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NuPITA Case Studies in Capacity Building

Capacity Building with NPI Advisors: *Building Trust and Reaping Results*

New
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(NuPITA)

Case
Studies in
Capacity
Building

“When we won our first U.S. government funded project, we were over the moon, of course. But we were also a little bit nervous, because we knew we were weak in some areas,” said Dinah Mwesigye, deputy country director at Retrak Uganda. Retrak is a United Kingdom-based nongovernmental organization that works with street children in Uganda and Ethiopia to give them an alternative to life on the street. Retrak’s goal is to enable the children to take back their place within the community, and where possible, within their own families.



An essential part of Josephine Tusingwire’s role as an NPI advisor was to form good working relationships, based on trust, with Retrak staff members. Here, Josephine is working with Retrak Deputy Country Director Dinah Mwesigye and Head of Social Work Department Moses Wangadia. Photo: Robin Hammond.

Retrak was founded in Uganda in 1994 as a soccer club; a place where children living on the street could find respite from their daily struggles through play. As the magnitude of the children’s needs became clear, Retrak grew over the years to become a full-fledged NGO providing a range of services that include food and refuge, medical care, education, counseling, and more.

In 2008, Retrak was awarded a three-year New Partners Initiative cooperative agreement through the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The New Partners Initiative cooperative agreements were designed for organizations, like Retrak, with little or no experience working with U.S. government funding.

“The genius of the New Partners Initiative is that it’s like a cooperative agreement with training wheels,” said Mark Kowalski, deputy director of the New Partners Initiative Technical Assistance Project.

The New Partners Initiative Technical Assistance Project, or NuPITA for short, was a parallel project that served as the proverbial training wheels for the new partners. The objective of NuPITA’s technical assistance was to ensure that after three years of support, the new partners

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would be able to expand and lead HIV and AIDS service delivery in their countries and effectively manage donor funds.

NuPITA was implemented by John Snow, Inc., a seasoned U.S. government partner with a proven track record in building organizational capacity. Through a detailed menu of technical assistance mechanisms, NuPITA reached each partner with the appropriate blend of support, including opportunities for training, coaching and practicing, peer exchange, targeted technical assistance and leadership development.

“Since this was our first U.S. government cooperative agreement, Retrak needed to measure up to the cooperative agreement’s requirements. One such requirement was to have standard operating procedures in place to ensure consistency in how we deliver services to children. This is important for monitoring and evaluation as well as for adhering to international standards for working with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC).

“After participating in a NuPITA-led process that allowed Retrak to assess our technical capabilities, it became clear to us that we had significant gaps and needed a specific person to help us in this area,” said Dinah Mwesigye.

One of the ways new partners could choose to receive technical assistance was through a NPI

advisor, essentially a technical specialist who was embedded within a new partner organization.

“The NPI advisor was on the payroll of NuPITA, but sat with and worked at the new partner organization,” said Mark Kowalski. “In many instances, the new partner wouldn’t have been able to afford to hire this kind of expertise on their own.”

Retrak took advantage of this opportunity and hired NPI advisors in both its Uganda and Ethiopia offices. “The scope of work for each advisor was developed jointly by NuPITA and Retrak. There was not much difference in opinion since we had identified the areas of need together during the technical capacity assessment process. And we appreciated the fact that NuPITA trusted Retrak to flesh out the details in each scope of work,” said Dinah Mwesigye.

Indeed, trust was an essential theme that seemed to run throughout Retrak’s NPI advisor experience. Once an NPI advisor’s scope of work was decided upon and the advisor was hired, both the organization and the advisor had to make their way through a “settling in” process. The process took time and patience from both sides.

“Our NPI advisor in Uganda, Josephine, had to first familiarize herself with Retrak’s work and how the flow of activities takes place between

Retrak is a faith-based NGO working with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) on the streets in Africa with the aim of providing each child with an individual route back to family and community. This is achieved through reintegrating children with their own relatives or through placement with local foster care families, and with support to build the capacity of these families to meet the needs of their children. With NPI funding, Retrak has worked to strengthen existing programs in Ethiopia and Uganda and has provided care to over 2,800 OVC on the street and has enabled over 400 children to return to a secure and caring family home.

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departments and individual staff members. She had to take time to understand what we do and how we do it. Josephine willingly took part in all of Retrak's activities—from street outreach to rehabilitation, reintegration, and follow-up,” said Dinah.

Josephine Tusingwire was Retrak Uganda's NPI advisor. She went to Retrak not only with a wealth of experience in working with orphans and vulnerable children, but also a “little black book” filled with helpful contacts.

When asked about her experience as an NPI advisor embedded within Retrak Uganda, Josephine became animated. “It was such an amazing opportunity and I was so excited to begin my work at Retrak. However, it slowly became clear to me that some Retrak staff didn't fully understand my role. I could sense they were a bit insecure with me—like struggling to portray a picture of 'all is well,' yet my role was actually to know their areas of weakness and offer support for the organization to improve.”

And this is the struggle inherent in any capacity building endeavor. The organization whose capacity is being built must be willing to reveal itself completely—its weaknesses as well as its strengths—in order to fully reap the benefits of the process.

As Dinah affirmed, this is not a comfortable thing to do, and with good reason. The risk of revealing organizational weakness can be formidable. “Well, at first, some staff were not sure how much information [Josephine] should have access to. As leadership, we had to explain to the staff the areas of work that needed Josephine's assistance.

“We also had to explain to staff that our donor would not “crucify” or stop funding Retrak when



Josephine led a workshop on performance management for Retrak staff. Photo: Robin Hammond.

they learn of our weaknesses; instead [under the New Partners Initiative] they would offer technical assistance to help us resolve our problems and become better service providers,” said Dinah.

Josephine did her part to move this process along, as well. “Communication is key. I used staff meetings to explain my role, interacted with individual staff informally, talked with them in a more free style, made sure to leave my desk to participate in various activities with the staff and children, and encouraged them to be the ones to engage me and use me. All this helped to build trust.”

Once trust was established, the real work could begin. During her two years with Retrak, Josephine helped the Retrak team develop standard operating procedures for the organization's service delivery areas as well as mainstream HIV prevention in all aspects of OVC care.

“Before I joined as an advisor, HIV prevention issues were not a focus area for Retrak. But with my technical guidance, peer education programs focusing on reproductive health were strengthened and incorporated at all Retrak facilities and staff were trained in how to lead these kinds of programs. I also helped Retrak establish

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partnerships with other OVC service providers, so that if Retrak cannot provide a certain service, our children can still be helped.”

Josephine was especially proud of the work she did to help strengthen Retrak’s role in the OVC coordination mechanisms at local, national, and international levels—so that Retrak is now able to influence, at a much higher level, the quality of services being delivered to OVC. “At the time when I joined, Retrak was more to itself. I encouraged Retrak to forge closer connections with groups like the National Council for Children, an office in Uganda’s Ministry of Gender that coordinates all organizations working with children in the country. Retrak is also now the lead organization in the Street Children NGO Coalition, a coalition of all organizations working with street children in Kampala.”

Josephine also had a major influence on expanding Retrak’s programming to include girls living on the street. During routine street outreach, it became clear to both Josephine and Retrak staff that the population of girls living on the street was growing. Retrak Uganda was given the green light by its headquarters to “analyze the situation of street girls in the Kampala slums, and specifically to find out whether there are any organizations offering [the girls] services.”

As a result of this study, Retrak decided to begin working with street girls, in addition to boys—certainly a major decision affecting the growth and development of the organization.

“We really opened ourselves up to the experience of working with an advisor,” said Dinah. “And I’m glad we did. Without Josephine, it would have taken us much, much longer to accomplish what we have in just the past two years.”

NPI advisors are employees of the New Partners Technical Assistance Project (NuPITA) who are embedded within or seconded to NPI partner organizations. The duration of their assignments range from several months to more than one year, depending on the needs of the partner organization. Recruitment of NPI advisors, from developing the initial job description to final interviews with candidates, is undertaken jointly by NuPITA and the partner organization. NPI advisors have provided services in a wide array of areas including compliance, financial management, human resources management, monitoring and evaluation, HIV service delivery and program management. NPI advisors report jointly to the senior management of NuPITA and the organization’s NPI cooperative agreement project director or his/her designate.

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