

# The Zimbabwe Alliance – a donor's perspective

Cynthia Ryan

**In January 2009, when my colleague Kumi Naidoo went on a 21-day hunger strike in solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe, who were starving because of the whims of their political leadership, I wanted to lend my support. As the head of a foundation that focuses internationally on human rights and peace and security, I arranged for a small grant to the coalition organizing these efforts, but I wanted to do more. This led to hosting the visit of Nomboniso Gasa to the US, as Briggs Bomba describes in his article. As he goes on to remark, it stimulated both of us to begin thinking about the relative lack of donor interest in civil society in Zimbabwe.**



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Over the last two years we have had both setbacks and successes, but if someone were to ask was the collaboration worth it, the answer would be a resounding yes. The positives for the Schooner Foundation have been both practical and philosophical. As a small, family, US-based foundation we had neither the staff to do the due diligence required to understand the complexities of the ever-changing situation on the ground, nor the means to find the best local organizations doing the work, nor the mechanism to fund groups not registered as US 501(c)(3)s. The various partners in the Alliance would solve these issues for us, but, more

importantly, our participation would greatly leverage our commitment of \$50,000 a year for three years.

However, there are wonderful intermediary groups that we could probably have found to facilitate this. For us the heart of the Alliance was a chance to be part of a collaboration that was consciously and deliberately trying, if not to erase, at least to minimize the power dynamic between large and small funders, donors and NGOs, western voices and those from Africa. We wanted to put into practice our belief in giving equal voice to all, trusting and respecting other points of view, and working as a group to find consensus on strategies and methodologies.

As funders we often ask grantees to collaborate but we don't often tackle the challenges ourselves. But it's important that we should do so. The time commitment is considerable, especially at the beginning. The delegation of responsibilities is often not evenly distributed, with the bulk of the work falling to a few. We learned that it was necessary to have a paid staff person managing logistics and communications, and being the link between different partners. We learned a difficult lesson when a crisis at one of the founding partner organizations affected several other members.

But a collaboration adds great value in addition to the actual cash grants. The benefit of having different actors with their own perspectives sharing ideas, tactics and strategies balances out the sometimes difficult process of letting go of total control over how the money will be spent. In that process, trust and respect for others with different viewpoints is fostered and developed. @

## POSTSCRIPT FROM CYNTHIA RYAN, ZIMBABWE, 21 JANUARY

I have been in Zimbabwe now for five days in both Harare and Bulawayo. Nothing replaces experience on the ground. I have been able to learn an enormous amount in a short period of time that I can now share with other members of the Alliance and the broader donor community such as members of the African Grantmakers Affinity Group and International Human Rights Funders Group.

There is a vibrant and active civil society in Zimbabwe but there are gaps and immediate needs. We must seek out ways to encourage women to participate more fully in civil society by supporting women-led organizations and those that focus on gender and women's empowerment. There is a clear need for resources that go beyond the financial that the Alliance can and should address: capacity building,

IT training, convening dialogues between different sectors and communities, fundraising workshops, policy and economic analysis to be used for advocacy, dissemination of information. These are just some of the areas we have identified where we can do more than help individual organizations but instead raise the tide for all boats and help the broader movement achieve its goals.

Not only has my trip generated many new ideas, it has also enabled Briggs and me to tell the community about the Zimbabwe Alliance, put faces to the names, and show our solidarity in the struggle. We are actively forming a community and that is a very fulfilling experience for me both as a funder and as a global citizen. Not only is there power in numbers; there is peace in numbers.