant had this to say:

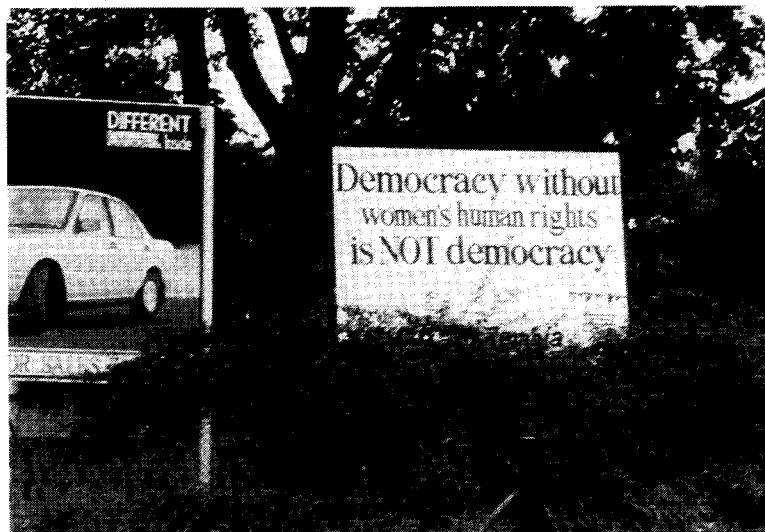


Photo: Michael E. Kelly

From a structural point of view, what we learned in the beginning stages of this project is that [communication] is still cumbersome because the national organizations are baby-sitting this [partnership] to death. With the exception of Geneva⁴ not being involved, in some ways it was as bureaucratic and as cumbersome in terms of information flow.... I really understand why this one has to be baby-sat, because we're going to have to learn how to do it, and trust is going to have to grow that we're not going to botch it. (YWCA personnel, Canada)

The YWCA of/du Canada was afraid that the Calgary branch would make "mistakes" due to its inexperience with global relationships. Therefore, the national association tried to control communications, leaving Calgary feeling disenfranchised. Another fear, that the Calgary YWCA might make

budgetary commitments that the national organization could not sustain, also drove the national office to maintain control of the communication process. Both concerns were real. Development of a communications protocol, making communication paths clear and reasonable, could have resolved the problem of communication, as well as addressed the perception of being "baby-sat" throughout the process. This unattended-to detail,

of how communications in this partnership would occur, resulted in tensions about power and control in the partnership, particularly between the YWCA of/du Canada and the YWCA of Calgary. The outcome for the Zambians was unclear communications and confusion.

Another unattended-to detail resulted in a concern which emerged from the Zambian side: who are the partners in this relationship?

We were at this time [October 1991 meetings] thinking of a partnership of country to country, not so much of local association to local association. And to tell you the truth we are not ready to see how it works, if it would be Calgary to Lusaka.... If YWCA du Canada is going to this partnership and expecting local association to local association, I think there's a lot that needs to be discussed because of various reasons. One of them, for us, is the capacity. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

The concern by the Zambian national YWCA regarding the capacity of their local branch associations to sustain a partnership of this type, given their difficulties in maintaining local programming, was a legitimate one.

The assumption, by the Calgary local association, that the partnership would be local to local, i.e., Calgary and Lusaka, was in keeping with relationships within the Canadian structure. The two national associations, however, were differently structured, accounting for the confusion which emerged. The Canadian national association did not have the capacity for a national to national relationship with another YWCA because it fills a member services organization role towards its member YWCAs and YM-YWCAs in Canada. It provides support to its membership, rather than directing the work of its member organizations. It cannot undertake direct programmatic work with another organization; it needs to involve a local member association in any international partnership initiatives.

The Zambian national association has a head office/branch offices structure with much more hands-on involvement by the national YWCA in the day-to-day operations of its branches. This is particularly true in the case of the Lusaka branch, since both are situated on the same property in Lusaka. Therefore, the YWCA of Zambia was in a position to undertake direct programmatic work with another organization and only experienced a conflict when it appeared that its Lusaka branch was to be the primary focus of the relationship, rather than the national office itself.

Who were the partners? Clearly the YWCA of/du Canada and the YWCA of Zambia as the initiators of the relationship. Clearly the YWCA of Calgary due to its invitation by the YWCA of/du Canada to participate. The Lusaka branch of the YWCA of Zambia, in contrast, was a participant in partnership activities, but not a partner. Defining the membership of this partnership was difficult because the organizational structures of the participating YWCAs did not match. This was not well understood.

Definition of membership in this partnership was also difficult because of what was at stake: access to resources. Exclusion from membership meant only indirect access to partner-

ship resources, through participation in partnership activities. We need to ensure that we are clear on membership, so that tensions are minimized rather than aggravated by misunderstandings. Clarity about membership should also mean clarity about the role of each member within the partnership, reducing further opportunities for misunderstanding to develop.

Another concern on the Zambian side was that of the relationship between the projects which are undertaken within a partnership, and the partnership itself.

I feel like our partnership is only in the project, you see, which is not what a partnership is supposed to be. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

Partnerships need to look at being more and more of a really broad thing, and not just a specific project. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

These comments express the concern that the partnership was being dominated by project requirements: completing the workplan, doing the necessary reporting. The distinction between projects and partnership is a subtle one, but illustrates short-term versus long-term thinking. A partnership, according to PAC's definition, is a long-term relationship, built up by shared activity. A project, by definition, is a time-limited endeavour. Given the general scarcity of resources, a joint project seems a necessary prerequisite to establishing a partnership. Yet a project has a vital dynamic of its own, with tasks to be completed and reports to be submitted. How are the needs of (long-term) partnership to be met in the context of a (short-term) project? This attribute of a North-South NGO partnership distinguishes it from partnerships of other types. Most other types of partnership are project or task specific and are expected to come to an end at the completion of the task or project. When organizations engage in a partnership, they need to be clear on the relationship between the project and the partnership, en-

sureing that the needs of both types of activities are met: project and relationship.

This project/partnership confusion gave rise to a fear expressed by the Zambian partners: that the partnership, which took so much energy to create, would be abandoned by the Canadians at the end of the project.

I don't know if the YWCA of Canada has ever thought about this partnership as a beginning of phases. I mean that it's not the beginning and the end. I hope they haven't done that, because if that happens, there is a tendency that you develop this partnership and it breaks. It's like a marriage breaking... I hope it will be a partnership that will develop into one that has to create more confidence in each other, that it won't just be here, and that will be the end, and then they move on. (YWCA personnel, Zambia)

I believe that North-South NGO partnerships should not be undertaken lightly, rather with thoughtful commitment and foresight. In the case of some NGOs, a long-term relationship may be an unrealistic or unsustainable goal. Not all relationships need to be partnerships. There are other ways for NGOs to relate North-South. In the case under study here, the partnership was entered into with good faith on both sides, but the volatility of the YWCA of/du Canada's context prevented follow through on the Canadian side. Given the rapidly changing social, political, and economic context within which Canadian NGOs are operating, is it fair to set up expectations which may be unrealistic or unsustainable?

Partnerships, like other long-term relationships, may not always work out. They will have a much better chance of success, however, if there is an exploratory period prior to the decision to engage in partnership. I believe, given the changeability of funders' priorities and strategies, that undertaking North-South NGO partnership means a willingness to com-

mit organizational resources in the periods between projects. When an organization is operating on a shoestring, this is a big decision to make.

An exploratory period will also allow the idea of partnership to move beyond key decision-makers, the identities of whom can change rapidly, to a broader base within the staff, volunteers, and membership of potentially-partnering organizations. A strong base of support for the idea of partnership should translate into treating an actual North-South NGO partnership as a high priority within partnering organizations, with a resulting higher commitment by all partners to the relationship.

Addressing the problems of partnership

The partnership participants had a series of recommendations for improving the structure of this particular partnership:

- develop a process for routinely revisiting expectations and arrangements in partnership, to be done very frequently during exchange visits;
- develop a communications protocol, simple enough to enhance rather than prevent communication;
- do more groundwork with the local member associations before the Canadian YWCA involves them in partnerships;
- provide cross-cultural and anti-racist training to Canadians participating in North-South partnerships;
- formalize the evaluation process;
- provide an opportunity for overseas partners to have a voice in Canada's International Cooperation planning;
- regarding exchange visits: ensure more advance preparation and exchange of information prior to the visit; ensure that exchange visits are agency-wide events, and not limited to single departments.

Conclusions

Partnership Africa Canada's list of qualities or attributes that an equitable partnership-relationship must

have provides NGOs working North-South with goals to strive towards, rather than milestones along the way. If we use the PAC attributes as a measure, the YWCAs in this case study did not achieve a full partnership, but rather made a valiant attempt to create a relationship of equality, a partnership, in an unequal world.

Unfortunately, after a good beginning, the YWCA of/du Canada has had to discontinue its international initiatives, and virtually its entire International Cooperation program. At the 1996 Annual Members Meeting its membership decided that the Canadian national association could no longer sustain significant international involvement, and that more efforts would need to be directed to local concerns. Given the fast-paced social and fiscal changes occurring in Canada, and their impacts on the Canadian YWCA movement, this decision is understandable, if disappointing. It is my hope that other women's organizations will see the benefits of North-South connections, learn from the YWCA Canada-Zambia experience, and pick up from where the YWCA of/du Canada, of necessity, left off. We have a lot to learn from our southern sisters.

Bev Suderman is a Canadian working for the Hopi Tribe. Her 1996 thesis (University of Calgary) is called "Beyond Rhetoric: A Case Study of the Partnership between the YWCAs of Canada, Calgary, and Zambia."

¹These attributes were identified by Partnership Africa Canada (PAC), in an NGO discussion paper published in 1989: "Partnership: Matching Rhetoric to Reality." PAC was a CIDA decentralized fund for African development operated by a coalition of 100 Canadian NGOs involved in development work in Africa or development education in Canada. PAC supported development in Africa by encouraging cooperation based on the principle of partnership between Africans and Canadians. Its funding was eliminated in the 1995 Canadian budget. Oxfam-Canada and the YMCA of

Canada have also created excellent materials to assist in organizing certain aspects of North-South NGO partnerships.

²This aspect of the partnership is too complex to summarize in this article. For a full discussion of this aspect of the partnership, please see Suderman.

³In the early days of my thinking, I called much of this racism. I was forced to re-think this analysis due to the rigorous opposition of my Zambian hosts (and participants in the partnership) to the use of the term "racism" to describe these experiences.

⁴Geneva is the location of World YWCA headquarters.

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