The Dilemmas of Post-identity Organizing: Unmaking feminist Ties in Southern Rwanda

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Since the 1994 genocide, local feminist organizations have sought to rebuild Rwanda and reconcile intergroup hostilities. Women-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have trained women for public office and helped them to win local elections. But as Rwanda has transitioned into the post-conflict phase of reconstruction, these groups have found it difficult to gain traction locally, nationally, and as players in the international development community. Field research with women's groups in the southern province revealed the power of homophily, or shared identity, as both an organizing force and an impediment to interorganizational collaboration with national elites and outsiders. This study suggests that we have not yet resolved the dilemmas of post-identity organizing in struggling communities.

Key Words: identity politics, feminist organizing, international development, Rwanda

"In the aftermath of the genocide, I thought I was the only one left, but when I turned to my neighbors, I found out that they had also been equally affected."
- Daphrose Mukarutamu, founder of the Duhozanye widows group/nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Save, Rwanda

Shared oppression is a powerful organizing force, especially in post-conflict communities (Cole & Norander, 2011). Despite the challenges of organizing along identity lines, the perceived strength of homophilous—or seemingly similar—lived experiences compels marginalized people to carve out communal spaces (Buzzanell & Lui, 2005; Phelan, 1994; Stein, 2010). In response to oppression, community leaders tend to unite constituents along contested socio-political borders. When these strategies succeed, they often evolve into community based organizations (CBOs) that keep the initial movement going. Such was the case for rural widows of the Rwandan genocide in the mid-1990s.

As many as 50,000 women were widowed during the 1994 genocide (Government of Rwanda, 2009). Yearning for interpersonal support and solidarity, they formed mutual
assistance groups in their rural communities. Initially, these groups provided a safe haven for interpersonal sharing and served as incubators for grassroots peacebuilding projects (Ryan & Balocating, 2010). Since the late 1990s, many of these groups have evolved from informal reconciliation organizations to formal social service nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that are certified by the national government. Like other feminist peacebuilding organizations, these NGOs now serve as an alternative to mainstream reconciliation and development programs by concentrating on “micro-practices of peacebuilding work, including relationship building and attention to women’s everyday needs” (Cole & Norander, 2011, p. 39). Women-led NGOs in rural Rwanda fill public service gaps by educating orphans, extending microcredit to poor families, and employing lower skilled women (Hategekimana, 2011; Ryan & Balocating, 2010; see also Asaki & Haynes, 2011). They train women for public office and help them to win local elections. They also expand “the boundaries of peace work” (Cole & Norander, 2011, p. 41) and transnational feminist peacebuilding by deploying localized knowledge to solve community problems (Jones, 2010; Ryan & Balocating, 2010). Yet despite the notable successes of these groups, their homophilous foundations now prevent them from gaining traction in a development and peacebuilding system dominated by patriarchal elites and outsiders.

Today, the mostly-female leaders of local feminist NGOs in southern Rwanda face difficult choices about the future of their organizations and the nature of their partnerships with diverse individuals and organizations. For women who lost nearly everything and then found each other, it has been difficult to move beyond shared experiences as widows, mothers, and rural women. Despite earning commendations from a handful of national government officials and international development professionals working in the capital, feminist organizers have struggled to build strong relationships with Rwanda’s male-dominated leadership and foreign partners. While NGO leaders realize that they need to broaden their stakeholder networks and expand beyond primarily identity-based organizing, they remain loyal to the local women who have helped them endure post-conflict violence and inequity (see Newbury & Baldwin, 2000; Reyntjens, 2011). Thus, the ethical dilemmas inherent in the unmaking of primarily homophilous interpersonal ties and organizational foundations are displayed in their full complexity in the feminist organizations that populate southern Rwanda. The Rwandan case illustrates the difficulties inherent in transitioning from local organizational agendas to the larger sphere of national or international decision-making, and suggests that we have not yet resolved the dilemmas of post-identity organizing.
The Strengths and Weaknesses of Shared Ties

When feminist leaders in economically struggling communities are failed by public assistance and community welfare systems, some launch local campaigns to fill the gaps (Buzzanell, 1994, 2000; Naples, 2009). The organizations that carry out the work of such local initiatives are usually operated by like-minded, similarly situated community members. Their homophilous connections stem from material similarity (e.g., we are equally poor) and/or perceived socio-political solidarity (e.g., we must stop being silenced) (Ibarra, 1995; Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2004; Rogers, 2003; Turner & Oakes, 1989). Social change scholars contend that these close ties foster trust and enable individuals to leverage their shared experiences and empirical observations to demand change (Mohammed, 2001; Rogers, 2003; Smith, 2010).

Like-minded individuals, or homophilous peers, share information and encourage each other to adopt new attitudes and practices, including standing up to injustice. Empirical research suggests that homophilous ties “turbocharge” innovation adoption within close-knit peer groups (Mohammed, 2001; Hwang, forthcoming; Smith, 2010). These innovative behaviors become institutionalized when such social organizations “provid[e] a space for participants to performatively engage in sense making about their lived experiences . . . [and challenge] broader hegemonic cultural narratives” (Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal, & Sharma, 2007; see also Jones, 2010). Grassroots institutions then leverage this creative energy to push new political and social agendas forward (Pyles, 2009). But as time passes and the social landscape changes, these organizations often struggle to move beyond their homophilous foundations (Phelan, 1994; Pyles, 2009). Often, these organizations and social movements face difficulties transcending initial identity boundaries (Beltran, 2010; Phelan, 1994).

Recognizing the need to diversify, many identity-based organizations in the U.S. have stretched—or drifted—from their initial missions (see Greenberg, Herald, & Strasser, 2010; Lewis, 2011). Planned Parenthood now downplays the issue of reproductive choice and emphasizes its role as a “trusted health care provider” (Collins, 2011; Planned Parenthood, 2011). The National Council of La Raza, which began as a network of Mexican-American organizations in the Southwest, now connects diverse Latino community based organizations (CBOs) nationally (Campbell, 2005). The leaders of these organizations have transformed organizational narratives and stakeholder networks in response to changing socio-political environments (Beltran, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Lewis, 2011). But while their reflexivity might sometimes be admirable, it is not easy to emulate (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). To date, this sort of re-
organizing has eluded leaders of feminist NGOs in southern Rwanda, partly because they face greater uncertainties and risks than their U.S. counterparts.

Patriarchy and Colonialism: The Lingering Oppressions that Bind Rwandan Feminists

Even prior to the genocide, Rwandan women faced rampant gender discrimination and violence. Most women performed harder manual labor than men, but were denied services and goods (e.g., meat and beer) due to scarcities and stereotypes about their delicate condition (see Adekunle, 2007; Mahame, 2009; Newbury, 1993). Male-identified occupations, such as carpentry, were off limits to women (Ryan & Balocating, 2010; Umubyeyi, 2009) and educational opportunities were denied to girls at every level, especially university (Huggins & Randell, 2007). Gender discrimination and violence, including intimate partner violence, saturated the society prior to 1994 (Jefremovas, 1991; Nowrojee, 1996). According to one well-circulated proverb, a woman was not a real woman until she had been beaten (Nowrojee, 1996). The genocide only made things worse.

During the genocide, hundreds of thousands of Rwandan women were the victims of sexual violence (Newbury & Baldwin, 2000; Green, 2001-2002; Haddad, 2011; see also Jones, 2010). They were separated from friends and families and cut off from their community networks. Women's traditional support systems dissolved overnight, as academic observers documented in the late 1990s:

The war and the genocide shattered the dense local friendship networks and community solidarity that had traditionally provided solace and support for women. Family members and friends were killed or fled, and neighbors and former friends sometimes turned into enemies. What was left was not only social dislocation, but also [a] legacy of fear, insecurity, anger, and for some, a desire for revenge. Under these conditions, social trust dissolved, and many women came to feel isolated, alone, and abandoned. (Newbury & Baldwin, 2000, p. 3)

In the wake of the genocide, many women felt that they possessed neither the strength nor skills to rebuild their lives, families, or communities (Ryan & Balocating, 2010). Displaced, homeless, newly head of household, and possessing few marketable talents, many Rwandan women faced dire circumstances (Newbury & Baldwin, 2000).

Today, the situation has improved dramatically for a class of professional women living in the capital city, but the vast majority of Rwanda's women still endure harsh living conditions with few opportunities for upward mobility (see Ansoms, 2009; Reyntjens, 2011). With the highest percentage of female Parliamentarians in the world and progressive new laws, Rwanda is touted as a model for gendered progress in the Great Lakes region and beyond (Anderson, 2007; Kantengwa, 2010; Krook & O'Brien, 2010). But most of the benefits afforded by the new constitution, which mandates that 30%, or nine, Senate seats go to women, only reach a small minority of well-educated urban
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women (Beswick, 2010; Burnet, 2008; Kantengwa, 2010). Therefore, while overall attitudes toward women are slowly evolving, lingering patriarchal stereotypes and a rising rich-poor gap (Ansoms, 2009) are hindering women’s economic progress in the dense neighborhoods of the capital and the remote hillsides of the south.

Consequently, sexism and the challenges of living in a post-conflict, developing economy make it difficult for Rwandan women to sustain not only themselves but their grassroots organizations. Lingering discrimination propels most Rwandan women to engage in locally-based, lower-paid, agricultural occupations, even when their avocations lie elsewhere (Government of Rwanda, 2009). Farm women attempt to overcome individual challenges by banding together (Jose, 2001, 2009), but in a land-locked nation with a restricted currency,1 the best hope for upward mobility lies in developing partnerships with foreign organizations. However, given the history of colonial atrocities in Rwanda, local women and women’s organizations often find it difficult to engage in partnerships with outsiders.

Colonial rule and post-colonial interventions have divided the Rwandan people against each other for more than a century. Prior to colonization, Rwanda’s two main groups—Hutus and Tutsis—were mostly separated by occupation (i.e., agronomy vs. pastoralism), not by ethnic identity (Newbury & Newbury, 2000). Late nineteenth century German colonization transformed occupational markers into fixed identities, and simultaneously shifted power to a small and insular Tutsi royal court (Newbury & Newbury, 2000). By 1923, when Belgium was appointed Rwanda’s protector by the League of Nations, royal historians and colonial administrators had successfully divided the people against each other (Newbury & Newbury, 2000). In 1933-34, Belgium conducted a census and issued ethnic identity cards (Gourevitch, 1998). Following the nation’s independence, Hutu governments maintained the identity card system. In 1994, the cards enabled genocidaires to identify their targets (i.e., because Tutsis and Hutus often look the same, Gourevitch, 1998). Thus, colonization both institutionalized ethnic divisions and provided the tools for efficient extermination (Ryan, forthcoming). This historical legacy has left Rwandan community organizers and scholars critical of foreign partners (Ryan, forthcoming; Sentema, 2006, 2009).

The preference for local solutions and homophilous organizing is especially strong among rural women, arguably the most overlooked group during and after the genocide (Haddad, 2011; Newbury & Baldwin, 2000). As National University of Rwanda Public Administration and Genocide Studies professor Ezechiel Sentama (2006, 2009) has argued, outside influences have continually corrupted and undermined Rwandan NGOs. Even now, supposedly local NGOs, such as the URWEGO microcredit institution—a satellite of World Relief—have enacted Western priorities and squelched community dissent (Sentama, 2006, 2009). When truly local groups have accepted outside financial

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assistance or entered into foreign partnerships, they have almost always acceded to
terms set by outsiders (Sentama, 2006, 2009). Sadly, these conditional opportunities
have often been the only sources of new enterprise for struggling communities
(Sentama, 2009). So, even though local NGO leaders have witnessed the costs of
collaborating with outsiders, they realize that they must cultivate relationships with
them in order to sustain themselves.

This organizational quandary formed the basis for a qualitative field study of three
southern women's agronomy organizations. The study sought to determine how rural
women's organizations have evolved in recent years. More specifically, it focused on
whether local women's organizations in southern Rwanda have been able to leverage
government decentralization to bolster their organizational operations or not. The
study centered around four questions: What services do local women's organizations
provide? Who are the organizations' primary stakeholders? Have organizational
leaders formed ties with national elites and foreigners since the central government
announced its intent to decentralize in 2008 (see Rwanda Research Group, 2009)?
What are the challenges outside researchers face when trying to assess organizational
evolution in rural Rwanda?

Field Research Methodology

Organizational communication research and volunteer consulting were conducted
in the Huye district of Southern Rwanda in the summer of 2009. The research team
comprised faculty and students from the City University of New York, National
University of Rwanda (NUR), and The University of Texas at El Paso. The U.S.-based
researchers included a female Caucasian Assistant Professor traveling to Rwanda for
the second time, a Filipina-American program officer with M.P.A. and M.A. degrees
and extensive international travel and research experience, and a female African
American B.A. candidate traveling outside the U.S. for the first time. Four translators
assisted the team during the field work: a female, U.S.-based development professional
who was born and raised in Rwanda, and three male NUR undergraduates who had
relocated from Uganda to Rwanda after the genocide.

Activities included eight hours of interviews with key management personnel from
three rural agronomy associations; a review of organizational documents; numerous site
visits (e.g., to sunflower, corn, and coffee fields; to a weaving site; to a bottle distribution
facility); semi-structured and non-structured individual and focus group interviews
with nearly 50 association members (i.e., poor rural farmers, mostly women); creation
of organizational communication materials (e.g., English-language brochures); and
follow-up research and consulting meetings. The research team also participated in
three short-term communal labor projects in Huye (see Ryan, forthcoming).

Throughout the summer, the research team employed rigorous ethnographic research
practices in order to collect descriptive data on NGO missions and activities, construct
organizational histories, and gather recent data on the public relations and networking
strategies employed by organizational leaders. The researchers traveled via matatu
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(local vans) to meeting facilities, worksites, and social gatherings in order to experience the work of all three organizations in situ. Team members discussed our observations nightly, conversing across cultures and nationalities about the intercultural meanings and differences ascribed to information and events, kept journals and completed write-ups, produced communication products for the organizations and received critical feedback, and combined personal experiences with participant renderings to garner a better picture of organizational leaders’ and members’ knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The information reported in this article was derived from interview transcripts and notes (digital recordings) and field journals written by the research team while in Rwanda. Though organizational documents were thematically coded, those findings serve only as background information for this article.

After consulting with local officials, NGO leaders, and development experts to determine which local NGOs were considered important to local development efforts (i.e., in the wake of decentralization initiatives), three women’s agronomy associations were selected for observation. For the purpose of anonymity outside of Rwanda, they will be called: Muraho (i.e., “hello” in Kinyarwanda), Amakuru (i.e., “how are you?”), and Ni meza (i.e., “I’m fine”). The three women-led NGOs represent the diversity of feminist associations in Southern Rwanda in terms of size, organizational structure, and activities.

**Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni Meza:**
**From Humble Beginnings to Contemporary Struggles**

Founded in 1994, Muraho is one of the oldest female-led agronomy organizations in Southern Rwanda. It is also one of the largest, boasting nearly 4,000 members organized into 63 geographical groups working on dozens of projects. Members pay no dues, but contribute to their local group microcredit funds weekly. Founded in 1995, Amakuru is relatively the same age as Muraho. The organization is comprised of a few hundred members organized into eight geographical groups working on a few key projects. Amakuru recently changed its status to a cooperative; members are now required to purchase a share in Amakuru’s profits. Amakuru also maintains modest microcredit programs. Ni meza is one of the newest and smallest agricultural organizations in Southern Rwanda. Founded in 2008, Ni meza currently has 11 members. Unlike Muraho and Amakuru, which were both founded by genocide widows with little knowledge of agronomy science, Ni meza was launched by female agriculturalists, including a faculty member with a Ph.D. in biology. Ni meza members are more focused on training farmers and providing seeds than engaging in collective farming. Ni meza members pay no dues and the organization has not yet established microcredit or profit-sharing arrangements. Given that Ni meza is the closest to an extension agency (e.g., it provides support in the form of training and seeds), it might not need to develop such financial instruments to sustain its mission.

It is important to note that all three of these organizations are unique responses to the Rwandan genocide. They reflect women’s efforts to claim a new space for female leadership in rural Rwanda. As leaders of Muraho explained, such organizations might
have been unthinkable before 1994, as men typically led community organizations (see Ryan & Balocating, 2010). The genocide, widespread infrastructure destruction, and social upheaval have served as catalysts for women’s organizing from the mid 1990s to this day. However, some of the organizations formed as responses to these challenges might not have a future if they cannot gain buy-in from Rwandan elites and/or foreign partners.

Currently, Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza leaders focus on the needs of local women and children. Nearly all of their members are female and unite around their status as survivors of the genocide and/or marginalized members of Rwandan society. All three NGOs were fashioned by and for women, and have strayed little from their initial missions. For example, Muraho aims to “ensure the socio-economic rehabilitation of widows and orphans of the genocide.” Each year, the NGO provides job opportunities for nearly 3,000 women and children, many of whom have no income outside of their Muraho activities. Amakuru “promot[es] peaceful coexistence among Rwandan women of different ethnic origins and social categories.” Amakuru hosts community-building vocational and social support activities nearly every night of the week. Ni meza aims to train local farmers and support emerging female agronomists, who have far fewer opportunities than their male counterparts. Ni meza conducts quarterly farmer trainings, mostly led by female agronomy faculty and students.

Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza support dozens of development and reconciliation projects each year, but struggle to connect them to the larger development agenda set by national government officials and entrepreneurial elites residing in the capital. NGO leaders often cannot clearly articulate how much their projects contribute to the growth of the national economy, though they claim that organizational activities help sustain thousands of rural households. The NGO leaders’ collective inability to quantify their organization’s economic output, coupled with their localized, women-centered focus, distances them from most Rwandan officials. Throughout our interviews, organizational leaders recalled numerous examples of local assistance (e.g., district officials lent Ni meza start-up office space), but almost no instances of national government support. Loose ties with the Kagame administration, parliamentarians, and wealthy businessmen in the capital translated into a lack of support for CBO leaders in the rural south.
Gendered familial and community obligations further hindered their abilities to network and garner national recognition. Female NGO leaders manage more burdens and responsibilities than their male counterparts (e.g., caring for young children), according to the leaders of Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza. For Muraho’s leaders, workplace and family issues are only the tip of the iceberg. Early on, they had discovered that to “bring women out of isolation,” as one executive stated, they needed to “be involved in political structures,” so they began running for office and training members to do the same. By 2009, they boasted leadership of more than half of the local villages, or cells. But training the district’s first class of female politicians had been costly and exhausting. Organizational leaders wondered if their efforts would be sustainable, or as one leader put it, if they had “mentored enough, supported enough, trained enough...” women to ensure lasting change. And they also wondered if those women could effect change at a national level, as their local influence had yet to translate into a share of the billions of dollars in development aid that Rwanda receives (see African Development Bank, 2008; Reyntjens, 2011).

Acknowledging the struggle to garner political capital nationally, the leaders had also hoped to form partnerships with foreign organizations. However, to date, they have had little success in building bridges with outsiders. In fact, in each of the organizations studied, leaders failed to form lasting partnerships with foreign organizations. Muraho had received a one-time grant from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) several years ago to support two employees for a year and purchase a car. At this time, Muraho leaders feel that it is impossible to obtain additional international grants because their organization is too small and foreign donors do not understand what they do. After a number of interviews, it became clear that Muraho leaders harbor the belief that only homophilous members of the group (i.e., local widows and female farmers) could really buy into the organization’s mission.

In the case of Amakuru, similar beliefs and a lack of networking capacities mean that weavers have no market for their goods. Initially, organizational leaders stated that Amakuru weavers had not yet learned to make high-quality, exportable baskets, but site visits and interviews with the weavers suggested that the lack of multinational vendor networks, not the quality of the product, was likely the reason that no baskets had been sold during the year-long weaving program. Amakuru leaders now hope to join one of Rwanda’s largest coffee cooperatives (Maraba), but have yet to connect with the heterophilous leaders of that cooperative (i.e., male elites living in the capital) or international coffee buyers.

For Ni meza, outsider buy-in is simply not an immediate priority, so they are not yet affected by the same organizational dilemmas. However, in the cases of Muraho and Amakuru, homophilous attitudes propel leaders to believe that outsiders cannot or will
not understand their work. As our field research revealed, outsiders contribute to this distance when they bring their own barriers to intercultural exchanges.

**Ethical Dilemmas of Intercultural Exchange**

Intercultural exchanges are complex, paradoxical processes that require reflective sense-making (see Jacobson, 2006; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000). At the beginning of our field research, we commenced the reflective process by journaling about our intentions, aspirations, and apprehensions. We wrote about what we did/did not know, what we perceived/believed, and what we planned to do during the field research (e.g., “What will we do if our interview scripts are not yielding productive discussion...?”). One of the U.S.-based researchers who had unsuccessfully attempted to secure a Kinyarwanda tutor in New York City wrote about her language gaps: “I know that we have talented translators, but...[I] want to communicate with people in the language they are most comfortable speaking. Also, a part of me often gets frustrated when I can't understand what people are saying.” Another researcher admitted that she did not know enough about these particular organizations or understand “how [one is] connected to all the others.” She had many questions, including: “What will their offices look like? How many women will be there? What will they be doing? What will be the tone of our meeting [e.g., with Muraho]?” The youngest member of the team wrote forthrightly, “I really don't know what to expect and I'm still processing being here in Rwanda.” The journal exercise enabled the team to have frank discussions about the limits of its collective understanding both before the first meeting and in subsequent evening feedback sessions.

The team’s journals also clearly reflected attitudinal barriers ranging from intercultural uncertainty to prejudice that ultimately inhibited our interactions with the organizations. As in most intercultural exchanges, members of the research team were fearful about how the local women would receive them. “If we are working with the women without [our female translator], will the women trust us?” wondered one member of the team. She brainstormed ways to establish rapport: “Can we attend social events with the women, like an ubusubane (i.e., community) meal, or something similar?” Accompanying this uncertainty, some members of the team expressed a desire to help women that they perceived as less skilled and able. One journal suggested that poor rural women might not be able to assess their own capacities and limitations:

> I’m not sure ... if the women even know what sort of things they need. Because when you go without help or certain skills ... you're not aware of what you’re missing out on. At least I tend to think of it that way. I mean, these women are from the countryside after all. Even still, I do hope that we are able to figure something out and help these women even if in a small way.

Another journal expressed a desire to “contribute something positive by the end,” implying a deficit-based view of the NGOs prior to the first encounter with them. Though the foreign members of the team had completed extensive background research on Rwanda’s past and current neo-colonization, none saw ourselves participating
in that process, partly because we had been invited to help the women's groups by a Rwandan member of the diaspora. We failed to realize that the local leaders had not initiated the request, nor did they necessarily desire organizational communication consultation from outsiders.

The team's introduction to the women's agronomy groups was facilitated by a U.S.-based Rwandan development professional who aimed to assist NGOs in her home district. Throughout 2008-2009, she was in the process of creating an umbrella NGO that would provide technical assistance and training to women's groups in southern Rwanda. She indicated months prior to the research trip that most women's agronomy associations were struggling. Her assessment framed our initial impressions of the NGO leaders, which caused us to be less open to the reality of their situation and needs. We felt charged to help the leaders remedy their praxis gaps. Then, problematic interactions, such as misunderstandings about volunteer consulting deliverables (e.g., website content versus a full website launch), further distanced us from local feminist leaders.

By the time we returned home, we admitted that we had not reached agreement about our role—if any—in community building in rural Rwanda (see Dempsey, 2010a). We noted that we should have invested more time in breaking down intercultural barriers, and that collaborative meaning-making would have been ideal. This would have required extensive relationship-building with local leaders. Given Rwanda's colonial past and the prominent influence of ex-patriot development professionals, it is difficult for local leaders to trust outsiders, even when everyone involved could benefit from the exchange.

Consequently, given the resources needed to build genuine intercultural relationships as well as the ethical dilemmas inherent in the process of intercultural exchange, few outsiders are willing or able to adequately invest in the process. Unfortunately, the major burden of bridging these divides then falls on local NGO leaders. This further inhibits small, local, feminist organizations from receiving the support needed for long-term sustainability.

**Ethical Dilemmas of Organizational Sustainability**

In order to ensure organizational sustainability, it is increasingly clear that local leaders must adapt their communication strategies to development partners' changing priorities (see USAID-Rwanda, 2011). They must also alter their behaviors to match external consultants' expectations, and pursue outcomes that align with national development priorities. Bending to meet the expectations of outsiders will require organizational changes ranging from translation of key documents to English, to incorporation of international development community jargon in strategic plans, to adoption of nuanced strategies for soliciting donations in accordance with other cultures' norms for discussing money. Aligning local projects with national development priorities will necessitate concentrating more on visible infrastructure projects (e.g., roads) as opposed to largely unseen social support projects (e.g., microloans to cover funeral expenses).
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To date, most local leaders and organizations have failed to achieve such transformations. As our field research demonstrated, older feminist organizations often cling to their initial identity-based missions and memberships. Their leaders begin meetings with potential foreign partners (e.g., our team) by sharing the burdens of rural widowhood. They connect these stories to current projects involving genocide orphans and local women. Though these narratives resonate with sympathizers, they do not align with national development priorities, including reducing reliance on subsistence-based agriculture (see Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2007; Rwanda Research Group, 2008, 2009), or elites’ expectations that NGO leaders will increase entrepreneurship in Rwanda (see Dempsey, 2010b; Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2007). Like many feminist organizations focusing on the localized needs of their constituents, the studied NGOs do not obviously contribute much to the national gross domestic product (GDP) or the agendas of national or international elites. As noted, these disconnects further complicate the efforts of local NGO leaders to cultivate larger audiences and support networks.

Aligning local projects with national development priorities will necessitate concentrating more on visible infrastructure projects (e.g., roads) as opposed to largely unseen social support projects (e.g., microloans to cover funeral expenses).

However, does this lack of connection with diverse individuals and organizations mean that leaders should abandon their current strategies? Should Muraho stop training local politicians? Should Amakuru abandon social activities and pursue only revenue-generating ventures? Should Ni meza focus on training the male agronomists who are much likelier to gain top positions? And should the leaders of all three organizations risk losing their bases of support as they compete for the attention of male elites and outsiders? These are the pragmatic and ethical questions facing leaders of women’s agronomy groups in rural Rwanda as they strive for organizational sustainability.

Like CBOs everywhere, Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza must effectively serve their local constituents while simultaneously building a broad base of support. These NGOs provide valuable support for vulnerable rural farmers, particularly women. As Rwanda’s national government and foreign development partners have invested in other groups and priorities (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2007), the services offered by Muraho, Ni meza, and Amakuru have become increasingly important to the local community. Still, NGO leaders have realized that local needs do not necessarily translate into national and international support. In fact, national elites and development partners often seem to adopt strategic visions at odds with local realities, for instance moving rapidly toward a service-driven economy when most Rwandans have inadequate access to education. So, the NGO leaders must adapt to the new rhetorics of progress without losing sight of their missions. Though they need not abandon farmers, women, or social reconstruction projects, they need to reframe their organizations as vital contributors to the sort of national progress envisioned by elites.
and outsiders. What might this sort of organizational reframing look like for these organizations?

As Rwanda attempts to transition to a service-sector economy (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2007), these local NGOs will need to embrace entrepreneurial rhetoric. For instance, Muraho leaders will want to downplay their farmers’ sunflower yields, and emphasize the entrepreneurial skills they are developing. Similarly, as the United Nations pushes for universal primary school completion globally, Amakuru leaders will need to emphasize how their weaving project enables women to pay their children’s school fees. And as the Kagame administration admonishes Rwandans for their donor aid dependency, Ni meza leaders will want to tout their efforts to bolster farmers’ self-sufficiency through crop diversification. By adopting elite-focused public relations strategies, these organizations will better appeal to diverse national and international stakeholders.

Going forward, the leaders of Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza will need to oversee the evolution of their organizations while remaining true to their clients and local constituents. In a society in which women are undervalued and local concerns are seen as backward, these leaders will need to project an image of masculine progress (e.g., competitive, win-lose), while providing safeguards for the rural women who rarely figure into the development agenda. This strategy presents both pragmatic and ethical challenges familiar to NGOs serving marginalized populations in diverse communities around the globe. NGO leaders must seemingly unmake their community ties in order to continue serving those who helped found their organizations. The strategy requires careful control over conflicting messages aimed at differently-situated constituencies, as well as a willingness to manage organizational double-speak. This sort of political gaming was hardly what community organizers had in mind when they created Muraho, Amakuru, and Ni meza.

Conclusion

Female agronomy associations in rural Rwanda are assisting thousands of local women and children in gaining valuable opportunities, such as vocational training. Despite their successes, the accomplishments of such NGOs are often known only to local residents and have little resonance with national leaders and those in charge of development funds. Because their stories go largely untold, rural agronomy associations face great obstacles in securing development assistance and economic partnerships. As a result,
their leaders have to make unenviable decisions, like charging membership fees to the poorest of the poor.

Interviews, focus groups, and site visits with the leaders and members of rural female agronomy associations in southern Rwanda revealed the homophilous attitudes and practices preventing them from reaching their goals. In some ways, the challenges of organizational change in rural Rwanda are similar to those faced by feminist organizations in the United States. However, although U.S.-based NGO leaders face similar attitudinal aversions to new ways of doing things (DeWine, 2001; Keyton, 2005), their reluctance stems from different cultural, economic, historical, political, and social baggage than that observed in rural southern Rwanda. Identity-based organizing in the U.S. responds to socio-political marginalization, but exists within a society that affords far more opportunities for upward mobility or at least, survival. Alternatively, the consequences of organizational stagnation and decline are greater in resource-poor rural Rwanda.

Operating in a land-locked country with a developing economy, Rwandan feminist leaders need foreign markets and elite partners to sustain their operations. But they also need to maintain the safe havens that saw them through their darkest hours. Because Rwandan women found each other when hope seemed lost, it is more difficult for them to evolve their organizational commitments and strategies to meet the expectations and desires of Rwandan men or foreigners. The ethical dilemmas facing local feminist leaders are complex and agonizing. The Rwandan case suggests that we have not yet resolved the dilemmas of post-identity organizing in economically and socially struggling communities. It also raises the question: Is our time best spent helping local feminists—in the U.S., Rwanda, and elsewhere—to evolve their practices, or advocating for systems of development that recognize the value of local efforts?

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Notes

1 Rwandan francs are only available in Rwanda (i.e., in contrast to United Kingdom pounds, which can be bought and sold outside the country). To keep the economy growing and inflation low, the country must garner foreign investment and aid.

2 Spellings for these words are taken from Odette Nyiramongi’s book Ikinyarwanda—The Language of Rwanda: Language Guide for Travelers [self-published in 2009]. In Nyiramongi’s book, the words appear accented for better pronunciation as: “Murâho,” “Amakuru,” and “Ni mézâ” (p. 14). It is worth noting that “Murâho” is a formal hello, of the sort exchanged by foreigners and Rwandans.

3 As documented in the organization’s strategic plan, created by a member of the diaspora as her M.P.A. capstone (at Baruch College, City University of New York).

4 Translated from Amakuru’s official association document which reads, “Promouvoir
Post-identity Organizing

la coexistence pacifique entre les femmes rwandaises d'origine ethnique et de catégories sociales différentes . . . “

Recently, Duhozanye has gained some additional international exposure. See Karoline Frogner’s documentary, Duhozanye: A Rwandan village of widows (2011).

References


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