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The Transformational Leadership Program (TLP)

An Evaluation of Impact in a Capacity-Building Leadership Program for Africa's Social Sector (Abridged Version)

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The role of leadership in rapidly developing African countries is fundamentally important and the need for leadership development across the African continent is critical for social and economic progress. Since 1953, the Africa-America Institute (AAI) has advocated for educational and human capacity building on the African continent by offering a wide range of scholarship, training and exchange programs that have benefited over 23,000 people from 54 African countries.

In 2007, AAI launched its Transformational Leadership Program (TLP) with a grant from The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation (TCCAF) to offer business training and broader leadership development for managers of African NGOs and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The program has reached 351 participants from 14 countries through certificate and degree programs at United States International University (USIU) in Nairobi, Kenya; Pan-African University (EDC) in Lagos, Nigeria; and University of Stellenbosch (USB) in Cape Town, South Africa.

In 2013, an evaluation of the TLP was conducted using surveys, questionnaires, individual interviews and focus groups with strategically selected stakeholder groups, site visits, participant reflective writing, Town Hall meetings, and a comprehensive review of program and university documents.

Analyzing these data, the research team discovered four key themes:

1. **Significant, Multi-Levelled Program Impact**
2. **The Transformational Quality of the Learning Experience**
3. **The TLP as a Generative Community of Practice**
4. **Influence of Program Structure**

1. **Significant, Multi-Levelled Program Impact**

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS

Addressing the individual growth needs of leaders is at the heart of the TLP. In addition to transformational shifts in personal identity, skills, knowledge and approach to being a leader, significant improvements in the leadership paths of participants were commonly reported: graduates explained that they moved to higher-level and better quality positions, transferred to new and often higher-profile organizations, initiated new programs within their organizations or founded new NGOs.

Leadership Acumen and Capacity Development

Each and every participant, without exception, touted a wide range of significant personal and professional gains from engagement in the TLP; gains that parlayed into increased leadership acumen and capacity in focused and powerful ways. The ability to build and improve leadership knowledge, effectiveness, capacity and skills was a primary objective for participants, one that was achieved through and fully realized during the TLP.

“ I am really transformed, the organization has been transformed... in one year, we see a difference between our job and what other NGOs do. Before the program there was no transparency or accountability... it is a pronounced change... I want my staff to go, they need the knowledge, knowledge is power.”

— EDC ALUMNUS

Skills Development

Participants stated that they found the skills, perspectives and specific tools built through program engagement practically useful. The core premise of the TLP—the application of management and leadership practices and enhanced skills to social sector organizations—was widely appreciated and actualized during and after the program. As one program leader explained the program’s design,

“ Leaders firstly need to know themselves—they need to be aware of what they are about, what makes them tick, what pushes their buttons. They then have to know the individuals with whom they are working and ensure that their teams are ‘doing the right things right’, if they want to continue making a difference and serve their beneficiaries as best possible. In the process, they are likely to experience obstacles and conflict, and have to make some tough choices. While team diversity presents exciting opportunities for development and growth, it also has its challenges, since everyone is different and needs to be managed accordingly—it is not one size fits all... [L]eaders have to facilitate engagements with their other stakeholders such as board members, donors or funders, beneficiaries, partners or collaborators, etc. For this they need to have good interpersonal skills, be able to communicate effectively, tap into opportunities and pre-empt potential problem areas. Leaders therefore have to be on a life-long journey of growing and strengthening their ability to facilitate change and all stakeholder relations.”

— USB PROGRAM LEADER

Personal Empowerment

Participants also reported personal empowerment as a key outcome, citing greater personal and professional agency. This shift, which both emboldened and developed these individuals, led to changes in their overall comportment and approach as leaders and included direct development of their professional dossiers: job changes, career advancement and the pioneering of new social sector initiatives, as well as new professional activities like publishing books, newsletters and creating public awards.

IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS

Improvements in the structure, functioning and capacity of the organizations led by TLP participants and alumni were also a significant impact, including program innovation and expansion. Participants attributed these improvements to new management approaches and improvements in their effectiveness as leaders.

Developing Missions and Visions

From the beginning, the TLP teaches participants to assess and develop the missions and visions of their organizations to ensure that they are anchored in clear objectives and that operations are aligned with these guiding principles. Indeed, a strong message is that organizational development must be built upon the sound foundation of an organization's mission that is instantiated in structure, process, implementation and delivery.

“ I now see what happens when an organization builds itself on a more intentional mission and vision. It changes everything moving forward because you layer it all, on top of a clear sense of where you are, where you wish to be, and what you can do, individual and as a unit, to get there. It's what people in the US call a 'game changer.'”

— EDC PARTICIPANT

Shift to a Sustainability Orientation

A key focus of the program across sites is helping participants to think and plan beyond donor dependency or fundraising and to strive and strategically plan for organizational sustainability. An emphasis on developing sustainable operations, and, in fact, actively challenging dependency attitudes in an historically international-donor-dominated sector, radically altered participants' approach to their roles, their finance models, as well as to their portfolio of revenue-bearing programs.

“ My idea of a social enterprise was: set up and develop by passion and get donors. That was my impression when I came to the program. But then there was a paradigm shift. This led us to change the structure of the organization because the impact would not be sustainable so we restructured it completely and are already engaging on a different level, we are no longer dependent on donors, we need to generate surplus to be sustainable.”

— EDC ALUMNUS

Approaches to Organizational Development

Participants across the three programs spoke in strong terms about the ways that they not only gained necessary leadership skills, but also developed a more wide-ranging and critical sensibility as leaders of organizations in the social sector. Many described a broad and deep professionalization of leadership and emphasized its impact on their approach as organizational developers.

“ It has greatly re-oriented my career path, my passion and my worldview of development work in general. I have become a more efficient, focused and confident leader; I am more equipped in my specialty area: OD and capacity development/institutional strengthening.”

— USIU ALUMNUS

New Management Strategies

Tools and habits of self-appraisal were of obvious importance in the development of professional management strategies. For some, the program's emphasis on country- and sector-specific government regulations, professionalized operations and sound fiscal management practices, including legal awareness and accountability, was an invaluable aspect of their professional training and leadership development.

“ The program taught us business language, which is key; many of us do not have that professional preparation and we need to know terms to lead: things like stakeholder mapping, collaborative models, benchmarking, competency, M&E, market research, research methods, ethics, project management.”

— EDC ALUMNUS

IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

The impact of the TLP on community—both communities served by participants’ organizations as well as their home communities—was commonly noted and observed by the research team during site visits. Not only do the organizations typically expand and improve services to constituent communities, but participants often extend their reach beyond their own organizations, giving back to their home communities and launching new initiatives to address emergent community issues and needs in marginalized populations.

Assessing and Understanding Community Resources and Needs

The program’s emphasis on client satisfaction in the social sector revolutionized how many organizations functioned. As one participant stated, the program’s central take-away was the need to cultivate community-based relationships for effective service. The program successfully teaches participants to adopt a more critical understanding of program measurement and evaluation in terms of the need to engage with communities in ways that assess both assets and needs (rather than models that are deficit-oriented).

“ Our staff is responsible for managing other staff members within the communities that we serve. They are allowing them to have more autonomy, which has been empowering. They have also become more consultative with the community members that they serve. There is an understanding that the community essentially knows best what it needs.”

— USB ALUMNUS

“ The work is relational... The value of listening to the needs of all with whom you work is so important. You cannot embark on the change process in isolation. The entire community must be involved and be heard.”

— USB ALUMNUS

Developing Reach and Impact in Communities and Organizations

Participants reported that the TLP empowered them to expand their visions and the scope of their ambitions for their client-serving, community-based organizations. Newly confident because of the skills and approaches learned, these leaders grew their organizations both numerically and qualitatively as their service to communities deepened and expanded. Related to this, a multiplier effect, as new skills and perspectives infused operations, was observed at participants’ organizations.

“ I oversaw a UKAid-sponsored Maternal Newborn and Child Health project. As a result of the knowledge garnered, I was able to transfer skills (i.e. proposal development, strategy planning, communication strategy development...) in organizational development to 27 community-based organizations involved in the project. In addition, I learned excellent management of the 12 million Kshs that was under my jurisdiction.”

— USIU ALUMNUS

IMPACT ON THE FIELD AND SECTOR

Given the goals of the TLP—to develop visionary, innovative, skilled leadership for social service programs at the local and national levels—each university partner also tailored its curriculum to impact the social sector as a whole. This ambition connects directly with leaders’ own goals for professionalization and for increased credibility for the sector. For example, two graduates of the TLP in Lagos currently publish new professional journals and one has also created a professional network and an excellence award for the sector. Graduates from both the EDC and USIU have hopes to develop post-program institutes for professional dialogue and exchange.

Reimagining the Sector

Expanding participants’ perspectives on their work and encouraging them to think beyond the individual – to reimagine and rebuild the social sector as a whole – is at the heart of the TLP. In Nigeria, the framework of the program focused, as one EDC alumnus stated, on “creating social enterprise as a way to combat the donor model and to develop sustainability.” Many participants find this vision of sustainability through entrepreneurial thinking and cutting-edge organizational strategy liberating and vital to their own sense of possibility as leaders.

“ We need to go beyond the current thinking of the social sector as charity and make a shift to more strategic thinking and sharing of expertise.”

— EDC ALUMNUS

Context is Everything: Social Location

Participants, alumni, faculty and administrators shared that contextual factors of identity and social location—with a focus on tribal origin and gender—presently undermine the field and sector (in parallel to the groups served). To address this problem, the program’s stated and operational emphasis on group collaboration, efficiency and teamwork supports a shift in how identity and social location are understood. This represents a key impact: unlearning bias and structural discrimination and re-learning more equitable ways to engage with colleagues and lead organizations. Learning to identify and construct new possibilities, in this realm, is viewed as a precursor for equitable action and change.

“ There are still tensions and even hostilities between tribes and in some regions. We are taught to consider and address this as a centralizing leadership question.”

— USIU ALUMNUS

Raising Professional Standards and Credibility

Through their engagement in the TLP, participants came to understand that in order to make significant impact, they, their organizations and the entire sector must become professionalized—seen as systematic, ethical, accountable and of high quality.

“ A degree from USIU carries a lot of weight as you advance your objectives, your organization and your career. People more readily view you as credible and trustworthy... This means that each of us is the face of the whole field.”

—USIU ALUMNUS

Collaboration and Professional Exchange

The TLP is structured to facilitate generative collaborations across participant and alumni organizations and across the local communities from which they hail. This structure provides the opportunity for participants to contribute to their fields and to offer new energy and strategic vitality in the social sector.

“ We functioned as a buddy system within the cohort, sharing information and best practices, going to each other’s sites to learn and exchange. It has to be symbiotic and build trust so it is a learning experience for all.”

—EDC ALUMNUS

IMPACT AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Given the status and quality of the universities offering the TLP, the programs attract and send forth leaders of high caliber. And with high standards for participation, engagement and performance, rigorous curricula and instruction, and direct support for participants’ professional goals, graduates emerge from the TLP equipped to impact national policy and legislation as well as local government legislation, advocacy and political representation. This national-level engagement, both formal and informal, represents an impact of the program that extends to the highest levels of society and trickles down through policy reform and legislation to affect every individual in each respective country.

Country-Specific Change and Innovation

Building a host of new skills, strong connections among classmates, as well as with professors, participants engage in and emerge from the TLP with a clear and strong sense of how their work can and must impact their countries.

“ Kenya is experiencing great change. We have seen human rights gain more prominence, health rights take center stage, elderly people recognized in the constitution, standards and certification gain prominence, quality leadership expected as a norm and not an exception, and transformation take root in many sectors represented by TLP graduates.”

—USIU ALUMNUS

Visionary Leadership for the African Continent

Participants, alumni, faculty and staff described the TLP as an incubator for a shared vision to transform their country’s social sector, its leadership, and the African continent as a whole. While usually focused quite locally in their operations, participants spoke of strategic visions that extended well beyond their immediate sites and constituencies.

2. The Transformational Quality of the Learning Experience

The learning, development and professional growth resulting from the TLP enables participants to function at an altogether different level, one that speaks to a profound transformation—in thought, belief, and action—within and across participants, across the three TLP sites. Participants and alumni regularly spoke of “paradigm shifts” in their approaches to leadership and traced these shifts to specific lessons, such as sustainability practices, fiscal management and internal accountability, the importance of board and employee development, and the need for more critical and equitable human resource management approaches. Universally, participants and alumni reported “seeing differently” in terms of themselves as leaders, their staff and their organizations, and even the sector as a whole.

RE-VIEWING ONESELF AS A LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Across TLP sites, participants learn to critically examine their personalities, leadership styles, biases and areas of needed growth, learning to view self reflection as vital to the ability to form effective relationships with staff and other stakeholders and to organizational development more broadly. This inquiry based approach to leadership development was cited by the majority of participants as a transformative practice.

“ I was masquerading as an organizational development specialist in agriculture, I used to pick concepts—like organizational assessment—but did not have the broader picture. [TLP] made it clear that I am looking at a changing environment. I learned to integrate the role of culture in behavior and how to manage diversity. I built a frame of reference. It enhances how I look at operations and to understand my own culture.”

—USIU ALUMNUS

RE-ENVISIONING ORGANIZATIONS

Participants consistently shared that they learn specific skills in the TLP that enable them to reimagine, reenvision and rebuild their organizations. For many, the program’s cultivation of communication, assessment and knowledge transfer skills has propelled them to reinvent not only how they function but also how their organizations are structured.

“ Facilitative leadership understands that managing people is key to managing and implementing change effectively. And there are lenses and tools to enable facilitative leadership. Dealing with the complexities and challenges within the NPO sector in the 21st century, it is very important to approach from a systemic perspective, understanding chaotic change and how to manage change that has no easy answers.”

—USB ALUMNUS

3. The TLP as a Generative Community of Practice

The TLP can be understood as a generative community of practice for the social sector, offering structured information sharing, strategic support and practice-based inspiration and learning to participants within their cohorts. In the context of these hothouse learning communities, individuals bridge differences that often represent social divisions (e.g., gender, tribe, social class) and learn to function as members of an integrated team with shared goals and objectives and a collective identity as social actors.

DESIGN FOR SITUATED LEARNING

The structure of each TLP constitutes a vital approach to capacity building, one opposed to more common, unilateral, and deficit oriented approaches to development. The importance and value of the community of practice model for sustainable learning cannot be overestimated. The structure of the TLP is intentional, created to support what Lave and Wenger define as “situated learning”—learning understood as a social process in which knowledge and skills are co-constructed in direct relation to context—and the processes put in place in the program through curricula, teaching, and classroom dynamics successfully help participants learn a great deal about themselves, each other, and human interaction and communication more broadly. Indeed, each TLP is purposefully structured as a meta analytic laboratory for studying the larger society. Participants are explicitly encouraged to conceptualize their interactions with each other through prescribed exercises and assignments in this way so that their group dynamics can be examined and their learning generalized beyond the classroom setting.¹

DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY WITHIN COMMUNITY

Participants and alumni consistently spoke about the powerful effects of engaging collectively to address issues of diversity and social identity. The program is self-consciously set up so that everyone is a learner and there is both instructor- and peer-led mentoring. The value of this kind of community, with shared learning objectives, a shared set of goals, and a shared vision, was transformative given the oft-divisive nature of the social identities of gender, tribe, region, social class and their instantiation in the politics of participants’ communities and countries. Further, the program’s emphasis on the need to develop a high level of sensitivity to clients and co-workers coming from different backgrounds enhanced learning about diversity. The emphasis on teamwork and relational aspects of human resource management also helped participants develop a more nuanced understanding of social identities and how these are at play in their relationships, organizations, and work more broadly.

“My class...nurtured my ability for interaction and appreciation of individuals from different backgrounds. It roused in me a high degree of mutual respect and expectancy of great ideas from individuals different from myself. I learnt to listen.”

—USIU ALUMNUS

PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY

Gender inequity, gender stereotyping, and institutionalized sexism are grave issues both in the national context and within the social sector (though women predominate in the social sector, they are still subjected to increased scrutiny and various enactments of male domination). At each site, the program cohort became a space in which gender work is encouraged, supported and appreciated. Participants shared that learning about gender issues through course and teamwork provides a microcosm for learning how to approach issues of gender equity and gender-based tensions in professional contexts.

“The culture of USIU pushed against typical masculine norms. The results are fundamental when you engage with women in their specific issues: bosses, family. Once you engage these issues in a group the results will shock you. It is everyone’s responsibility to produce the best for everyone.”

—USIU ALUMNUS

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situated_learning

4. Influence of Program Structure

The TLP has been adapted by each university partner to fit and address a specific educational and social context. The history and needs of the different universities within their national contexts explain the various ways the program is structured: as an executive-style certificate program (EDC & USB) or a more traditionally academic master's degree program (USIU), as a full-scholarship program (years I-IV of USIU) or as a blended fee model in which self-pay students learn with scholarship students (USIU now, as TCCAF funding has ended).² University partners target the moral capital of social sector leaders as a critical way to contribute to the creation of a “new generation of African leaders”—each in their own way, adapted to their local contexts.

BRANDED FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Despite some significant structural differences across the programs, participants shared a unanimous perception of their university's emphasis on quality and rigor. From selectivity of admissions procedures to high levels of accountability for attendance and engagement, the universities earn high marks in the eyes of participants. The association of the TLP with the strong brand of the universities enhances participants' own social capital. Importantly, the credential granted to participants from each university is quite different. For example, it is important to earn academic degrees as opposed to certificates in Nairobi, given the higher education milieu and its relationship to professional marketability. Since a degree is so valuable in the Kenya market, a certificate program would be less attractive. In Nigeria, the corporate flavor of the EDC-sponsored SSM program seemed a great fit for the participants and milieu and adds the value they need to succeed.

“The program is extremely well respected. When I was invited, I was delighted to become a part of such an esteemed group of leaders. When I got here I understood why it is so high in its standing.”

—EDC ALUMNUS

STRUCTURE FOR COHORT LEARNING

Intentionally structured programs that “socially engineer” group make-up and dynamics are a primary component of the curriculum across sites. The goal is to reinforce the cognitive and academic aspects of the curriculum with the lived experience and dynamic aspects of instruction and engagement. Participants understand this intentionality in the curriculum and reported that structured engagement with their cohort colleagues adds significant value to their learning experience and generates new ways of thinking, being and doing.

“The learning outcomes focus on multicultural and international issues and skills. We also put marketing, finance and HR in same groups. It is very deliberate social engineering. When they come they are fearful, then they realize they have the same challenges and now focus on their common goals beyond tribal divisions.”

—USIU LEADER

² These comments are largely based upon research team visits, interviews and observations at two of the three TLP partner sites; the USB model is more recently launched and is included in these comments only through document review.

INCLUSION OF MARGINALIZED PARTICIPANTS

A major issue for the university partners, as well as for program graduates, was the inclusion of participants from low-income and marginalized groups and communities. While scholarship funding has allowed universities to support these participants during the first five years of the program, as funding has ended programs are shifting to a self-pay model that excludes sponsored participants, who are arguably most in need of the strengthening and professionalizing that comes from participation in the TLP.

“ There was such demand for the program so we do self pay but the needy who came earlier no longer can come and they work with the most marginalized populations. That’s a problem we cannot address without additional resources.”

—USIU LEADER

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the findings of the evaluation, the following recommendations, which are explained in detail in the full report, were offered for the TLP as a whole and for AAI and its university partners specifically.

Recommendations for **The Africa-America Institute**

- AAI must further develop a theory of change for the TLP and map its short, mid, and long-term objectives onto its strategic planning process.
- Only by integrating AAI and its facilitative role into the everyday activities of the program can AAI expect to stay on top of the adjustments and new opportunities in the rapidly evolving African social sector.
- AAI can promote a Pan-African capacity-building orientation rooted in global perspectives and best practices. Central to this is the foregrounding of African expertise and existing capacity.
- AAI can promote a global perspective on standards of practice in the social sector by building and engaging an international network of university and NGO partners in the sharing of models, pedagogical practices and best practices would be ideal.
- AAI can take a more deliberate stance in support of specific constituencies, specifically women, to target particular social change goals. Likewise, there is profound need for a parallel focus on specific programming and supports for leaders from marginalized, minoritized and under-served regions, tribes, ethnic groups and social classes.
- The TLP deserves state of the art, data-based development. As a program adapting to the social sector needs and realities of societies in a sustained period of rapid change, the value of a nuanced, contextually relevant, culturally informed understanding of what is working for participants, and what must be developed or adjusted, is critical.

Recommendations for **University Partners**

- The program and its university partners should play a more aggressive social sector advocacy role, urging the need for a rigorous approach to management and organizational development.
- The organizational capacity-building dimension of the TLP—both during and after formal training—should be deepened. Built into the program coursework must be numerous opportunities for concrete learning experiences based upon each participant's own organization.
- Additional post-training support is encouraged, specifically to strengthen student networks, provide coaching and mentorship to graduates, broker fundraising opportunities, engage in sector-specific trend sharing, and to continue to actively support graduates' professional growth and effectiveness.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is our hope that the findings and recommendations of this evaluation further the ways that AAI and its partners have positioned the TLP as a practice of freedom, a program that seeks to achieve, through rigorous, contextually developed and enacted leadership development practices, a kind of individual and collective growth and transformation necessary for people to be able to live their lives in ways that help them to grow and become free of oppression, inequity and marginalization. And further, to build, grow, develop and ensure success for their sector and countries. Education as the practice of freedom is at the heart of the TLP and is the hope for sustainable development on the African continent.

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