

How capacity strengthening readied a local partner for sustainability and growth in Uganda

Tic kacel ki ribbe kelo dongo lobo. (Working together and having a good relationship brings development.)

—Sister Pauline Acayo (in the Acholi language of northern Uganda), on how partnership helped the Diocese of Northern Uganda to become a stronger organization

The offices of Catholic Relief Services and the Diocese of Northern Uganda (DNU) are just a short walk apart in Gulu, Uganda. Founded in 1903, DNU is a faith-based organization that belongs to the global Anglican Communion. As neighbors, CRS and DNU became familiar with each other's work through monthly district meetings that they both attended. Seeing CRS' peacebuilding activities grow in the community, DNU decided to reach out to CRS. What began as an informal relationship transformed into project-based partnership and has continued to evolve.

From the beginning of their official partnership in 2004, DNU received support and capacity strengthening from CRS. In 2009, DNU obtained direct donor funding to implement a three-year savings and internal lending communities (SILC) project with CRS. When the project ended in 2012, DNU transitioned to independent operations. Highly regarded by donors and the community today, DNU now provides large-scale services and trainings.

Capacity strengthening helped DNU achieve impressive results:

- DNU gained seven new program donors, increasing its program value by \$463,000.
- DNU doubled its geographic coverage and reached more than 25,800 additional beneficiaries.
- DNU added eight new projects and eight new program sectors.
- In just three years, DNU increased its savings fivefold, by \$159,000.



Photo: The staff of the Diocese of Northern Uganda. Sister Pauline Acayo/CRS

- DNU increased its funding from non-CRS donors by over \$1 million.
- Ten new local organizations began attending the peer coordination meetings hosted by DNU and CRS.
- DNU hired 27 new staff (including 26 professional staff and 15 female hires).
- As a percentage of the total number of staff, the number of female staff increased by 17 percent.

WHAT'S IN THIS PAPER?

- Observations about how and why DNU grew
- Details about CRS' financial and technical investments in strengthening the capacity of DNU
- Insights about the dynamics of partnership, and how to improve them

Interested in DNU's success, the Partnership and Capacity Strengthening Unit of CRS visited northern Uganda to get the whole story. The team researched DNU's growth from 2006 to 2012. Here is a summary of the changes that DNU and CRS were able to make.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

CRS and DNU worked hard to make growth possible. Together, they focused on improving DNU's capacity in many domains, including program implementation, local coordination and influence, funding development, and human resources.

Program implementation

CRS invested \$196,000 in DNU's program capacity. From 2004 to 2008, CRS focused on building the capacity of extension workers within DNU's staff. These extension workers established and trained farmer groups and volunteer groups in the community.

For example, DNU's community extension staff trained technology adoption committees on record keeping, documentation and assessment. These committees became the de facto technical entry point for each community. Then DNU leveraged this network for community engagement and change.

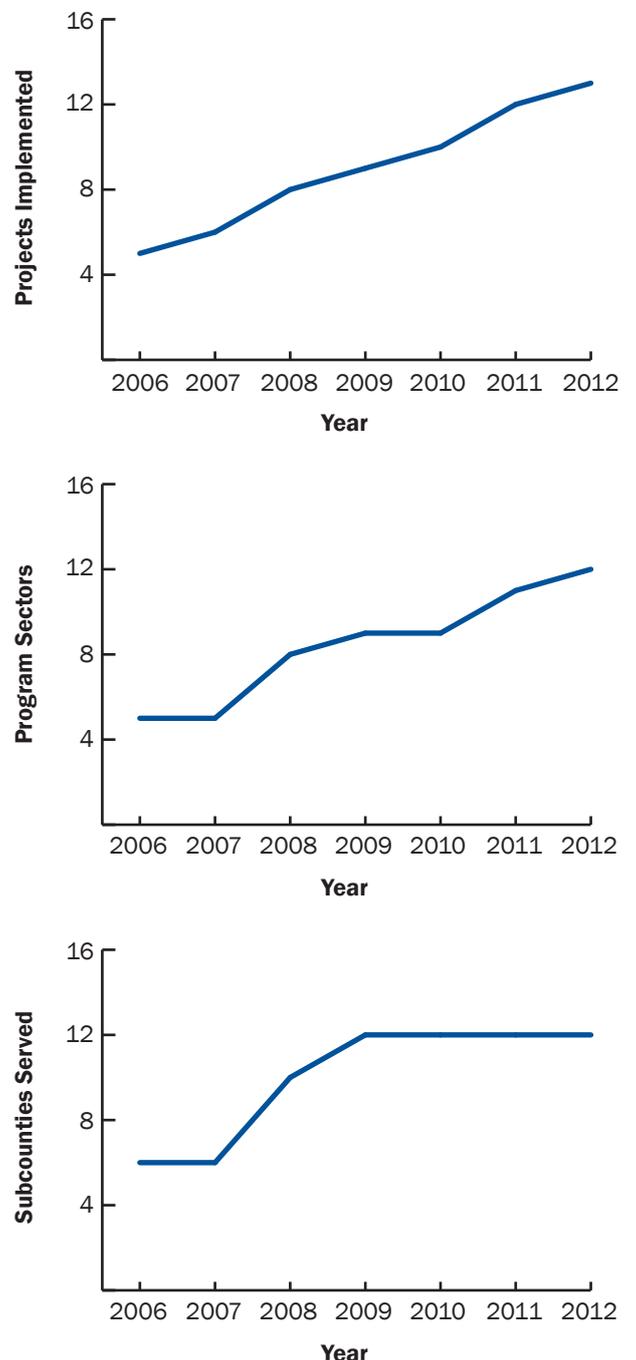
From 2006 to 2012, DNU gained eight program sectors. One was later discontinued. During this time,

DNU also added eight projects and brought services to six new subcounties.

In 2007, CRS used training sessions to prepare DNU for a project funded by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance. Topics included information management, program operations, and community engagement and assessment.

Between 2009 and 2012, CRS and DNU held a two-year, on-the-job training and certification program for SILC private service providers (PSPs). These are field agents who provide services to SILCs on a fee-for-service basis and no longer receive direct support from the project. They are SILC experts who operate

Figure 1. DNU's Projects, Program Sectors and Subcounties





Members of this savings group meet to discuss how to make loans. *Sister Pauline Acayo/CRS*



Staff members from DNU congratulate their top-performing SILC agents. *Sister Pauline Acayo/CRS*

in their home communities and beyond. PSPs are strong community marketers and mobilizers. Their mutually beneficial relationships with SILCs allow PSPs to earn a consistent income.

From 2006 to 2012, DNU gained more than 25,800 project beneficiaries. During the seven-year period, DNU's program value increased by \$463,000, including a \$364,000 increase that occurred from 2007 to 2008. There is no information on savings prior to 2010. From 2010 to 2012, however, DNU increased its savings fivefold, by \$159,000.

Local coordination and influence

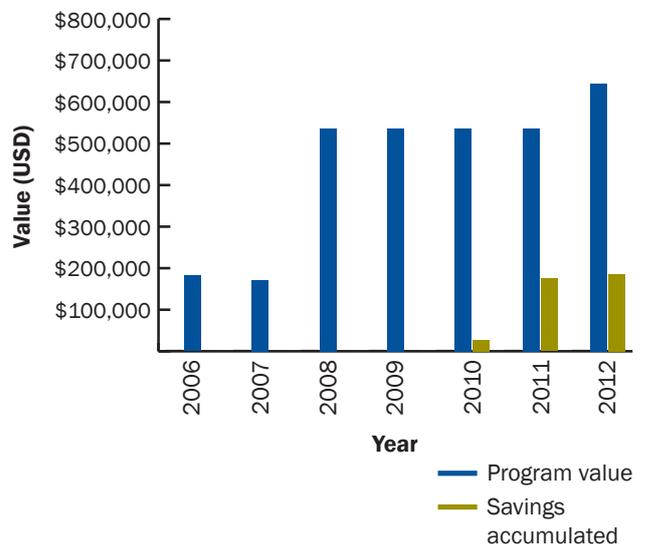
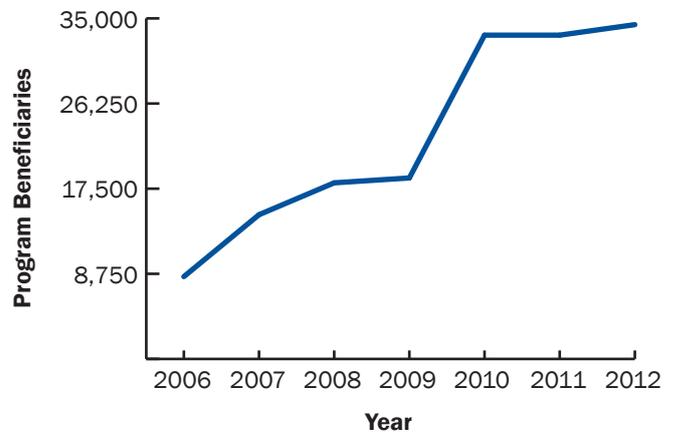
CRS support helped DNU coordinate local stakeholders and shape local systems. This support included transferring resources, such as motorcycles, to the local government. In 2005, CRS and DNU cohosted a training session to strengthen the district's ability to handle emergencies. The session emphasized preparedness and planning in camp decongestion, return and resettlement.

During their partnership, CRS and DNU jointly hosted peer coordination meetings. From 2006 to 2012, they gained the participation of 10 new local organizations. According to Reverend Patrick Lumumba of DNU, participation grew as organizations discovered that "they could not do this work in isolation." "Development," as he said, "is a question of coming together to work together."

Funding development

CRS invested \$45,000 in DNU's funding development. In 2004, CRS conducted a three-day training session for DNU on proposal development. In 2008, CRS conducted a two-day training

Figure 2. DNU's Beneficiaries and Monetary Value



session on proposal development specific to the SILC project.

DNU feels that its overall institutional development greatly improved its ability to attract new donors. DNU implemented its programs more effectively and efficiently because the organization could rely on formal, competent program agents, such as extension workers, farmer groups, SILCs and PSPs. DNU's

Figure 3. Local Organizations that Attended Peer Coordination Meetings

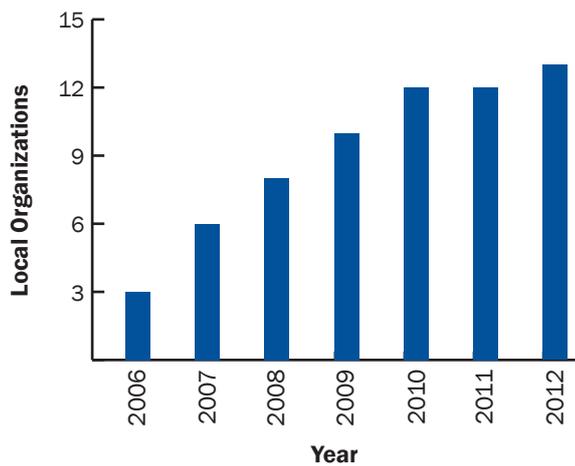
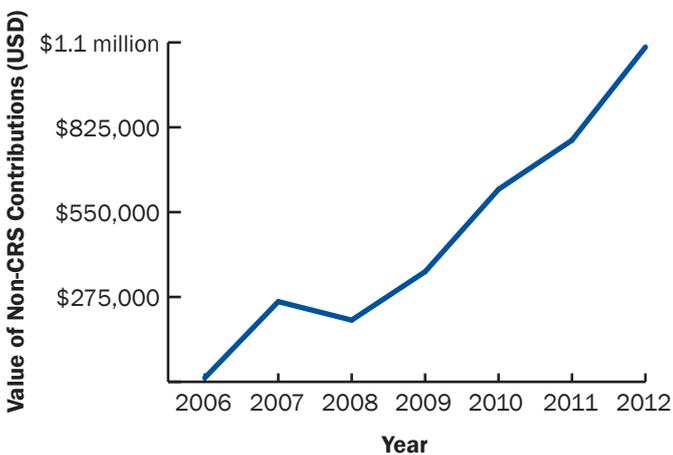
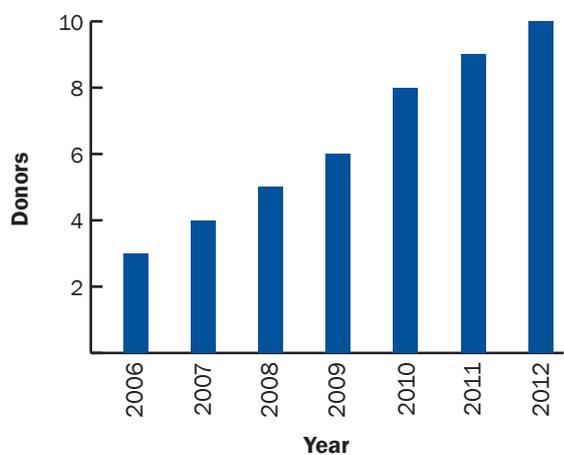


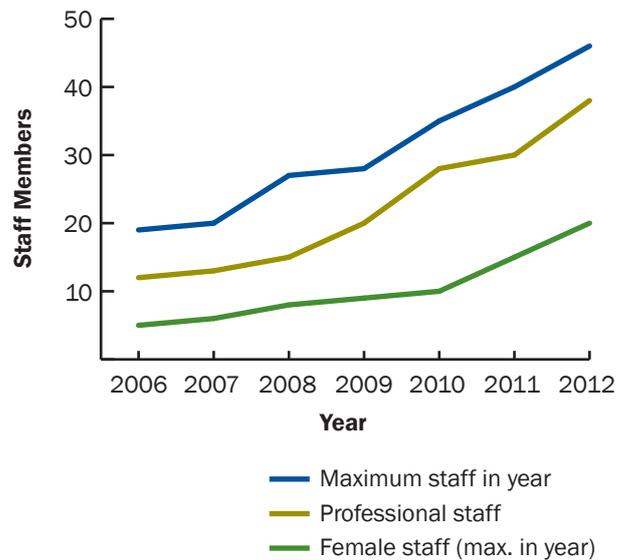
Figure 4. DNU's Donor Diversification



structures and systems had benefited from years of capacity strengthening in all departments, and potential donors rewarded DNU with more funding. In this sense, donor diversification is not only a capacity strengthening “target area” but also a natural result of successful and comprehensive organizational development.

From 2006 to 2012, DNU steadily attracted new donors. By 2012, the organization received direct funding from seven additional donors. In seven years,

Figure 5. Changes in DNU's Human Resources Capacity



DNU's funding from non-CRS donors grew by more than \$1 million.

Human resources

CRS contributed \$1,000 to DNU's human resource development. CRS provided technical assistance to DNU from 2004 to 2005 to develop their policy and systems for human resources. CRS' human resources manager from the Northern Uganda Regional Office worked with DNU's staff and shared manuals and procedures. These activities took place for four days every quarter. The total training period lasted eight quarters—32 days in total.

DNU hired 27 new staff members between 2006 and 2012. Of these, 15 were female hires and 26 were professional staff. The percentage of female staff increased by 17 percent and reached 44 percent of the total staff by 2012, an impressive trend in gender representation.

WHAT CREATES SUCCESS?

CRS helped DNU by providing assets, resources, training and technical assistance. But, according to these two partners, there's a lot more to it than that.

Look for partners who are committed to learning

One of the reasons DNU was able to achieve such growth was because the organization was committed to learning. “DNU wanted to build their own capacity so that they could eventually stand on their own,” said CRS' Sister Pauline Acayo, when describing

how the partner relationship came about. To do this, DNU sought out CRS and requested a formal partnership. DNU made it clear to CRS that the organization wanted to improve its ability to do good in the world. In turn, CRS saw the amazing potential in DNU's motivation and in DNU's enthusiasm to learn and improve. Outstanding partnerships continually learn from the insights that experienced team members offer.

Foster genuine, consistent and individual connections with the partner

In Uganda, CRS and DNU staff regularly got together after hours to connect, reflect and socialize. These gatherings weren't explicitly "capacity strengthening," but according to CRS and DNU, they strengthened the bond between partners immensely.

These connections create a way for staff to share their individual insights and experiences with each other. These insights and experiences are valuable but are not always captured in manuals and training sessions. Informal interactions provide unscheduled opportunities for partnership reflection, allowing staff to share concerns or ideas in a comfortable way.

If the opportunity arises, try to share personal or "nonproject" information with partner staff. This builds rapport and paves the way for sharing valuable information about the partnership. If it isn't possible to get together outside the office, set up a regular time to talk openly about the partnership without adding the pressure of a formal evaluation.

Value the partner and their staff as extensions of your organization

In Uganda, DNU and CRS described themselves as part of the same "family." They operated on the basis of transparency and respect. They encouraged each other to constantly improve. It's true that CRS made substantial up-front investments in DNU, but both organizations strengthened their capacities by developing a productive relationship with each other.

In contrast, when partners are impersonal with each other, they can create a sense of separation, which leads to power imbalances or a lack of transparency.

It's especially important to continue relating to partners in personal ways when challenges do arise. Partners will be most receptive to change when they feel included rather than alienated. Proceeding with

respect and flexibility can transform a mishap into an opportunity for growth. Value the partner and individual staff by acting with honesty, appreciation and reciprocity.

Create and maintain trust through clear goals, accountability and flexibility

CRS and DNU felt that trust was the glue that held everything else together. They had to build this trust every day—it didn't happen all at once. Partners need to see that even when situations change (during a miscommunication or a technical challenge, for example), the organizations will still trust each other.

Set the stage for trust by being open about intentions and expectations for the relationship from the beginning. This should include dialogue between both organizations, including all levels of staff, and formal documentation of the partners' shared perspective. Establishing clear common goals will make it easier for both parties to hold each other accountable throughout the partnership. Joint planning and review activities are also valuable tools to develop the vision and build the team for the partnership.

At the beginning of a partnership, communication may seem guarded. CRS and DNU noted that trust grows slowly. Be patient and trust will grow as the partners get to know each other better. Challenges are the best opportunities to create trust. If a mistake occurs, take appropriate steps to correct it but reiterate that your organization intends to provide long-term support for sustainable growth. Call attention to challenges gently. Use them as opportunities to clarify the needs of each partner in the relationship and to further refine expectations and goals.

PARTNERSHIP INSIGHTS

Throughout CRS' partnership with DNU, Sister Pauline Acayo worked closely with both organizations. She was the peacebuilding project officer, the director of the Northern Uganda Regional Office and later the peacebuilding and partner relations program manager. She's drawn the following insights from CRS and DNU's eight-year partnership.

Aspects of organizational growth are interconnected

Partners with strong systems and structures inspire donors' confidence. Submitting competitive proposals and meeting the structural demands of new donors

are essential to growth. Strengthening skills and making improvements in monitoring and evaluation, finance, governance, logistics, and human resources may not appear interconnected at first, but they are. Capacity strengthening in one area can catalyze change in the others. Together, these help make internal and external operations seamless.

Staff are more likely to understand the importance of capacity strengthening when they recognize this interconnectedness. Adult learners often benefit from knowing the practical ways in which new skills can help them. Capacity strengthening in any department can help the partner and its staff reap the benefits of greater funding and organizational stability.

Staff loss can be expected, but it is not inherently bad

As a partner strengthens its capacity, some staff attrition is natural. When staff are trained, they become more qualified. In turn, they become competitive applicants for jobs with the government or with higher-paying NGOs.

CRS' Partnership Unit has seen this trend in more than one recent case study, but most of CRS' partners don't consider staff loss to be an indication that they are doing something wrong. In fact, they say that when staff are able to move to higher-profile opportunities, the community benefits from their professional growth.

Still, losing staff at a crucial point in a partner's development presents challenges. Partners can overcome these challenges by working together to fill the needed roles and by allowing the capacity strengthening process to continue.

Successful capacity strengthening eventually means partner independence

The end goal of capacity strengthening must be for the partner to function independently, and to function well. To achieve these results, capacity strengthening needs to be intensive, long term and valued equally by both partners. In Uganda, for instance, DNU now provides services at a large scale and conducts training sessions of their own, without CRS involvement.

Trust, transparency and respect are the “secret ingredients” that make outstanding organizational growth possible

Being willing to embrace change, being open to communicating during challenges, being honest about mistakes, being hopeful about the future, being confident enough to seek and find innovative solutions—these characteristics all fundamentally stem from partners' confidence and faith in one another. Without trust, partners simply can't go very far.

Creating trust, transparency and respect takes consistent and repeated effort. The in-country partner needs to see that the international organization is committed to a long-term and authentic relationship. No partner wants to be “capacity strengthened” only as a means to achieve project or donor goals. The international organization also needs to see that the in-country partner is serious about the relationship.

In Uganda, community members began to appreciate CRS more when they saw that CRS had a positive and authentic relationship with DNU. People began to see CRS as an organization that is “for everyone,” not just for members of a specific religion. As a result, members of all denominations began to join the ranks of DNU staff.

Relationships make technical investments sustainable

Achieving healthy working relationships is *essential* to productive partnership. Without authentic relationships, real technical improvements are unlikely to occur, and they're even less likely to last. The relationships between partners and their individual staff are equally important as project outputs in implementation, human resources or funding. Evidence shows that truly outstanding capacity strengthening is the result of immense tangible and intangible investments on behalf of both CRS and their partners. The technical and relational components of partnership have to complement each other in order to be successful.

For more information, contact Partnership@global.crs.org.