

Reflection on STAR-Ghana's journey towards an independent national Trust

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As STAR-Ghana moves toward the launch of a new STAR-Ghana Public Trust, it is striking how little awareness there is – in Ghana and elsewhere – of its remarkable journey towards independence. STAR-Ghana is certainly well regarded in Ghanaian development circles as a high-performing donor grant-making facility working to advance transformative, inclusive social change by strengthening civil society, accountability and active citizenship. Established in 2011, its core donors are the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union and Danida (Danish Development Cooperation). Currently, STAR-Ghana is managed by a Ghanaian-led Steering Committee (SC) and Programme Management Team (PMT) in partnership with an international consortium led by Christian Aid with Social Development Direct, Humentum, the Overseas Development Institute, and Nkum Associates. STAR-Ghana builds on successful predecessor programmes, including the Ghana Research and Advocacy Programme (G-RAP), 2005-2011; Kasa, 2008-2010; the Rights and Voice Initiative (RAVI), 2004-2010; and the Civil Society Governance Fund (CSGF), 2004-2010.

STAR-Ghana has an enviable record of achievement and delivery. In its first phase (2011-2015), it delivered a strategic grant-making programme that worked with a wide range of civil society organisations and Ghana's Parliament. An end-of-programme assessment by funders gave STAR-Ghana a score of 'A+'. In the current phase of the programme (2015-2020), STAR-Ghana was again rated 'A+' in the 2017 donor review. It may be argued that some of this success was owed to STAR-Ghana's low-profile, 'honest broker' approach that has put the spotlight on civil society partners more than on STAR-Ghana itself. However, the time is now right to shine a light on STAR-Ghana's bold efforts to create a Ghanaian-owned and led national centre for civil society, active citizenship and philanthropy.

In recent years, there has been considerable growth among indigenous African civil society institutions working on issues of transparency, accountability and social justice. At the same time, there has been a slow but steady expansion among indigenous grant-makers, foundations and philanthropy support organisations. Some of the notable institutions that have emerged over the recent past include the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), major 'think tank' organisations (especially well-represented in Ghana), the Southern Africa Trust, TrustAfrica, the African Women's Development Fund, the Foundation for Civil Society (Tanzania), the Kenya Community Development Foundation, the Graça Machel Trust, the Social Justice Initiative in South Africa, the African Philanthropy Network and others. This organisational growth reflects a widespread aspiration to develop home-grown solutions to African development and governance issues. Nonetheless, much of Africa's new civil society and social change infrastructure does not derive its funding from African sources – and many of its institutions remain dependent on international donors. In West Africa, the civil society sector is extensive but indigenous social change grant-makers, foundations and philanthropic institutions are thin on the ground.

In this context, the launch of STAR-Ghana as an independent national Trust is a landmark event. At the end of Phase 1 of the programme, STAR-Ghana's locally-led Steering Committee (SC) and Funders Committee (representing its core donors) engaged in a reflection, lesson-learning and design process to shape the next phase of the programme. The process involved consultations with partners and stakeholders, as well as learning journeys to organisations in the Global South that have transitioned, with donor support, into a nationally-owned trust or foundation (the Foundation for Civil Society in Tanzania and the Manusher Jonno Foundation in Bangladesh). This reflection process found strong evidence of leadership gaps, opportunities and challenges that STAR-Ghana is well-placed to address, particularly:

- The necessity to look ‘beyond aid’ and move away from over-dependence on waning official development assistance by establishing locally-owned institutional platforms that can mobilise new domestic and international resources to sustain citizen-based social change initiatives;
- The opportunity to nurture a robust, more resilient civil society and citizen sector, providing strategic and pro-active support that includes but goes beyond grant-making;
- The need to put gender equality and social inclusion firmly on Ghana’s policy agenda, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the ‘Leave No One Behind’ agenda;
- The opportunity presented by Ghana’s economic and democratic gains to grow local resource mobilisation and private philanthropic support for active citizenship work;
- The challenge to build a stronger enabling environment (legislative, tax and policy) for civil society, active citizenship and philanthropy;
- The need to shift civil society mind sets and catalyse collective action around partnerships, resource mobilisation and sustainability;
- The opportunity to forge new forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration around salient change issues that can capture the energy and imagination of citizens.

Inspired by these findings, the design framework for Phase 2 of the programme proposed the incubation of a new, independent STAR-Ghana and was successful in mobilising a substantial further five-year funding commitment from core donors. Central to the vision for this phase of STAR-Ghana are two innovative refinements of its mission:

- The **3C’s and Learning approach (3C&L)** – the **Convenor, Catalyst, Coordinator and Learning** mantra encapsulating the dynamic, value-added role beyond grant-making that defines the new STAR-Ghana;
- A commitment to put **Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)** at the heart of everything STAR-Ghana does.

Since the commencement of STAR-Ghana Phase 2 in October 2015, there has been a systematic investment of time and effort to lay the groundwork for the launch of an independent STAR-Ghana, in tandem with a very active civil society partnership programme (focused on critical themes like inclusive elections, gender and inclusion, media, anti-corruption and local governance). Consistent with STAR-Ghana’s bold commitment to transparency and ‘co-creation,’ the SC has undertaken a comprehensive series of national stakeholder consultations. The aim was to solicit the views of diverse stakeholders on the nature and design of STAR-Ghana as an independent national entity, ensuring buy-in and broad national ownership of that entity. About 700 leaders and activists were directly consulted (with an additional 1,500 indirectly canvassed) about various institutional models that had already been painstakingly developed by the SC, in collaboration with the PMT, Consortium and funders. Significantly, the consultation was not confined to historic partners (‘the usual suspects’). It reached out to a wider range of actors from civil society, government, business, academia and the world of social entrepreneurship.

A strong consensus emerged from these consultations endorsing the establishment of an independent STAR-Ghana Public Trust as **a national centre for active citizenship, civil society and philanthropy**. A wide majority of civil society stakeholders consulted recognise that STAR-Ghana has already become much more than just a grant-maker. There is a broad consensus about the relevance of the **3C&L mission**. Stakeholders have confirmed that STAR-Ghana’s vision, mission and programme will fill critical gaps in Ghana’s civil society space, adding value to the work of civil society organisations (CSOs). Civil society stakeholders welcome STAR-Ghana’s mission-driven commitment to grow the resource base for CSOs and to strengthen **social change philanthropy** in Ghana. As a result, STAR-Ghana is perceived by CSO leaders more as an ally than as a competitor.

Concurrently, STAR-Ghana has pioneered an **‘embedded’ political economy analysis (PEA)** approach that generates a continuous analysis of the fast-changing Ghanaian context. It has also

nurtured and convened ***‘communities of practice and learning’*** with partners and stakeholders to harvest learning from the programme and apply them in the spirit of ***‘adaptive programming.’*** Intensive efforts have been devoted to the development of the policies, strategies, systems, human resources and governance structures required to deliver an effective Public Trust. In August 2018, a Board of Trustees will be appointed through a rigorous and open process.

What are some of the most striking lessons from STAR-Ghana’s journey thus far?

- The considerable investment of time in institutional modelling and stakeholder dialogue has paid dividends in trust-building, legitimation and a more resilient design for the new Trust (the goal of ‘co-creation’ has proved to be possible);
- The time is right for a larger vision of citizen-driven development and change, that transcends the ‘NGOism’ of the past;
- To play an enhanced role as an honest broker, a trusted convenor and a ‘driver of change,’ STAR-Ghana needs an independent institutional platform that can provide high quality local leadership, capacity and support beyond the life of current donor funding;
- On-going contextual analysis and consultations have confirmed that that STAR-Ghana is uniquely well positioned to deliver on its 3C&L mission – and Ghanaians are ready for the new Trust;
- Complex North-South partnerships (like the STAR-Ghana collaboration between the SC, PMT, Consortium and core donors) can work very effectively to effect institutional transformation – and a shift of power to the South – if based on shared values, common purpose, ‘smart’ deployment of complementary skills and resources, and systematic trust-building;
- The pursuit of sustainable income streams for STAR-Ghana and civil society more generally, that tap into the considerable resources of Ghana’s growing economy, remains the biggest challenge for the future;
- Stakeholder dialogue confirms that STAR-Ghana’s success in its sustainability goals is directly linked to its collaborative leadership role in strengthening the enabling environment for active citizenship and philanthropy in Ghana.

Without doubt, the emergence of STAR-Ghana as an independent Trust is a major change in the landscape for active citizenship, civil society and philanthropy in Ghana and Africa as a whole. It has become an urgent priority to share and celebrate that story widely, moving STAR-Ghana’s profile up several notches and making common cause with peer institutions and networks that are transforming the space for citizen-driven change across the continent.