

Local Solutions for National Problems: How Nonprofit Organisations Tackle the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

There are many studies on several actors (including organizations) attempting to tackle the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially at the strategic level. However, attempts by local actors in developing economies are often underexplored. Through multiple in-depth interviews with nonprofit organizations, this article provides evidence of how nonprofit founders develop solutions for national problems using local resources. The findings from multiple interviews with the founders revealed that they demonstrate pro-social behaviour but have distinct personal experiences and backgrounds that shaped their nonprofit model. Interestingly, both founders utilize knowledge of the local environment, grants from international NGOs, educational hubs, and local community actors to enact activities (and actions) to end period poverty, vocational skills gap, and gender inequality.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) members adopted the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a framework to solve global inequalities. The SDGs have 17 goals (or actions) that must be achieved by 2030. Whilst all the goals are important, countries have different priorities for the actions since the inequalities differ across countries. Each year the UN publishes a report on the SDGs progress to provide insights into the goals' actions, solutions, and achievements across countries. In their 2022 report, sub-Saharan Africa still needs to catch up on key developments. It is among the highest regions for working poverty, child mortality, poor education, and food insecurity. For instance, the under-5 mortality rate is 74 deaths per 1000 births in 2020. Also, childbearing among girls aged 10-14 is common in sub-Saharan Africa (Review of *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022* n.d).

Health inequalities are the unjust differences in health between groups of people occupying different societal positions. Several studies have examined the causation of health inequalities since the Black Report 1980 (McCartney, Courtney and Mackenzie, 2013). However, drivers of health inequalities differ across countries and within a country. According to the World Health Organisation, the lower an individual's socio-economic position, the higher their risk of poor health. The disparity in health outcomes is associated with social factors such as employment status, income level, gender and ethnicity, and education (WHO, 2018).

The Gambia is Africa's smallest country, with a population of 2.64 million (The World Bank 2022). Despite the high tourist attraction, the country has many challenges like any other country in sub-Saharan Africa. The poverty rate in rural communities is 70 per cent, while in

urban communities, it is 32 per cent. Further, poor education and gender inequality are also issues facing the Gambia. The country's education policy is aligned with SDG #4, focusing on accessible, equitable, and inclusive quality education for all. However, the country faces capacity, system, and infrastructural issues that educate and tests learners' competencies for life-long learning. What is most challenging about the sustainable development issues in the Gambia is that gender inequality is still further behind compared to neighbouring countries like Senegal. 1 in 10 girls miss school or drop out due to a lack of sanitary products or sanitation facilities in schools. On average, girls miss 48 days of school a year during their periods ("Project Gambia" n.d). Adolescent and teenage marriages still exist; 25.7 per cent of women aged 20–24 were in a union or married before age 18. As of 2021, only 8.6 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women compared to the global average of 24.5 per cent ("Gambia Women in Parliament - Data, Chart" n.d).

Poverty, as a social factor, has a negative impact on health due to poor nutrition and access to healthcare ("5 Facts about Healthcare in the Gambia" 2020). The SDGs, therefore, are interconnected and thus require an integrated approach to solving the disparities (Evans, Marten and Etienne 2012). Niessen et al. (2018) argued that five SDGs outline clear targets for reducing health inequalities. They are gender inequality, equitable education, poverty reduction, health and well-being for all people, and reduction of inequalities within and between countries.

Different actors, such as international NGOs and government bodies, have developed initiatives to tackle health and education disparities. However, domestic nonprofits focusing on local solutions are often invisible in the knowledge landscape. This paper provides insight into the resources and solutions developed by nonprofit organizations in the Gambia to address period poverty and the vocational skills gap. The research addresses these two pressing questions: *How do nonprofit organizations in the Gambia develop local-centric solutions to address the SDGs? In what ways are local resources used to achieve their organizational mission?*

The rest of the paper will be structured as follows. First is the data collection procedure and analysis. This is followed by the key findings addressing the above research questions and discussion. The article ends with a concluding section and recommendations for future research.

Collecting Interview Data and Analysis

A qualitative design using multiple in-depth interviews with the Founder of Prospect for Girls and Girls' Pride is used. The interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams. 12 semi-structured questions were prepared, focusing on the research questions. The 12 questions were divided into three categories. The first category concerns the founders' motivation for establishing the organization. The second was about nonprofits' solutions to address the SDGs. Then the final category focused on the types of local resources used and how they are implemented to achieve their organizational goals.

Four interviews were collected from both founders - Kujeh for Prospect for Girls and Fatoumatta for Girls' Pride. The first set of interviews lasted two hours on average, and the

second set lasted an hour and forty minutes. In-depth interviews enable the researcher to build rapport with the participants. It also allows for a comprehensive discussion about the role of both nonprofit organizations in tackling SDGs 3, 4, and 5. The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify the themes reflecting the research questions.

Case Organizations - Prospect for Girls and Girls' Pride

Prospect for Girls is a community-based organization in the Gambia. Their mission is to empower young women to be independent by acquiring vocational skills. The company was established in 2018 following a successful grant award by the US Embassy in Gambia. The company provides vocational training in four key skills: Food and Beverage, Tailoring, Photography, and Graphic Design.

Girls' Pride is also a community-based organization in the Gambia. Established in 2017, it provides reusable cloth pads and sexual and reproductive health education to keep girls in schools, end gender-based violence, and protect the environment from waste. Girls' Pride partners with international NGOs and local communities to provide young women access to sanitary pads in rural and urban areas.

Findings

The next few sections present key findings from the in-depth interviews with the two founders.

Pro-social Motivation

The analysis of the interviews reveals that both founders have different motivations for establishing their nonprofit, which is unsurprising since their mission is different. However, they both demonstrate pro-social behaviours as they explain why they establish their organizations. Pro-social behaviours are concerned with voluntary actions to improve the well-being and current state of others. Fatoumatta said,

I was born and raised in a low-income family in a community where people don't discuss periods or issues affecting women and girls. Growing up, when I was going to school, I never had anybody to talk to me about periods. I never had someone to buy any period packs for me. I will either stay out of school during my period or when I go to school. I will keep to myself. I had to starve myself to buy some pads, and when I did that, instead of changing my pad regularly, I would use one pad the whole day, and I always had infections after my period. So, in 2017, after 15 years, I realized that girls in my community are experiencing the same problem. So, when I learned about reusable pads during the Mandela Fellowship, I thought this could be something I could work on as a community project.

The Prospect for Girls founder, Kujeh, had a different motivation. She was a marketing and communications manager before starting her nonprofit, although she still worked at the commercial firm whilst managing the nonprofit. She argued that most trainees she mentored and trained in her marketing role had some academic qualifications, but they lacked the required skills to do the tasks. Several conversations with her co-workers over the years led to

the view that young people, especially women in the Gambia, seem to focus on one career pathway. Kujeh believes that the changing nature of work and our world means people need transferable life and career skills, especially in a country with high levels of youth unemployment. Based on her observations, she began planning to develop a vocational skills programme to equip young women in the Gambia with transferable skills that will benefit them economically. However, the comprehensive work for setting Prospect for Girls began during her Mandela Fellowship program. She said,

Although I had an idea of what I wanted to do before the Mandela Fellowship program, the programme allowed me to critically think about how the vocational programme will work. I was asking myself questions like what sort of skills should we focus on? What type of women do we need for this training? Where will I get the money to start? Where will the training take place? How will the training make women more economically independent?

Both founders demonstrate ‘pure altruistic motivation,’ a perspective associated with pro-social behaviour. Pure altruism is behaving with the aim of benefiting others. From the above extract, both founders took action to benefit young women in their communities.

Solutions, Advocacy, and Change

After completing their Mandela Fellowship programme in the US, both founders returned to the Gambia to start their ventures. First, they spent five months building their case for reusable sanitary pads (Fatoumatta) and a vocational training programme (Kujeh) through research; national and international reports on the issues they seek to address, and observations at the local level. Then they applied for grants. Girls' Pride applied for an International NGO grant (based in the Gambia), while Prospect for Girls applied for the US Embassy Gambia Grant. Following the successful application of their grants, the founders established their nonprofit, focusing on a range of activities.

Prospect for Girls trains young girls and women in four key skills: Photography, Graphic Design, Tailoring, and Food and Beverage. Each training runs three times a week over six months. In the first cohort of 2018, they trained 40 young women. The second cohort in 2019 had 30 learners.

Girls' Pride partners with local and international organizations to provide educational materials on period management and hygiene training in local communities and schools. For instance, in the Home Economics subject in secondary schools, students usually learn how to make baby clothing. Due to Girls' Pride, students learn how to sew sanitary pads. Students sew ten pads during the project – five for themselves and five-handed to a teacher who stores this in a pad bank for when students need them whilst at school. Pad Banks were created in schools as a space for girls to access free pads while in school. Girls' Pride advocates ending period poverty on radio stations and social media. This organization has two full-time staff, 12 part-time trainers, and 20 volunteers.

While both organizations use grants, schools, communities, and their networks to create change, they also focus on changing perceptions that often impede sustainable solutions.

I have seen that some girls are excluded from social activities because of the taboo and negative social norms and values that are happening in the Gambia. They believe that if you are menstruating, you should not associate with people. If you don't have access to clean water and you are on heavy period, then you will have an odour. Some people will laugh at you and call you names like you are smelly. All these things compounded can also predispose that individual to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

- Fatoumatta, Founder Girls' Pride

Some perceptions also exist for vocational training.

Although there is progress from when we started, parents do not encourage their children to go to skilled schools, to vocational schools, and even if they choose to, the public would not support you or would not consider it a valuable qualification. But now you would see that in Gambia. There is an increase in the number of vocational institutions that have been established, and that tells us something. It tells us that there are students interested in attending these institutions, and these institutions are making, you know, money from training young girls to become better. And the good thing is some of these institutions hire their students to work for them.

- Kujeh, Founder of Prospect for Girls

Discussion

Like many sub-Saharan African countries, the Gambia faces many challenges. The challenges discussed in this article are period poverty, skills gap, and gender inequality. These issues are mapped in the UN SDGs goals 3, 4, and 5. To tackle these issues, the two nonprofit founders interviewed use various resources: finance from an international NGO and a governmental organization, schools, local community centres, and their professional networks.

However, both founders spend an extensive period researching the issues locally to understand the society's attitude and perception towards their goals. Of course, both founders are Gambian women with a shared knowledge of these social and cultural beliefs. But they acknowledge that these perceptions differ from urban to rural areas. In rural areas, people were conservative and conscious about discussing periods because they considered them a 'private and unclean' topic. This perception meant that Fatoumatta had to include advocacy in the nonprofit role to ensure the message with the reusable pads would be effective. The journey through advocacy meant that the company considered involving men in developing the pads. In some of their training sessions in schools and local communities, male teachers, brothers and fathers were encouraged to learn how to sew the pads. By engaging men, they hope to distort the stigma and negative perceptions of periods in the Gambia. So far, Girls' Pride has trained over 160 school teachers on hygiene management, period shaming, and gender-based violence, 600 adolescent girls in rural Gambia on menstrual hygiene management, and over 900 schoolboys on period shaming.

Similarly, Prospect for Girls employs male and female trainers to facilitate the vocational training sessions. The skills categories of photography, graphic design, tailoring, and food and beverage are based on the skills interest identified at the earlier stages of the project.

Also, there is a prospect for post-training employment in photography and food and beverage, given the high economic concentration on tourism and hospitality. The skills programme offered by this organization is based on the high economic areas and those of interest to the youths at the first phase of the project formation. Since its first cohort, learners have either started full-time employment, returned for further vocational training at other institutions such as the Gambia Technical Training Institute, or started their businesses. Both founders used specific resources tailored to local needs to achieve their goals.

Local Solutions for National Problems

From this research, the primary issues in the Gambia affecting women are period poverty, the vocational skills gap, and gender inequality, especially with employment and health. As depicted in the figure below, nonprofit organizations use a combination of resources to achieve their organizational mission. Although their mission differs, they utilize financial (grants from international NGOs and local government) and social capital (volunteers) to achieve their mission. Furthermore, schools and community centres are central networks for implementing the training necessary to achieve sustainable goals. For instance, period management training is undertaken at local community centres and schools to educate teachers and male and female students about the cultural myths and taboos associated with periods, and specific training sessions for teachers and female students about period management. On the other hand, vocational skills training takes place at accredited educational centres. These networks form a part of the ecosystem enabling social change to real national problems.

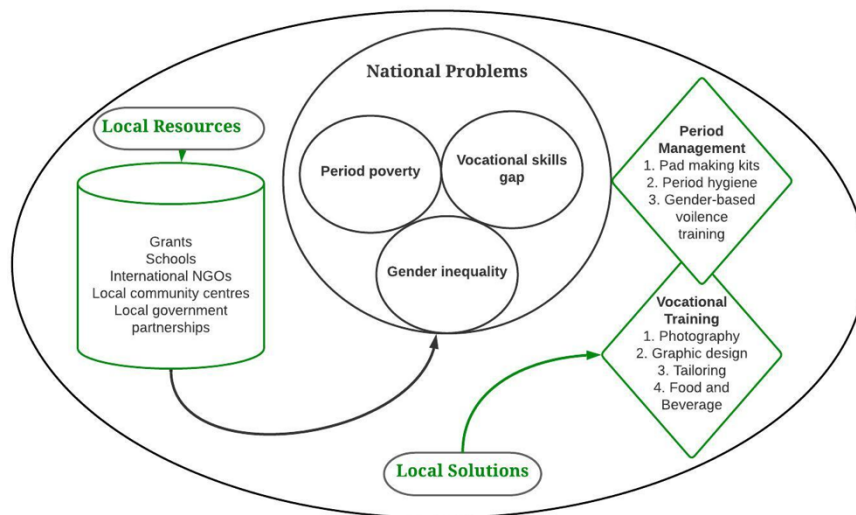


Figure 1. Local Solutions for National Problems

Conclusion

Gender inequality negatively affects girls and women's health, education, and employment. This study explored how nonprofit organizations use local resources to tackle period poverty and the vocational skills gap among young women in the Gambia. These contextual issues

complement SDG numbers 3 and 4, respectively, and the overarching advocacy mission for both organizations is to close the gender disparity gap, thus tackling SDG 5. The findings from this study show that nonprofit organizations in the Gambia use a combination of financial, social and network capital to implement their solutions. The solutions are local-centric as both founders detect the causes of these problems and focus on the resources within urban and rural areas to change the current state of girls and women affected by these issues. Although the goal is to end period poverty and close the vocational skills gap among women, enacting the solution is not gender specific. That is because achieving their goal requires relevant stakeholders, irrespective of their gender and social status, from rural and urban areas to challenge the cultural and systemic issues women face. Considering the findings from this study, further research should examine the impact of local-centric solutions on women directly and the funding landscape for nonprofit organizations in developing economies.

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