

**Diakonia Eastern and Southern African Regional Office**

**An institutional assessment report for Gender Links**

**By Projects & Allied Consultants Limited**

## **OVERVIEW**

Gender Links has one of the most institutionalized approaches to running and developing an organization. It has well documented policies for human resource management and administrative decision making that are reviewed on a regular basis.

Members of staff have opportunities to participate in regular policy reviews and the organization uses well lessons from such reviews to inform its future planning.

Gender Links' monitoring and evaluation system is elaborate and detailed, yet dutifully implemented by staff members in a dynamic manner that actually helps the organization discern lessons from its activities to improve the institution, its programmes and external relations.

The success of Gender Links depends to a large degree on its passionate, focused and dynamic Executive Director Ms. Colleen Lowe. In this strength however lies the trap that could render GL's sustainability vulnerable. At an executive level, too much relies and depends on the Executive Director. There doesn't appear to be a deliberate plan in place to share executive responsibilities and prepare for institutionalized succession. The person who acts in the position of deputy Executive Director for GL is not based at the organization's secretariat, and not even in South Africa. She has been assigned to establish a programme in another country, a responsibility that should ordinarily belong to a country-specific programme officer or manager. There is an undesirable gap between the executive level of GL and the rest of the organization's staff in relation to administrative and programme leadership and management functions.

### **Organizational Identity**

Gender Links is a Southern African non-governmental organization (NGO) that primarily promotes gender equality in and through the mass media, but which also conducts significant and high level policy work in area of Gender and Governance (women in politics and related issues) and campaigning in the area of Gender Justice (violence against women and children).

The current Director of GL Ms. Colleen Lowe Morna and a number of board members established GL in 2001. GL has been developed from initial volunteer efforts into an asset owning civil society organization. It has evidently achieved tremendous institutional growth and development as a result of focused dedication and a disciplined institutionalized approach.

GL has successfully given expression to its vision and mission statements by establishing and joining networks to cascade its programmes into the countries of the SADC and by developing strategic partnerships with key regional and national media NGO's and national and intergovernmental

agencies. The organization has clearly discernable and comprehensive strategic approaches that are linked to its vision and mission. There is a documented history of participatory development of the organization's strategies, with evidence of involvement of different stakeholders. These approaches clearly take HIV/AIDS and gender into consideration in a proactive manner.

## **Organizational Structure**

Gender Links has a functional secretariat headed by an Executive Director. It has a regional Board of Directors (board members resident in different Southern Africa countries) that exercises oversight on the secretariat. Duties and responsibilities are allocated according to the structure and every member of staff has a clear job description stating responsibilities and the reporting lines.

There is evidence of active board performance of its oversight responsibilities in form minutes of regular board meetings. At the executive level however, there appears to be a gap that could expose the organization to institutional vulnerability. An organization that has achieved tremendous growth and development in most of its institutional and programmatic functions ought to have an executive arrangement that matches such growth and development. Most cannot and must not seem to depend and rely on the Executive Director. The Executive Director provides excellent leadership, but she, with the support of the board, must identify and build other organizational leaders to work with her at the executive level. The return of the deputy director, after a period of secondment to GEMSA, and sharpening the focus of this post to director of programmes is a welcome and necessary development. It is designed to free the ED to undertake the more strategic functions of the organisation.

## **Governance**

The executive leadership of GL advocates for and pays specific attention to fair and transparent routines and practices. The monitoring and evaluation system and practices provide opportunities for decision-makers to be held accountable for the decisions they make. There are clear formal systems for decision making that involve broad participation and actively cater for inclusion, ensuring that there is no exclusion on account of sex, ethnic or religious affiliation or any other basis.

The organization has a documented grievance handling procedure that provides for handling of work-related conflicts through mediation.

The Gender Link board is composed of two male and eight female members, tilting its membership in favour of women due to the singular thematic focus of the organization. The board is an independent governing body with its roles and responsibilities being segregated from the management roles. There is

evidence that it plays an active oversight role and gives policy direction to the organization. The board meets annually and approves each two-year strategic plan of GL, as well as the annual work plan for the next year. The board's documentation of the meetings is very detailed and well maintained for reference.

GL conducts its fundraising on the basis of each two year plan. Full board meetings approve its annual audited financial accounts. These meetings take place during the month of March each year in order to dovetail with the financial year of GL. The board appoints a 4-person Executive Committee that meets every three months and oversees and supports the work of the executive director and the secretariat on a more regular basis on behalf of the board. The Executive Committee for example reviews GL's quarterly statements of accounts and attends to any matters that arise between board meetings.

### **Design and implementation of programmes and activities**

Gender Links has a current strategic plan with documented annual plans that are drawn from the strategic plan. Members of the board and staff are all actively involved in both strategic and annual work planning. The strategic plan defines the expected results and provides a functional framework for implementation and monitoring of activities as results can easily be traced back to the plans. GL's planning actively takes into account issues of people living with HIV/AIDs and gender.

A two year strategic plan period for an organization that has attained GL's level of development is too brief when medium term and long term results are considered. Such a brief strategic plan period tends to confine organizations to looking at the success of their activities and short term results as their ultimate measure of results.

GL has a very comprehensive system and tools for, and a credible organizational culture of regular follow-up of activities, and applies the necessary resources to monitoring and evaluation that enables it to objectively compare quality and quantity of the results against plans. The findings and lessons from the monitoring and evaluation processes are regularly discussed and incorporated into future plans. Such regular practical use of monitoring and evaluation tools provides opportunities for their review and update.

The monitoring and evaluation system, tools and practices generate a tremendous amount of information. GL has demonstrable capacity to systematically document all the important information and store it in a retrievable manner from which the organization uses to generate progress and other reports. Its reporting cycle is therefore on time and in accordance with its partners' reporting requirements.

The choice of programmes and activities for GL are relevant to its stated vision and mission. This alignment is consciously discussed during GL's strategic and annual work planning in order for it to be evident to all those involved. There is flexibility that allows for adjustment in planned activities in cases of significant change during the implementation period.

The organization's working methods correspond to its vision and objectives and they are reflected in the policy documents. Overall, GL has adopted participatory approaches that have heavily inbuilt continuous organizational learning for institutional improvement. These approaches also take gender and HIV/AIDS into consideration.

The rapid growth in GL has seen it take on a lot of projects and activities that pose the danger of overrunning its human resource capacity, and overall institutional capacity. It is advisable that GL now adopts more long term strategic planning in order to concentrate effort on maximizing outcomes and impact on the areas it has now developed programming capacity.

### **Skills in relation to activities**

GL has a documented recruitment policy that lays emphasis on equal opportunities and compliance with the South African Employment Equity Act and Labour Relations Act. The policy commits the organization to fair recruitment and selection practices on grounds of race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language and birth.

All positions in the organization have an operational job description and relevant qualifications, skills and experiences. The assessment established that GL deliberately and regularly updates the knowledge and skills of its staff through workshops and refresher courses.

There is demonstrable evidence that GL has adopted a learning organization's approach. It emphasizes competency based training, links performance management to staff recruitment, training and development, and pays attention to non-core staff personal development needs like mentoring, coaching, on-the-job learning and job rotation. There is also a consistent culture of induction for new staff, interns and volunteers that helps them to fit into the organizational culture.

There exists a cordial relationship between the team leadership/management and staff. Regular staff meetings and activity reporting and discussions provide opportunities for interaction that helps to build a team whose members are supportive of each other. The presence of an objective grievances handling procedure also contributes to the building of trust and confidence in the staff.

The organization has an HIV/AIDS workplace policy that ensures those infected are not discriminated, victimized and/or harassed. The policy includes key point areas such as voluntary testing, confidentiality, awareness raising and education, treatment, care and support, and occupational and accidental exposure.

### **Systems of financing and administration**

Gender Links has a written financial management policy that sets the minimum standards and guidelines for financial management in the organization. GL's financial management policy makes clear provisions for key areas such as financial responsibility and segregation of duties, accounts and Audits, reserve funds, budgets, budget lines and expenses, revenue and interest received, purchasing, procurement and management of assets, outsourcing and contracting, cash receipts and Cash requisitions and reconciliations. It is a comprehensive and progressive policy that provides an enabling framework for establishing and sustaining financial resource management discipline in the organization.

As a non-profit agency, GL receives the bulk of its funding from external donors, particularly bilateral donors and foundations. Much of this funding though is in the form of short term project funding. This approach to funding obviously puts a strain on the resource needs of building and sustaining an institution like GL as the priority focus of the funds is programme activities at the expense of long-term strategic planning and institutional development. Some of GL's donors however do designate a small percentage of their funding to go towards institutional development.

In order to broaden its resource base and strengthen its financial position GL is shifting from predominantly project funding to multi-year funding that covers programmes as well as core institutional support like staff, human resource management processes, equipment and facilities, and is aligned to the organization's financial year. GL is also seeking to maximize internally generated resources through undertaking of relevant consultancy work from time to time, maximizing on interest, VAT returns and sale of publications.

The organization has an administrative procedures and management policy backed by well established management systems and routines in all areas. The systems are clear and transparent with administrative decisions being made in an open and participatory manner. There is an effective mechanism for follow-ups on administrative issues raised in different forums and a smooth flow of communication in all ways in the organization

### **Relations with target group(s)**

The assessment did not include interaction with the organization's target groups and partners. The assessment team can however offer a comment on this based on review of secondary literature at the organization.

GL has a well defined target group. An assessment of the organization's comprehensive annual reports and a sample of activity reports reveals that the relationship between the organization and its primary constituency is characterized by free interaction and expression. The organization enjoys the trust of its target groups as evidenced by their contributions to reports and processes and their high level and very visible participation in the organization's various activities.

The assessment established that GL does involve a credible representation of its target groups in its institutional processes like planning, monitoring, evaluation and reviews.

### **Working environment**

The organization has a deliberate strategy for communicating about itself and its work through annual reports, magazines, Gender and Media Diversity journal, local government gender action plan manuals and other media outlets. It is a well known player within its field confirmed by its participation in public thematic discussions and contributions in different forums. GL regularly disseminates information and shares insights from its work with other interested parties. It also actively participates in different gender and women's leadership networks and is involved in joint network activities on an ongoing basis. Through participation in such network activities, GL is able to acquire new information, work methods and skills which it puts to good use in improving its organizational learning.

### **Sustainability**

Gender Links has an overall sustainability strategy that involves target groups in needs assessment and project identification, design and development, monitoring and evaluation. The information gotten from the monitoring results is used to inform strategy and this helps to monitor and support operationalization of amended and new policies. GL has very well demonstrated detailed knowledge of its constituency, and maintains active relations with the constituency, endearing itself to the constituency's investment in the organization in form of strategic leadership, peer support, external and internal relationship building, and resource mobilization.

The organization is building a fixed asset base in order to cut down on its institutional expenditure and broaden its sustainable resource base. The sustainability strategy referred to here provides the basis for and supports the organization's sustainability initiatives.

### **Outstanding Strengths**

- GL owns the building that houses its secretariat and offices in Johannesburg. It includes adequate space for not-so-large workshops and training events. This has helped a lot in saving costs for the organization
- The Executive Director of GL has a very passionate interest in the development of the organization and its business. The ED provides firm, dedicated and consistent leadership on all organizational and programmatic development principles and processes as identified during the assessment exercise, and insists on maintenance of the set standards by all staff members
- The organization's board membership is quite diverse and strong enough to play its oversight and policy guidance roles effectively. It is clear that the board takes institutional good governance seriously and gives priority to strong oversight over financial management, quality of programmes and good internal policies, systems and practices.
- The staff members are self driven and focused with a clear vision and clarity on roles and tasks
- GL has a regional geopolitical focus with a presence in 13 SADC countries
- The quality and standards of training provided by GL, as well as the trainers they use, are regarded highly amongst its peers in the civil society
- GL produces a lot of research based new knowledge that makes a substantive contribution to the field of media and gender studies in the SADC region
- GL annual plans include targets and indicators for both quantitative outputs and for qualitative outcomes
- GL's approach to programmes is exceptionally productive and extremely quick on implementation
- Members of GL's board are politically well connected at a regional and international level and the organization and enjoys strong international linkages
- The organization has a very systematic approach to its business, thanks to its Executive Director

### **Main Weaknesses**

- Work overload: there is an apparent danger that GL is taking on too much without the requisite human resource capacity to handle such a work portfolio
- GL does not seem to have worked much with community media in the region; it has focused on the mainstream media
- The board needs to pay more attention to networking and partner relationships with other organizations
- The administration of so many projects increases the administrative costs of GL thus making financial sustainability difficult

### **Recommendations**

1. GL should match strive to match its programme demands with human resource capacity to avoid work overload and possibilities of staff burn-out
2. GL should share its monitoring and evaluation approaches and experience with other DIAKONIA ESARO partners
3. Diakonia should work on agreeing with other donors on joint institutional assessments and reviews of a grantee like GL