

## No.5

Learning from  
Practice Series  
**Organizational  
Perspectives**

# Solidarity in action: Partnering to prevent violence against women

## Overview

We started Raising Voices with a bold vision of innovating ideas and strategies that could effectively prevent violence against women and children. Yet, before long, we encountered our first obstacle to maintaining this focus. There was an expectation—still not uncommon in the development sector—that we would not only specialize in creating methodologies but also in managing their community implementation. It was assumed that we would need to “do it all” to establish our identity, elevate our credibility and attract more funding.

Thus, in collaboration with the National Association of Women’s Organizations in Uganda (NAWOU) and with support from Action Aid, we created the Domestic Violence Prevention Program (DVPP) within Raising Voices for managing the implementation of our first methodology: a community mobilization program for the prevention of domestic violence. We hired our first staff and spent most of our time working deeply in the community. By 2003, we could see how this approach would make it nearly impossible to realize our founding vision of innovating new ways to prevent violence against women and children. To work in the realm of community implementation required careful attention to logistical details and community relationships. Whereas, to work in the realm of innovating and discerning which approaches worked best required being in the community with a different lens—looking not only at immediate impact but also at how ideas and activities were understood, how they played out over time, and how they could be strategically combined to change community norms.

Therefore, after much deliberation, and despite the substantial investment we had made in DVPP, we decided to turn it into an independent organization called the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), an organization with whom we would thereafter work in partnership. This meant losing our only staff and the direct management of something we had spent years building. It was one of the hardest decisions we have ever made, yet we believed in what it signified. The creation of CEDOVIP prepared the way for three priorities to be possible: (1) for Raising Voices to grow as an organization with a focus on innovation, ideas and the “how” of prevention; (2) for there to be a local organization in Uganda committed to spearheading violence against women (VAW) prevention; and (3) for both activities to be conducted with the greatest care and quality.

We realized that it would take time and effort for these possibilities to come to fruition—and that, until then, both organizations would need to remain accountable to one another. We understood that CEDOVIP would need substantial support in the early years, including training, joint fundraising and the sharing of resources, large and small. We knew we had to remain committed to the partnership and to making these investments, even when it felt burdensome. At the same time, being technically the founders of CEDOVIP, it was important to us that the organization, while independent, retained its focus on VAW prevention, activism and values-driven practices. After all this, we knew the time would come (and it did) when we would have to step fully aside to refocus on Raising Voices itself.

Thus began many years of growing together, learning from each other and letting go. From the start, and still today, this deeply collaborative partnership has challenged us as individuals and organizations, while bringing unanticipated benefits well worth the effort. In the development sector—where competition between organizations is the norm—all of us at Raising Voices and CEDOVIP have found this partnership critical to improving our work, reputations and impact on communities. In this paper, we share our journey and learnings for others considering or navigating partnership opportunities and for all those seeking to work in solidarity for the collective good.

## Experience

The investment in growing CEDOVIP was all-consuming at first. To start, Raising Voices essentially managed the new organization, and then for a long time provided mentorship and technical assistance in everything from management to programming. It was several years before someone was hired as coordinator—a position that would evolve into executive director. Thankfully, the leader hired for this position worked enthusiastically and tirelessly with the two Raising Voices directors to continue growing the organization’s confidence, capacity and responsible stewardship, now with an eye to its approaching independence. Being the leader of CEDOVIP during this time was challenging, yet she persisted. Throughout her extensive learning, she still represented the organization as the independent entity it was becoming, claiming her voice as its leader. When staff habitually looked to Raising Voices for direction, she redirected them instead to shaping CEDOVIP’s identity and to looking first to each other for guidance and support.





For many years, distinguishing between the organizations was difficult, since many CEDOVIP staff had been the employees of DVPP. As a result, the directors at Raising Voices needed to continually ensure that CEDOVIP's leadership, and the partnership as a whole, were not undermined by staff, other partners or even funders. The deep relationships forged between the three directors became the glue that held the partnership together as it emerged into its early years of independence.

With hard work and patience, the partnership eventually grew into a peer-to-peer relationship that became recognized and respected within the sector. Given the two organizations' different areas of specialty, staff began deepening each other's thinking about VAW and what it would take to do prevention well. The synergy of purpose between the organizations proved more powerful than imagined, and became more and more valued, internally and by others.

Still, everyone was trying to find their way together with no known precedent to follow, and there were many incidents that could have brought an end to the institutional collaboration, or strained it beyond repair. A particularly challenging time was when Raising Voices began growing and hiring a VAW team. This raised fears among CEDOVIP staff of becoming redundant and being abandoned. During this evolution, great work was needed to fortify the trust within the partnership, as the two teams learned to grow together through change.

To this day, the partnership has remained informal and undocumented, allowing us to stay relevant and flexible to the growth of either organization. This has demanded added vigilance to manage each team's support for and understanding of the relationship. However, despite periodic challenges in this regard, there is no question that through this partnership and its culture of non-competition, we have far exceeded our individual capacities to do what is most important: to bring quality programming and VAW prevention to communities.

## Learning

Partnerships provide insight into another organization's world—into their way of thinking, their field of practice and their community of people. This insider's perspective has been invaluable to all of us at Raising Voices and CEDOVIP. In this same spirit of openness, we present the following learnings. They include both the successes and challenges of our experience. They reveal that partnership is strategically and interpersonally complex, yet, when built on a strong foundation, can amplify our collective potential.

## 1. Partnerships improve social justice impact.

The greatest benefit of our partnership has been the positive impact on social justice. Our combined specializations have enabled us to uncover overlooked needs in communities and to develop pioneering solutions in response. We have added value to each other's work, avoided duplications in programming and shared resources in creative ways to optimize funding.

The publication of *SASA!*, the second methodology developed by Raising Voices and implemented by CEDOVIP, deepened the partnership even further, leading us to take risks and embark on initiatives we would never have considered alone. Some of these bold undertakings have more broadly contributed to advancing the field of violence prevention. The greatest example would be the *SASA!* Study, a randomized controlled trial of the *SASA!* methodology in Kampala, Uganda. The *SASA!* Study was an ambitious, multi-year project, which, after many obstacles and breakthroughs, enabled us to prove that intimate partner violence is preventable. Conducted in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Makerere University, it also revealed the benefit—to both programming and research—of fostering a similar quality of partnership between activist organizations and researcher institutions.

Unfortunately, within the development sector, extensive competition can distract organizations from their commitment to communities and their social justice mandates—making it feel necessary to prioritize the profile of one's organization over the most effective ways to create change. Since this survival mentality has become so common in the industry, it became imperative within our partnership to reestablish a culture of prioritizing communities based on shared principles of social justice. This took years to fully establish, and takes equal effort to maintain. However, it has taught us that the impact of the partnership comes not only from our combined expertise but also our shared commitment to meaningfully influencing people's lives. To continue growing this commitment to social justice, we above all make time for celebrating stories of impact and reconnecting with the true rewards of the work.

## 2. Partnerships can strengthen an organization's identity and reputation.

A strong organizational identity begins within. For Raising Voices, choosing to create CEDOVIP was about refocusing on our strengths and prioritizing quality activism to honor the vision of what we wanted to be. Once we made this choice, we could make better strategic decisions, and we became inspired by the new possibilities before us. As more years passed, the partnership kept refocusing us on our strengths, thus continually clarifying our identity for ourselves and others—while also doing the same for CEDOVIP. As both organizations grew alongside one another, we hired people who fit the specialization of each, which led to staff who felt aligned with their organization and empowered to bring their skills to bear.





However, the type of partnership we were aspiring to develop was unfamiliar enough that it still raised suspicion among some staff, which at times turned into gossip and worry about hidden agendas. We soon learned that deep collaboration would require talking and behaving in ways that enabled staff to trust the authenticity and sincerity of the partnership. This included regularly expressing and role modeling the benefits for both organizations, and continuing to make decisions in each organization's best interest.

Eventually, as staff gained confidence in the partnership, their attention shifted to strengthening their piece of the work, understanding and taking pride in their particular role in violence prevention. As the directors role modeled respect for the other organization's expertise, each team recognized that through the partnership they had gained an expert ally who could help improve their work. Since the partnership had allowed the two organizations to each achieve a higher caliber of practice, everyone benefitted from learnings that would have otherwise been missed by all. The result was an elevated reputation for both organizations—independently and in partnership.

### 3. Partnerships foster the solidarity that fuels activism.

On an organizational level, the most lasting outcome of this partnership has been invaluable relationships and solidarity. Having real, meaningful and even raw exposure to the struggles and growth of another organization has been a humbling and bonding experience. Also, having another team of activists understand your ambitions and truly believe in what you are doing has been a powerful motivator for overcoming obstacles on the path.

We learned early on that this partnership between organizations would only be as strong as the solidarity between leadership and staff. With no external obligation mandating our relationship, it would need to be held together by something equally and ideally more powerful. We thus deeply engaged staff in creating shared values and a shared vision—which together became a credo far stronger than words on paper. Over the years, these have inspired both groups to do their best work, and they have guided us through the most challenging moments.

Values, in particular, take great effort to foster, deepen and maintain. While creating values-alignment requires substantial organizational investment, it is what drives activism and ultimately moves staff from a project mindset to an activist mindset. In our case, as the staff of both organizations became connected by a values-based commitment to violence prevention, they became all the more focused on how to combine their skills and expertise to make the collective work better. They came to recognize that activism lives not in the activities of one organization or the other, but rather in the collective effort and in how we treat each other.

As relationships grew and deepened, however, so too did the intensity of our debates and convictions. With practice, we learned to hold each other in solidarity while at the same time working through conflicts, disparate ideas and misunderstandings—and sometimes agreeing to disagree. Within that context, the leaders of both organizations learned to support healthy relationship dynamics, and to share expectations with all team members and external partners about how to treat the partnership, how to value it, and what kind of communication and trust were needed to sustain it.

#### 4. Partnerships benefit from distinct areas of practice.

Despite the professional solidarity that can develop, partnerships are not about subsuming one another or doing everything together. Rather, to thrive, they require giving each organization independent outlets and space. For us, it became essential to establish some distinct professional domains for each organization. We began by deciding that Raising Voices would not fundraise for VAW work locally, nor do national level policy or media work—enabling CEDOVIP to have an independent presence within these areas. These decisions were especially important for building public understanding of CEDOVIP’s autonomy, and helped secure CEDOVIP’s local strength, which ultimately benefitted both organizations. In particular, by increasing CEDOVIP’s independence, Raising Voices could move out of the role of “founder,” allowing the full potential of the partnership to be realized.

Still, these types of decisions at times challenged our boards of directors, and were not always understood by staff. We quickly learned the importance of staff engagement and team discussions to ensure the benefits of these decisions were understood and felt by all. That said, the sense of limitation is one that we must continually manage and reframe, and is partly softened by maintaining equal flexibility.

For example, even though each organization has its own specialty, this does not mean that Raising Voices will never engage in implementation or that CEDOVIP will never develop tools. Of course, we can, do and will—since both organizations must have the freedom to explore and grow. Once a strong foundation had been laid to protect the integrity of the work, and effective communication structures had been established, the partnership began to evolve amid an ongoing dialogue about how best to respond to the emerging needs in communities and the emerging strengths within each team. It has been at times challenging to manage this openness and ambiguity. However, ultimately it has enabled us to find our way together and do work that we can be proud of.



## Action

Voluntary and authentic partnerships that put social justice first can seem counter to what is required for sustaining and growing an organization in the development sector. Competition for funding can at times be ruthless, causing some organizations to even pursue projects far outside their skills and mandate. Organizations within partnerships prescribed by funders may find themselves using precious time to protect intellectual property or achieve more profile than the other. However, many leaders and staff of development organizations came to this work with a vision of creating social change. Together, we can move from a competitive culture to an activist culture by creating powerful feminist partnerships through our own design.

Consider the following actions for doing so within your own work:

- **Invest in Your Strengths and Interests:** Determine the areas of work in which your organization excels—or those areas in which it aspires to excel. If this is unclear, stop and engage your team in a detailed and honest examination of your work to discern the answer. Take strategic steps to focus your organization on deepening your efforts in these areas of strength and interest, thus making a more meaningful contribution to social justice.
- **Establish Strength-Based Partnerships:** Recognize that collaboration with a trustworthy partner can strengthen, rather than diminish, your organization's identity. Survey your professional community: Which organizations could add value to your work, enabling greater collective impact? How could you prevent your organization from doing duplicate work by allowing another organization to do what they do best?
- **Focus Less on Organizational Profile and More on Quality Practice:** If you do quality work, the recognition will come. Make decisions based on potential impact rather than branding and marketing for your organization. When we compete with each other for recognition and position, we communicate to community members that the focus is "us" not "them," and that our organizations' needs are greater than the social justice concerns.
- **Deepen Partnerships through Shared Values:** If you are already in a partnership dictated by a funding relationship, explore ways to make it more collaborative and less competitive. Establish shared values or principles of practice to build solidarity among staff—shifting focus from a project mindset to an activist mindset, from individual responsibilities to a collective effort.
- **Foster the Growth of All Partners:** Within existing, healthy partnerships, foster your partner's growth, trusting the foundation you have created together. Even if it feels threatening or uncomfortable, recognize the value for that organization and move beyond one's own perspective—opening similar opportunities for your own organization's growth.

### Interested in learning more?

- Raising Voices. 2015. "Creating an organizational culture for social justice activism." *Learning from Practice Series, No. 1: Organizational Perspectives*. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.
- Raising Voices. 2015. "Growing as an activist organization through evaluation research." *Learning from Practice Series No.2: Organizational Perspectives*, Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.
- Raising Voices, LSHTM and CEDOVIP. 2015. *Is Violence Against Women Preventable? Findings from the SASA! Study summarized for general audiences*. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.



The *Learning from Practice Series* is a collection of articles that synthesize perspectives and activism emerging from Raising Voices' experience in preventing violence against women and children.

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