



© YONECO: Girls performing during an HIV awareness campaign in Malawi

## Strategic funding: strengthening partnership for real development

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This learning paper considers how strategic funding allows community-based and non-governmental organisations the flexibility to develop their responses to HIV and AIDS; it creates the space for organisational development to enable those changes and for organisations to learn from, and share with, each other.

## What is Positive Action?

Many community-based and non-governmental organisations have to deal with ever-increasing demands to provide essential services to their beneficiaries. The extra pressure that HIV and AIDS places on communities also adversely affects these organisations. Above all, they need to cope with changes in staffing, the funding environment, political change, and changes in the development of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Africa. Positive Action is a dynamic funding model that works to strengthen the capacity and leadership of civil society organisations who work on community responses to HIV and AIDS.

Funded by Comic Relief and managed by Healthlink Worldwide since 2006, Positive Action provides strategic funding to the following five organisations based in sub-Saharan Africa.

### The Positive Action partners

#### **Zimbabwe: Family AIDS Caring Trust (FACT):**

Established in 1987 FACT is one of the pioneers of the response to HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. FACT works in eastern Zimbabwe and also helps to build the capacity of other organisations in east and southern African countries.

#### **Kenya: Kibera Community Self-Help Programme (KICOSHEP):**

Based in the Kibera slum area of Nairobi, KICOSHEP was initially set up to provide support to women, and has moved to providing care and support to all community members. It now also works in the city of Kisumu and the rural district of Machakos.

#### **Uganda: National Community of Women living with HIV (NACWOLA):**

NACWOLA aims to promote positive living for women living with HIV in Uganda, through psychosocial support, economic empowerment and advocacy for essential services.

#### **Ethiopia: Tilla Association of Women living with HIV (Tilla):**

Tilla operates in Awassa, the southern region of Ethiopia, creating awareness about HIV and AIDS and doing advocacy through testimonies of members. They plan to develop work nationally over the next 10 years.

#### **Malawi: Youth Net and Counselling (YONECO):**

YONECO is a youth-focused organisation based in southern Malawi that is dedicated to mitigating the impact of the HIV epidemic in the country. It has a national coverage and also runs the first national child helpline.

The Positive Action five-year strategic grant has ushered in a new way of working for all the partners involved. It has also been a first for the donor, Comic Relief, to work with as many partner organisations through one strategic grant. A wide range of lessons have been learnt since the programme was first planned, and many more lessons continue to emerge from the group as it builds common ground to take Positive Action forward.



Caregivers, a counsellor and FACT staff in the Ngorima community, in Zimbabwe, who have worked together to improve M&E and develop a ward-based constitution to cater for vulnerable groups

## What has our learning been through Positive Action?

**A project document is not always a necessity.** Most projects require an overall document for the whole project, that lists a set of activities directed towards donor priorities that the organisation is expected to perform. However, Positive Action is different. There is no single project document. Instead, each organisation is led by its own strategic plan and sets its own milestones, which it works to achieve by setting out a series of “**step changes**” that it expects to go through over the five year period of the grant. This is what underpins the organisations’ capacity to offer improved services to the communities with which they work.

**Supporting organisations to develop both organisational capacity and project activities is beneficial.** It allows them to progress to their own strategic goals, rather than those of the funder. Unlike standard, activity-focused project grants, Positive Action is a strategic grant model that recognises that the value of funding goes beyond delivery, thus allowing organisations to adjust as plans, people and contexts evolve. The strategic grant gives organisations freedom to determine their own priorities and helps them to invest in structures that build their capacity to respond effectively to needs in their communities. Increased input into staff development has led to high motivation and efficiency among staff, leading to more effective programming.

**Learning questions are useful.** Learning is a core element of the Positive Action strategic grant and as such, partners have identified a set of learning questions designed to help them achieve their main step changes. This gives them a useful way to track the organisational change that is happening over time and in so doing, measure the impact of Positive Action, which cannot be easily measured by traditional output

indicators that are used in projects.

### **Flexibility in models of development can bring more gains to beneficiary communities.**

The strategic grant has introduced a new model of development for the beneficiary communities as well. Since the strategic grant does not tie partner organisations to project specific activities, they are free to respond and adapt to community needs as they arise. This allows them to work directly with community members to explore innovative, locally relevant ideas and insights, which enable communities to have more ownership over changes in their environment. Tilla staff have been trained in carrying out community consultations, helping the organisation engage more effectively with the communities it works with.

**Peer support is an effective way to share knowledge and experiences between partner organisations.** Positive Action depends on effective partnership and shared learning to work successfully. The annual partner meetings and bi-annual joint training workshops have provided opportunities for different members of staff from each organisation to learn and share skills and experiences.

Peer support has also been a vital component of Positive Action. All partners have benefited from the unique opportunities made possible by the wide Positive Action partnership and its support in management and leadership, as well as its links with other organisations across the region that face similar challenges. For example, through Positive Action, the Directors of KICOSHEP and Tilla have been able to mentor each other closely. Similarly, through the broader regional partnership, FACT has benefited a great deal from YONECO's experience in advocacy work, being trained by YONECO in advocacy skills.

**“We are all working under the same strategic grant, yet when we all come together it can be seen how differently each of the partners are achieving their organisational goals. This forum and space for learning and sharing experiences is really one of the key things of the model of funding.”**

**Agnes Apea – Executive Director - NACWOLA**

## **Changes through Positive Action**

A mid-term evaluation of Positive Action found that the strategic grant is enabling the partner organisations and their communities to respond to the HIV and AIDS epidemic effectively and sustainably, with major strides being made towards their step changes as the following examples show:

**NACWOLA** has a membership of over 60,000 women living with HIV and AIDS, who have benefited through the improved leadership and structure within the organisation. Positive Action has enabled NACWOLA to develop systems and strengthen governance which has enhanced the role of its members to influence the direction of its work.

**KICOSHEP** has reviewed its monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. Staff who participated in the development of the M&E toolkit now understand why it is needed and appreciate how M&E helps to monitor and demonstrate achievements. Since then, a strong organisational culture of evaluation and learning has emerged which is further strengthening other areas of work.

Positive Action has helped **FACT** to invest in staff training, as well as improve systems in project design, reporting, participatory monitoring, learning, sharing and documentation. FACT's ability to fundraise, as well as utilise funds effectively, has significantly improved. As a result, they have secured a number of new grants which have allowed them to reach more communities.

Both **YONECO** and **Tilla** have built new office buildings. YONECO's new building includes a Youth Leadership Development Centre. The offices have given both organisations security and permanence within the communities in which they work.



**Tilla's new office building, Ethiopia**

## Emerging issues and thoughts for the future

Positive Action has been a steep learning curve so far, but all partners express their total support for this model, which has demonstrated significant advantages to achieving improved community responses to HIV and AIDS. In short, when people are empowered and systems are developed, the whole organisation is strengthened.

### Partnership

This strategic, multi-organisation and multi-country approach to funding has encouraged more sophisticated relationships that acknowledge and actively expect change, while conveying a real sense of partnership and openness between the donor, the UK organisation and local organisations. Greater trust, dialogue and learning have allowed a shift of power so that the organisations in the field have more freedom to decide their main needs and where to channel resources.

### Communication

Effective communication is the foundation of any partnership, even more so when multi-partners are involved. All partners feel that donor engagement should be maintained and increased, as they value the donor's increased understanding of their work and strategic directions. Positive Action provides the space for increased engagement and improved links between donors and multi-organisation regional partnerships.

### A project or strategic model?

A shift in thinking has taken place for all involved in Positive Action. Most notably, there has been a significant shift from a narrow, project focus to a broader organisational focus. By developing their plans around their own strategic frameworks, partners have been able invest in developing their own organisations, which has helped them recognise the wider impact of their work on their communities.

### Capturing change and learning

Learning is a central component of Positive Action. The learning questions and theory of change provide a useful framework for partner organisations to identify and track changes across the partnership. Partners appreciate the opportunities to share ideas, processes, ways of working and to develop stronger linkages with other organisations that are not involved in Positive Action. However it will also be important to explore change at all levels as the programme progresses. Similarly, for future grants, there is space to explore new and innovative ways of capturing longer-term change.

### Way forward

Positive Action has ignited real change in the partner organisations. This has flowed into real changes in the communities with whom they work, and has translated into real benefits for people living in those communities. It has followed a strong process of empowerment, which has centred on most of the important decisions being made at the local level. This has been possible because of the funding model and the commitment of all of the partners to work in a new way. The approach recognises the need to be flexible in working to achieve some of the things that can be planned, as well as being able to adapt to and respond effectively to the unexpected changes that will always occur. This is development in action. This is Positive Action.

## Healthlink Worldwide

Healthlink Worldwide is a specialist communication and information organisation that collaborates with over 50 partnerships across 30 countries to address the social, cultural and economic aspects of vulnerability to poor health.

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