



TAKING WORK TO A NEW PLACE:

Urgent Action Fund-Africa's
Virtual Organisation Model

**URGENT
ACTION
FUND
AFRICA**

FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

VO	Virtual Organisation
WHRDs	Women's Human Rights Defenders
UAF-Africa	Urgent Action Fund-Africa
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
HR	Human Resources

**WE RECOGNIZE THAT WORK
IS SOMETHING WE DO, NOT A
PLACE TO GO**



In December 2012, Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-Africa) took the bold decision of transitioning into a “virtual organisation” (VO). This decision was in many ways radical and intuitive. Almost eight years later, we find that the concept is still both fascinating and intriguing for many of the different actors we interact with. We often get questions including:

How do you ensure the work gets done with this kind of staff dispersal across Africa? How do you deal with different security risks in the countries where staff is based? How do you stay connected throughout the working day? How do you deal with internet connectivity problems?

We aim to answer wide selection of enquiries related to the details of the work of UAF-Africa as a virtual organisation through this publication. We will not only be answering questions related to logistics and work productivity, but as a feminist Fund, we are interested in addressing issues related to well-being and collective care in a virtual organization. We want to surface the joys and pains of this arrangement, the peace of mind that comes from the ability to work from one's home country, but also the feelings of loneliness that staff members who are virtually based occasionally experience. We will present our experiences and issues that we are still dreaming of and thinking through. We are hoping that this publication will inspire a conversation around the variety of work models adopted by feminist organizations and the lessons we have collected around dealing with similar stumbling blocks.

We are publishing our experience with virtual work at a unique and challenging time, a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is turning our worlds upside down. Among the many changes the world is contending with, one change is that most organizations are thrust into implementing “work from home” arrangements for their teams. We believe this is an opportune time to share our experience in implementing a virtual work arrangement and hope that we can contribute to shedding some clarity on how organizations can implement a similar arrangement during these unprecedented times.

So here is our story...





WHAT IS A VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION?

A virtual organization is an arrangement that supports a mobile workstyle that understands that work is something people do, not a place where they go.

Virtual organizations provide the flexibility to select the location from which one works, increase productivity by eliminating commute hours and allowing members to select the space from which they feel most at ease to be productive, and an escape from the distractions of an open office. The physical requirements of this setup are fairly straightforward: a quiet space with a door that can be shut, a comfortable chair, a laptop, a functional mobile phone and reliable internet connection.

We see the virtual office model as essentially a feminist one. According to Ndana Bofu-Tawamba, the Fund's Executive Director, the virtual model is essentially a disruptive innovation and intervention to the capitalist project of defining work in binary terms-formal and informal work and working spaces. In her analysis, Ndana believes feminist organizations are boldly deconstructing how work should be conducted, politicizing the space and unlearning bureaucratic ways of organizing that space, organizational structures and systems. In her view, women



THAT IS, A MODEL WHEREBY ALL STAFF MEMBERS MUST SHOW UP TO AN OFFICE AND SIT ON A DESK FOR A SPECIFIC NUMBER OF HOURS. THEY HAVE TO WORRY, ALONE, ABOUT CHILDCARE, ABOUT MISSING THEIR FAMILIES IN THEIR HOME COUNTRIES, ABOUT FEELING OUT OF PLACE (IF THEY DO) IN THE COUNTRY IN WHICH THEY ARE BASED.

have historically been disenfranchised from formal work spaces, been chastised as a non-productive population that should be kept busy in the reproductive and private sphere of the economy. She opined that to have women defy these odds of patriarchal oppression and not only present themselves as equal thinkers and discourse shapers in the 'formal orbit of work' as well as demystify what 'paid' work looks like, who does it and from where, is revolutionary! In a nutshell, Ndana is adamant that feminist organisations have seen the light-they are diligently dismantling the master's house-piece by piece. Feminist organisations are shifting and redrawing the boundaries of power in the workspace-that is what this virtual organization model represents.

That is, a model whereby all staff members must show up to an office and sit on a desk for a specific number of hours. They have to worry, alone, about childcare, about missing their families in their home countries, about feeling out of place (if they do) in the country in which they are based. By going virtual, we are trying to challenge those notions of physical location, geography and the politics of being contained in a space simply because of policies that restrict

our movement. The option of leaving the physical office behind is exhilarating for Onyinye, who after working for 15 years in an office setup, was excited by the bold idea of working from anywhere she pleases, in Africa-so long as she delivered on her tasks.

At the present global moment when the COVID-19 pandemic is changing our lives in dramatic ways, having the infrastructure for virtual work meant that, within 2 days, all of the Fund's staff started working from home. The pandemic has meant that flexible working hours must be a new reality for the Fund. As schools have shut down in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus, this has meant that the Fund's team members need flexibility to contend with increased care responsibilities. In practice, this meant that team members forge flexi-time with supervisors on priority work which could be completed outside office hours, if these hours are now needed to attend to new realities at home. It was stressed that delivering on priorities, on agreed time, is more important than the number of hours worked. This is a revolutionary way of looking at the concepts of work (successful completion and delivery of tasks) and working hours (time spent at work).



UAF-AFRICA'S PATH TO BECOMING A VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

In December, 2012, UAF-Africa's Board of Directors decided, after consultations with the Fund's stakeholders, that the Fund will adopt a virtual work arrangement.

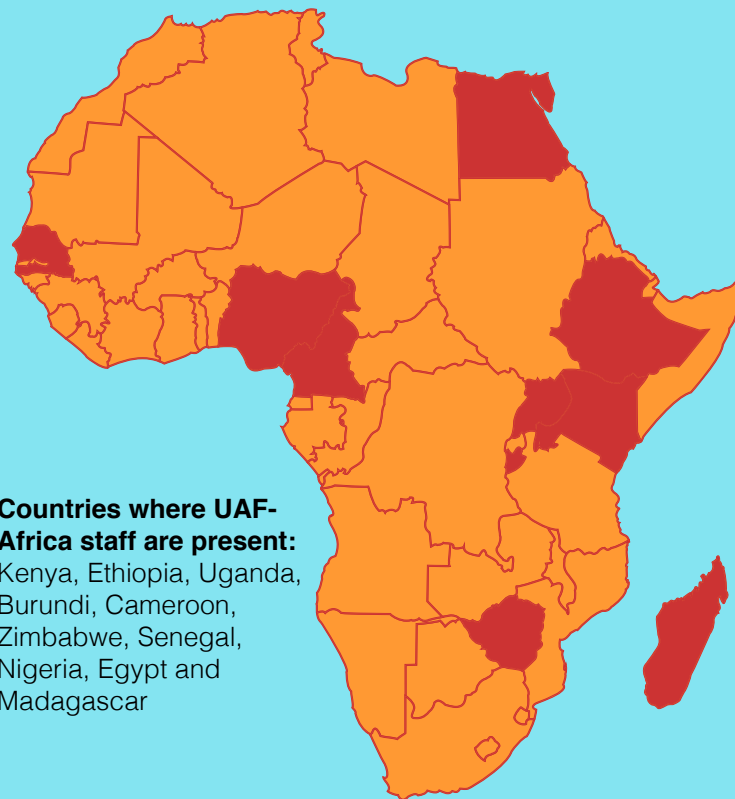
According to then-UAF-Africa Board Chair, Binaifer Nowrojee, "The idea arose at a moment when the organization realized that despite identifying as a pan-African organization, 98% of UAF-Africa's staff were from Kenya. The tone of the office was Kenyan, most grantees were East African". The latter status hindered the Fund's goal of becoming fully pan-African, which led the Board to think that having a wider diversity of staff experiences and networks could be one step towards that goal. The option of having non-Kenyan staff members join the Nairobi office was discussed, but dismissed due to the expenses that would be entailed, including to secure work permits for non-Kenyan staff the Fund wanted to employ. The decision was then finally made for non-Kenyan staff members to work from their home countries, which made administrative, political and budgetary sense, but would also reinforce the "pan- African tone and networks", if staff members from across the continent continue working and connect the Fund to women's rights activists, organisations and movements from their home countries and sub-regions, according to Nowrojee.

Staff members based in their home countries joined the Fund after the decision was made. They represented Southern Africa (Zimbabwe), West Africa (Nigeria, Senegal); North Africa (Egypt); East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia); Central Africa (Cameroon) and Oceania (Madagascar). Complementing the Nairobi and Harare anchoring offices, the Fund's staff complement is dispersed across 11 African countries and is able to relay the socio-political, economic and environmental



BETWEEN 2004 AND 2008, UAF-AFRICA'S TEAM WAS 100% KENYAN. BETWEEN 2008-2012 THE TEAM WAS 98% KENYAN. AFTER 2012, WITH THE DELIBERATE STRATEGY OF DIVERSIFYING THE STAFF COMPLEMENT TO REFLECT A PAN-AFRICAN LOOK, THE FUND SUCCESSFULLY HIRED STAFF FROM ALL FIVE SUB-REGIONS OF AFRICA. STAFF ARE STATIONED IN 11 AFRICAN COUNTRIES. UAF-AFRICA IS A GAME CHANGER IN REMOTE WORKING MODALITIES.

PAMELA MUDHUNE: FINANCE + OPERATIONS DIRECTOR-KENYA



Countries where UAF-Africa staff are present:

Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Nigeria, Egypt and Madagascar

perspectives, analysis while networking the Fund with a variety of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who are active in diverse settings. Although the Fund has a strong East Africa presence through the Nairobi office, the Burundian staff member added the much-needed perspective of the Francophone WHRDs in the region, who had been difficult to reach for the Fund due to the country's political instability and language barriers. Similarly, the Egyptian staff member responded to the Fund's challenges in funding Arabic-speaking WHRDs. It should be recognized that the Fund deliberately selected staff members who are natives of countries that are considered to be "hotspots" in their regions. At the time, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Egypt, and Burundi all had active civil societies and uncertain political contexts in which WHRDs would greatly benefit from the Fund's rapid response grantmaking.



HOW IS THE VO ARRANGEMENT WORKING FOR THE UAF-AFRICA TEAM?

In reflecting on our virtual setup, interviews were conducted with the entire team (those based in offices and those virtually based in their home countries, working from home or shared spaces). The questions aimed to explore what is working for the UAF-Africa team.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

Personally

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND RICHNESS

At the personal level, staff members based in offices report benefitting from the greater diversity that has come from working with staff members from different countries, who share their culture; work ethic, power dynamics (different cultures exhibit varying hierarchies of power), food, music, and personal lives, bringing a particular richness to staff interactions.

ABILITY TO BE CLOSE TO HOME

Staff members virtually based in their home countries believe that a great benefit of this arrangement is that it enables them to stay close to their families and the comfort of familiar settings where they do not have to worry about applying for work permits, visas, and complex tax procedures, which is the experience of Edmond Mugisha, the Francophone Grantmaking Programme Associate, who explains that he suffered through the process of renewing his visa when he was based in Nairobi.

The closeness to family is a literal one in the case of staff members who are mothers and who do not have a lot of options for childcare. In the case of Onyinye Okechukwu, the Fund's Communications & Media Engagement Coordinator based in Nigeria, it is not always feasible to get help from family members for childcare. It is helpful that she can be with her children in the same space. She is learning how to “juggle between looking after them after they have attended nursery school and working”. This has meant finding creative ways to engage her children while she is working, which has been a learning experience for herself, her husband and her children, who are learning to be independent from their mother while seeing her with them in the same space. Being a consciously feminist Fund, experiences such as those of Onyinye affirm the Fund's decision to transition into a virtual model, as it allows her to support the reality of the experiences of working mothers who are expected to work and fulfill care roles, often with very little help.



**UAF-AFRICA STAFF WORK
FROM OFFICES, SHARED
OFFICE SPACES, HOMES,
CAFES, AND WHILE IN TRANSIT**

Professionally

STRUCTURE THAT ADAPTS TO EMERGENCIES

We operate in volatile environments. In a context of ever-changing ways in which civil society spaces are closing, it is important to have an organizational structure that adapts to emergencies.

This was the case in Kenya, when violence erupted in the context of [disputed elections](#). As it became increasingly dangerous to be on the road and it was impossible to predict where the violence would erupt, UAF-Africa took the decision for all the Kenya-based staff members to work from home for a couple of weeks subject to further assessment based on the situation on the ground. The same decision for staff members to work from home was also applied in the Zimbabwean case, following news that long-time president [Mugabe was placed under house arrest and that the army took control of the country](#). It was difficult to predict if the situation would lead to violent unrest in the country. To ensure the safety of the Harare team, everyone worked from home while the safety of commuting was being assessed. The ability to work from home provided staff members with peace of mind, knowing that they are with their families at an uncertain time, not having to frequently call-in to ensure that everyone is safe at home. According to Nairobi-based Caroline, the Fund's Grantmaking Coordinator from Kenya, “Working from home in this political circus, besides it being a practical solution to commuting, it has also been good for my mental wellbeing. I am naturally drawn to scenario building so being away from the central business district has been calming.”

YORUBA

IGBO

LANGUAGES SPOKEN

ARABIC

FRENCH

BY THE FUNDS TEAM

AMHARIC

HUSA

KIRUNDI

ENGLISH

MEMBERS

KIRUNDI

SWAHILI

SHONA

MORE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF REGIONS IN WHICH VIRTUAL STAFF MEMBERS ARE BASED

At a professional level, all of the grantmaking team members report that they have a much more nuanced understanding of the countries in which the Fund is virtually present. For example, while it might be relatively easy for the Fund to know about the different groups that are active on the continent, it is very challenging to know what forms of organizing exist, as that requires the knowledge and insight of individuals on the ground who are familiar with the context. The presence of virtually based staff has thus added great value to the Fund's intelligence.

According to Edmond, being back home in Burundi, was great to his understanding of the Burundian context, "I would read about what is happening in Burundi and base judgment on information covered in the news or ask friends, but by being here I have the experience, I know when partners talk about an issue, I can quickly verify and confirm it". This first-hand knowledge and ability to fact-check information is an essential component to the grant making team's ability to maintain its rapid response mechanism. As a result, the grantmaking team finds that it has been much easier to make decisions about grant requests as virtually-based staff members provide 'live' input and insights about the issue

that is being reported on and the context. Seeing that UAF-Africa specializes in rapid response grantmaking, we are keenly aware that WHRDs sending us grant requests often do not have the time to write elaborate descriptions of the context that makes their planned intervention urgent. They count on our knowledge to not ask questions – that to them are very obvious- about their context. The presence of staff members from across the continent helps the Fund avoid asking such questions from grantees, greatly cutting down on our turnaround time and our ability to provide grants rapidly.

According to Susan, the Fund's Anglophone Grantmaking Programme Officer from Uganda, the virtual arrangement is "more assuring" for grant applicants. As tribal allegiance is still a crucial way of understanding the world in the case of some countries and communities on the continent, if a grant request coming from a group whose members are Luo, for example, is rejected, upon perusing the website to get an idea of who the staff members are, they might think that the reason behind the rejection is that the majority of staff members are Kikuyu. Our mosaic staff complement (some of whom are Kenyan) embolden our claims that our decisions are objective and not based on tribal, religion, sexual orientation or class-among many other factors.



GRANTMAKING IN A VO SETUP—PRACTICAL INSIGHTS





The presence of a staff member in Egypt is very useful as “she is able to follow and be updated about the situation in Egypt and get in touch with us regarding projects on the ground”. While there are a lot of organizations who might have offices in different countries but they do not follow up on what is happening or how things are happening whereas UAF-Africa observes what is happening on the ground. So, this is what I appreciate and it is not common. For me, this is what makes UAF-Africa stand out from other organizations.

GRANTEE PARTNER FROM EGYPT WHO PREFERS TO STAY ANONYMOUS



As a grantmaker, the UAF-Africa took the VO move to ensure that the Fund's staff are closer to the constituencies that we support, across the continent. This guaranteed the Fund's physical presence and connection with grantees and movements organising on the ground. This better facilitated active participation in movement convenings, arranging one on one meetings with potential grantees so they better appreciate what the Fund supports. The Fund believes that the presence of a staff member who speaks the local language, is familiar with the socio-political dynamics on the ground, is part of the feminist and women's rights movements that UAF-Africa already supports or is likely to support bolsters the Fund's grantmaking, raises the Fund's political visibility while facilitating trust building which is crucial during uncertain times. This strategy would also further enhance the Fund's footprint into the sub-regions where virtual staff are based, enabling UAF-Africa to provide strategic resources in countries, difficult-to-reach rural, mining and urban slum areas where strategic support has not reached before, for example, or in countries and places that are usually far from the reach of bigger funders. This way UAF-Africa becomes the local funder as well as bridge builder between local women's rights activists, organisations and movements and the international funding community. This is a strategic role that Women's Funds such as UAF-Africa are providing within the bigger philanthropic architecture.

In the countries in which UAF-Africa is virtually based, our grantmaking and interaction with WHRDs has been deepened. Our physical staff presence in Burundi, Cameroon and Senegal was of great significance when we organized the [Galvanising Women's Rights Organising in Francophone Africa](#) convening, which took place in Dakar, Senegal from May 18th-20th, 2015.



The presence of a staff members with knowledge of the groups and WHRDs in Francophone Africa who are doing important work allowed us to reach out to groups that have rarely attended regional convenings in the past or had the platform to be able to address funders with the issues relevant in their contexts.

UAF-Africa's presence in Egypt allowed the Fund to reach areas that few funders have. We supported groups in regions including North Sinai, undergoing an armed conflict between militants and the state. Groups in the region have very limited email access. We were able to stay in touch with them by phone. We are also getting better at integrating North African feminists into the work of the wider African feminist movements, as the latter sub-region has historically been more connected to the Middle East than to its African roots. North African feminists today participate in all of the Fund's convenings, which was not the case before the VO arrangement. Given that there is a staff member with knowledge of the context of the sub- region, the Fund is attracting more programming funding for North Africa.

UAF-Africa's ability to verify the authenticity of grant requests has greatly improved over time, partly due to staff presence in different countries. There was a period when we started receiving a large number of grant requests from organizations based in the DRC and Burundi, who endorsed each other for the grants they requested. The organizations claimed that they are based in Bujumbura but have offices in Bukavu, DRC. Our staff member in Burundi was able to visit the organizations and verify their existence, finding in some cases that they are not legitimate organisations!

While virtual staff conduct physical visits and outreach in the countries in which they are based, their knowledge of the wider region in which they are sitting enables them to conduct online outreach to potential grantees that they are familiar with and who could benefit from the Fund's support. The Fund's online outreach to Francophone West, Central, and to North Africa started when virtual staff members joined and contributed to enhanced grantmaking to those sub-regions.



WHERE DO WE FACE CHALLENGES? WHAT ARE WE DOING TO ADDRESS THEM?

COMMUNICATION

We strive to make the VO arrangement as conducive as possible to the development and maintenance of team spirit. However, communication remains a challenge – it is difficult to find alternatives to having lunch together, having face-to-face conversations about how our weekends went, or having an impromptu discussion with another team member about a grant request. The virtual nature makes some of these interactions challenging-losing the ‘real time element of an important message’, while removing the impromptu nature from others. Before discussing an issue with a co-worker, we have to email or message them to make sure that they can spare time to speak. That effectively means that some conversations simply do not happen immediately. Emails are also not always an effective means of communication, as “you cannot read someone’s face or their body language in an email. Many times, because of different social backgrounds- what one person sees as simple and straightforward may be misunderstood, what one person views as a joke in Kenya may be offensive in Zimbabwe”, as Pamela, our Finance & Operations Director put it. In addition to miscommunication and lost opportunities for conversation, how can team spirit be built with colleagues who are sitting thousands of miles away from each other, colleagues who are experiencing different socio-political, economic and environmental factors?

The Fund has been thinking through these challenges. We have some promising practices that are working for us:

- We **chat/call/text** a lot via Wire, Jitsi and Signal to check if a team member we want to have a quick chat with is free. This has become our version of having impromptu conversations.
- We have agreed on a system for which kinds of messages are communicated through which mediums:
 - We share quick updates or anything personal via Signal rather than sending an email and CC’ing everyone. Due to its instant nature, Signal has been great to relay any urgent information that needs attention;
 - Emails are only sent to people we need action from while cc’ing those that we need to share information with. We agreed to think thrice before hitting the reply all button. No one wants to read emails from 20 people that have nothing to do with them. Ignoring the emails can be difficult, with many people getting notifications of new messages on their smartphones or distracting pop-up messages on their computer screens;



WE HAVE AN IN-HOUSE POLICY THAT SAYS, 'DO EMAILS YES BUT IF YOU FEEL THERE IS SOME FORM OF MISCOMMUNICATION GOING ON, PICK UP THE PHONE, OR GOTOMEETING WHERE YOU CAN HAVE A BACK AND FORTH'.

–NANCY CHITIZA, HEAD OF PEOPLE + CULTURE

- o If by the third email exchange, there still remains a misunderstanding, we immediately go to Skype (for personal conversations), Jitsi, Zoom, BlueJeans or use the phone-depending on how sensitive the issue is.
 - We have **monthly staff meetings** to get up to speed on what everyone else is working on or having challenges with. We start our calls with each team member sharing their 3P's: personal, professional, and political updates. We have found this to be a great way to get an update on what the team is going through personally, what projects they are working on professionally, and their take on the current political context (of the country in which they are based, regional and internationally). The latter has been helpful to get a quick picture on the political issues of relevance that the Fund should be aware of;
 - We have **invested in software** that enables us to have long staff calls without many glitches: GoToMeeting, BlueJeans, Jitsi, Zoom which does not suffer from Skype security and connectivity issues.
 - All of the Fund's team members **meet face to face twice/** year. We are able to pull off these meetings because we hold one of them with large convenings that require the presence of all staff members. We meet for 2-3 days after the end of the convening, during which we have the time to work, plan for the period ahead, and bond!
 - The other face-to-face meetings are the two annual staff retreats that happen around March and October of any given year. Tariro, the Fund's Head of Partnerships & Development from Zimbabwe, thinks that these interactions with the team have helped her in getting to know the team members' personalities better, which makes misunderstandings that come with online communications much less frequent.
- In addition to face-to-face team meetings, we also try to have more than one staff member travel to coordinate one of the Fund's smaller convenings. We try to have one virtually-based staff member and one office-based staff member, both members from different programmes, work together on such convenings to strengthen the team spirit between team members. For example, we can have Hiwot, the Fund's Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Programme Officer from Ethiopia organise and travel for a convening in Burkina Fasso with Roseline, the Fund's Francophone Grantmaking Programme Officer from Cameroon. This practice has been attributed towards living our organizational values; working as a team, we deepen our trust of each other, we are more attuned to each other's worldviews and thus better able to empathise as well as hold each other accountable.



I LOVE WORKING REMOTELY; I FOUND OUT THE HARD WAY THAT I AM NOT AN "OFFICE PERSON". HOWEVER, THAT DOESN'T MEAN THAT I SOMETIMES DO NOT YEARN FOR HUMAN NOISE WITHOUT ACTUALLY BEING "IN" IT! FOR THAT, I USE ONLINE PLATFORMS SUCH AS COFFITIVITY TO PROVIDE AMBIENT NOISE.

– MASA AMIR

ISOLATION

Working alone from home, a café, or a shared office space can feel lonely. The spirit of working with a team in the same space is lost and given the challenging contexts in which we all work, working alone from a country in which it is becoming increasingly insecure to support the work of WHRDs, can enhance the feelings of loneliness, anxiety and sometimes fear. In the experience of Masa Amir, the Fund's Research & Protection Coordinator from Egypt, there are benefits to experiencing security concerns while working virtually: "It gives me perspective to have an in-depth knowledge of the security concerns that all team members have, which vary in intensity from one country to another. It is difficult to have an apocalyptic outlook when I know that my situation is not really unique. It rather becomes helpful to learn from other team members what they are doing to enhance their own security and what is relevant for me to adopt".

In 2017, the Fund started implementing a policy of annually having one of the virtually-based team members working for two weeks from one of the Fund's anchoring offices (either the Nairobi or Harare office). According to Edmond, who was the first virtually-based team member to go through this experience:

Being in the Harare office gave me an opportunity to enjoy group lunch time stories which I had really missed. It was a remarkable moment to foster friendships with my colleagues, all of whom are in different programmes than my own. Spending time with the Partnerships & Development team of Daphne, Tariro and Vongai was enlightening to how sustainable partnerships are forged. Nancy, the Fund's Head of People & Culture was resourceful in walking me through some of the Fund's newly institutionalized Human Resources policies-something I greatly appreciated!

At a professional level, I loved the energy in the Harare office. I had an opportunity to quickly respond to questions on write-ups that we, as the Grantmaking team, had shared with the voting committee. I was also able to explain to new team members how the grant request review process was done.

Furthermore, Edmond's visit to Zimbabwe enabled him to get a sense of the daily life of team members based in Harare, including the experiences dictated by the country's unstable economy:

Realizing how expensive goods were at the market, looking at very long queues of people expecting to withdraw not more than \$50 (maximum withdrawal) from their bank accounts, opened my eyes on unprecedented political and economic issues that I read about and never imagined in real life.

The Fund holds our staff retreats in locations where virtual staff members are located to enable the team members to get a real picture of the contexts in which we all operate. This policy has so far not worked very well due to the precarious security contexts in which virtually-based staff members operate.

UAF-Africa holds her staff retreats in locations where virtual staff members are located to enable the team members to get a real picture of the contexts in which we all operate as well as connect with the movements within these countries (each staff retreat affords the entire staff team to engage with the feminist and women's rights movements through some so-convened one day gathering structured around a particular topic for discussion). This dream, while it has worked in some countries, it has equally been a challenge for others, especially countries facing socio-political and economic upheavals.

WHAT ARE WE REFLECTING ON?



There are aspects of this arrangement that are requiring in-depth thinking about how to address them appropriately. They are not exactly challenges, but issues that we have flagged as an organization that are a mixed bag. We have developed ways of addressing them, but they are challenges to the feminist, and more generally human rights movements as a whole. We do not think that they will be fully resolved, but that constantly thinking them through might lead us to better approaches:

WELLBEING

Addressing the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of WHRDs has always been a challenge for feminists. In the midst of growing backlash against women's human rights; the gaining of power and authority by fundamentalist groups; funding challenges; and the challenges of maintaining families, romantic relationships, and friendships, maintaining our energies and the energies of the women around us becomes a monumental task. We experience and watch as team members and fellow activists report burnout, illnesses brought about by extreme exhaustion, chronic stress, and the traumas that accompany the resistance of injustice and patriarchy.

As our feminist values are the cornerstone of the work we do, we value each other's wellbeing and continuously reflect on what we are doing and not doing to maintain it. This is one aspect of building and maintaining an "organization with a soul".¹ While ensuring the wellbeing of one's team members is challenging in contexts where we get to be in the same physical space as our colleagues, ensuring the wellbeing of team members that you do not see is a very unique challenge. After all, how much can you tell about a person's physical, psychological and emotional health from email exchanges? Or even from a phone call, if a colleague just does not feel like sharing? Or if she responds to the question of "how are you feeling?" with a simple "I'm OK". Without seeing their face or body language, how can you see and feel if something might be wrong? In such a virtual context, one has to take time to listen deeply and know deeply the people they work with.

1. The term is borrowed from Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu's publication on [Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul](#).



WE TRY TO GET A CLEAR PICTURE TO SAY, 'THE KIDS ARE NOT FEELING WELL,' FOR EXAMPLE, SO WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR HER WORK DELIVERY, HOW CAN THE ORGANIZATION COME IN TO CUSHION HER DURING THIS PERIOD WHEN THINGS ARE NOT GOING WELL? THE PERSONAL ASPECT OF THE WORK IS JUST AS SIGNIFICANT AS THE PROFESSIONAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS.

– NANCY CHITIZA



SECURITY

Physical and digital security are another challenge that continues to haunt feminist organizations- how can we stay safe, in the physical and digital worlds- in the midst of a world of increased militarization; surveillance; states that are emboldened to torture, kidnap, rape; and a digital world of trolling, bullying, stalking, and surveilling our every move? How can we stay on top of all of these security alerts? More challenging is the fact that we are a virtual organization. We need to think through the security contexts of all of the countries team members are based and of ensuring that their digital habits and behaviours are secure. When considering digital security, we need to think about the regulations governing network operators in the countries where team members are based; how to send SMS safely; encrypt emails; ensure that data is backed up; that we have measures to remotely wipe data in place; and the list goes on. Ensuring that all of these measures are in place for team members sitting in different countries virtually, most of whom rely on our ICT Associate based in the Kenya office to setup these measures while balancing their own workloads, has been challenging. The temptation to use common apps to communicate, like Skype and WhatsApp is sometimes just too tempting. When thinking of physical security, the Fund needs to be creative beyond what protocols already exist within the Fund, about the many and evolving security threats the team and WHRDs are , for example, what else needs to be done if a team member is facing unthinkable threats from state or non-state actors, banned from traveling, arrested family threatened etc.



Here are some approaches we are working on:

Physical security

- For our offices in Harare and Nairobi, all office doors are locked and we ensure that windows are closed when the offices are not occupied. We are in the process of securing offices with CCTV cameras;
- Staff members who are virtually based in other countries are encouraged to surveil the area from which they work and communicate any security issues to the HR manager to think through options, which may be changing the location, thinking about security measures to consider;
- We provide psychosocial support to any staff member involved in a threatening incident;
- We suspend, relocate, or terminate activities if the risk is significant. Risks can include unexpected risk that made a country too dangerous for staff members and invited participants in the case of a convening; threats received by the organization after a convening is announced; or if we receive a recommendation from our on-the-ground advisors not to be present in the particular country due to a well-founded fear of a risk;

We are working on establishing an integrated security plan, as all of the measures above have been implemented on a case-by-case basis. We believe that a security plan that encompasses all of the above risks, and others, would be more helpful in allowing us to provide a more strategic approach to our physical security.

Digital security

- All team members underwent a digital security training to be acquainted with the basics of keeping smartphones and laptops secure; using encrypted emails; using secure apps to communicate.

We are still thinking through what to do in instances in which grantee partners are only using Skype, for example, and do not have the time to explore safer options we suggest? In other cases, in which we call grantee partners on their phones, we prefer using secure apps such as RedPhone, but the grantee partner does not have an internet connection to download the app. In such cases, what is the best way to proceed?

- In instances in which a team member is receiving threats – either from state authorities- or because of their online presence (after writing an article, for example) which makes them vulnerable to trolls, we are ready to remove their biographical information from the Fund's website; and explore plans to maintain their physical safety.

We are also planning for staff members to receive comprehensive training on security protocols, risk assessments and risk mitigation



SO WHAT DOES
THIS ALL MEAN?
HINDSIGHT IS
TWENTY-TWENTY
VISION THIS WE
OFFER TO YOU....





In the experience of UAF-Africa, ensuring that staff that work from virtual offices are provided with one-on-one support to speak about setting up a structure, managing their time, and dealing with feelings of loneliness.

VALUES AS THE FOUNDATION

We recognized that the gold standard of organizational development is that of being a value-driven organization. We therefore embarked on a process designed to make sure that there was clarity and agreement on how we would do our work. In other words, did we share the same values and, if so, what were these values? This process involved numerous conversations with each other which allowed us to interrogate our personal values recognizing that our personal values reflect how we behave on a daily basis, at home, in the community and at work. This led to an agreement on our stated organizational values and how they are lived on a daily basis. We came to realize that our organizational values had to be integrated into who we were at all times and demonstrated through our behaviour – on the job and off the job. Once our values were agreed on, soft skills and systems were designed to reflect our values. For example, how we interacted with each other on a daily basis, how we hold each other accountable both formally and informally. We work hard at living our values and walking the talk. We are not perfect. We recognize that our values are aspirational as well as functional and we are committed to holding each accountable in a respectful manner.

PROVIDING NECESSARY SUPPORT TO STAFF WORKING VIRTUALLY

Working from a virtual office does not necessarily come naturally to everyone. For some, the experience is difficult – the sense of isolation, the need to manage time effectively, setting boundaries to people you share your working space with, dealing with the fact that some of us will share the space with their young children – all are some factors that make the experience challenging for many.

In the experience of UAF-Africa, ensuring that staff that work from virtual offices are provided with one-on-one support to speak about setting up a structure, managing their time, and dealing with feelings of loneliness. It greatly helps if there are team members who are already working from virtual offices to induct new members who are to follow this way of work. The latter was very helpful when all UAF-Africa team members had to transition to work from home given the COVID-19 outbreak – having team members who already worked virtually share tips was very insightful.

SPECIFIC HUMAN RESOURCES POLICY

The Fund's Human Resources (HR) policy is specifically tailored to the realities of the virtual arrangement. That means stipulating the different working hours applicable in the different countries and time zones from which we operate; stipulating that all team members must be accessible online at all times (whether it is being alert to WhatsApp, Wire, or Signal messages) to respond to any questions or any emergency team members might have. The Fund has also been considering for a while the necessity of the provision of psychosocial support for staff. This idea became a necessity with the COVID-19 outbreak and a therapist has indeed been retained to provide collective and individual support sessions to team members.

The HR policy has also established a 360-staff evaluation process, whereby staff members evaluate the work of colleagues within their supervisory threshold on an annual basis. The evaluation is conducted on the basis of the Fund's core values: **professional rigor, teamwork, working with a soul, dynamism, introspection, diversity, and accountability**. Three values are selected as the basis of the evaluation every year. We have found that this evaluation encourages team members to pay keen attention to the work of their mates. The evaluator must also provide a short example, situation, or better still, a story to illustrate their responses. In providing this feedback, team members must do so using the positive enquiry approach. When necessary feedback is given immediately in a respectful manner and in living the value of accountability. During our annual staff retreats, time is spent on sharpening the soft skills of improving emotional intelligence, holding difficult conversations –either with each other or with stakeholders and how to build and maintain trust.

TECHNOLOGY

In our experience, there is a need to rely on multiple, complementary technologies to manage the virtual workstyle. These are technologies that aim to provide secure access to, and secure management of sensitive information. For example, the Fund uses Salesforce to centralize all of the information related to our work and to enable all team members to access it from anywhere they are, and from their laptops, smartphones, or tablets. Salesforce has enabled 23 team members sitting in seven different countries to access all of the information they are looking for to complete their tasks. This access to information is done from around 40 different devices in the Fund (including smartphones, laptops, computers, and tablets).

We also use Signal and Wire to communicate safely over the phone and Protonmail to send and receive emails securely.

THE HR POLICY HAS ALSO ESTABLISHED A 360-STAFF EVALUATION PROCESS, WHEREBY STAFF MEMBERS EVALUATE THE WORK OF COLLEAGUES WITHIN THEIR SUPERVISORY THRESHOLD ON AN ANNUAL BASIS.



WORKING FROM HOME MEANS LEARNING HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRACTIONS: I REALISED THAT THROUGHOUT THIS WEEK MY NEIGHBOUR HAS BEEN WATCHING A REALITY TV PROGRAMME AND THE VOLUME ON HER TV IS SO LOUD I COULD HEAR WHAT THE CHARACTERS WERE SAYING FROM MY WORK SPACE. WORKING FROM HOME ALSO MEANS KNOWING WHAT SHOWS MY NEIGHBOURS WATCH ALL DAY! COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE AROUND YOU ABOUT YOUR WORK SPACE IS KEY- INCLUDING NEIGHBOURS!
- ONYINYE OKECHUKWU

THE NEED FOR DISCIPLINE

Working from home, café, park, or wherever a team member has an internet connection can be distracting. Self-discipline is key. We use work tracking tools to ensure that tasks get done. These include google documents and spreadsheets and platforms, such as Asana to track the progress of specific tasks. We also monitor our workplans to check on the progress of tasks and adjust as necessary.

IN-OFFICE STAFF MEMBERS CAN WORK FROM HOME

Once a week, between Friday and Mondays, team members based in the Nairobi or Harare offices have the option of working from home. As long as work deliverables for the day are met, we have found that this has been a useful option in many cases.

This option also caters for the need for solitude that is sometimes needed to get a certain task accomplished that would benefit from a day without fighting the traffic to commute to the office. The Fund is also aware that sometimes we just need our solitude; that we don't have the mental space for the social interactions of an office.

USING LEAVE DAYS!

Fatigue and constant work are NOT regarded as expected parts of the work. The Fund takes great care to remind team members of the number of leave days they have and we are encouraged to use them. This HR policy is an attempt for us to free ourselves from working continuously without breaks in between.



"MAKING CREATIVE USE OF RITUALS AND SYMBOLS IS A POWERFUL WAY TO HELP AN ORGANISATION KEEP ITS FOCUS AND PERIODICALLY 'ALIGN' ITSELF TO ITS CORE VISION, ITS SOUL SONG"-

HOPE CHIGUDU AND RUDO CHIGUDU, IN STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING AN ORGANISATION WITH A SOUL.

We are still thinking through ways in which we can structure our time so that the team has time during work hours for reflection and to be able to block off time during the day to share those reflections (whether by writing, conversations with other team members, and other ideas we are still exploring). Given the volume of the work that needs to be done, it has been a challenge to structure reflection time during the workday.

WE HAVE SISTAHOOD RITUALS

As aptly stated by Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudo in [Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul](#), "rituals can be a profound tool for activists to rebalance and reclaim their own power". This is as rituals can bring an organization's team together in much more profound ways than rhetoric can. By embodying an organization's values and beliefs, rituals can play a great role in creating a unique identity for an organization. And where is it more suitable to institute organizational rituals than in Africa, a continent of rich rituals?

In the case of UAF-Africa, we have created a ritual of meeting for a staff retreat in a beautiful place at the beginning and toward the end of every year to reflect, build team spirit, and plan for the year ahead. Seeing that wellbeing is a great concern for the Fund, we intentionally select nature-oriented places to meet as

a team. These spaces have included secluded lodges surrounded by greenery, spaces from where we can easily access relaxation facilities, and spaces that are relatively safe to allow for long walks. The entire team looks forward to the end of year retreats, knowing that it has become an organizational ritual to meet in calm, open spaces where we can relax while working on planning for the upcoming year. We know we can look forward to a method of stress relief that makes wellbeing an organizational endeavor, not an individual responsibility we can rarely accomplish alone. This ritual effectively created an identity for the Fund as one that 'walks the talk' when it comes to wellbeing. The retreats provide a sistahood space where we can be vulnerable with each other, contributing to deepening our trust amongst ourselves, realign ourselves with our core values and remind ourselves that we are defenders of women's rights.

We also have a gift ritual. In August, each team member selects someone for whom they will buy a gift to be shared at the end of the calendar year during the December staff retreat. Very specific instructions are attached to the process in the "August memo". "Sistahood Extravaganza" is the name of our ritual. It allows us a way to enjoy each other as the gift sharing involves lots of guessing around who is the gift from, bought by who, why, how and on it goes. The rule is that gifts should not cost anything beyond USD\$25.



CONCLUSION



As we write, we feel that we exhibit all six characteristics of long-lasting successful organizations.²

These organizations have:

1. Strong, positive, values-driven cultures.
2. They make a lasting commitment to learning and self-learning.
3. They are continually adapting themselves based on feedback from internal and external environments.
4. They make strategic alliances with internal and external partners, customers, and suppliers.
5. They are willing to take risks and experiment.
6. They have a balanced values-based approach to measuring performance.

We believe that our VO arrangement has allowed us to pioneer a new way of doing work for civil society organizations (CSOs). We believe that it has allowed us to attract talents without having to worry about work permits, office space, and the psychological toll it takes to leave one's family and friends to relocate for work. In our experience, with the right mix of people, systems, and technology, virtual teams have been an effective way for CSOs to work. Operating in a climate of ever closing spaces for civil society organizations, having dispersed teams facilitates the evasion of state scrutiny – there is no mega office to raid or documents to confiscate. Scattering around the continent makes it harder to shut us down.

Our virtual arrangement also makes us more reachable to WHRDs. As a Fund that inhabits the middle ground between activists and donors, the perception by WHRDs that we are close to them has allowed us to pick up on red flags and intervene early on and to have a realistic picture of the different regions that constitute the continent. To be able to do this work in the language spoken by WHRDs has been a catalyst to our ability to operate and make decisions rapidly, and most importantly, to the perception of WHRDs that we are not a “foreign” Fund, but one that is run by activists that they know and are familiar with.

Despite all of its perks, we are still thinking through important issues- how do we ensure that we maintain the soul of the organization given a funding climate that is making it more challenging for the team to meet in a relaxed environment to enhance our team spirit? In countries in which staff members are experiencing traumatic events (imprisonment of friends, threats against them or their loved ones, etc.) how can we best provide deep solidarity while being thousands of miles away? As surveillance of our work is becoming ever more nuanced, how do we maintain a digitally safe practice, especially as we increasingly support WHRDs located in remote areas and who often have not been trained on digital security issues? In such instances where we have to rely on virtual communication, how can we keep ourselves and the WHRDs we communicate with safe?

We are not perfect. We are constantly working on how we experience each other.

We hope that this publication starts a conversation around the futures of our organizational structures and a collective thinking through issues concerning connectivity, communications, funding challenges, security and safety and the manner these issues interact in a circular fashion to both protect and put WHRDs at risk. Let's continue with our collective strategizing, organizing and knowledge generation for our feminist survival and growth.

² Liberating the Corporate Soul. Building a Visionary Organization. Richard Barrett. Pg. 192.

