



# Reflections on the Foundation's journey:

## LESSONS LEARNED



## BACKGROUND

In just Five years since its formal launch in November 2018, STAR-Ghana Foundation has successfully negotiated the path from a donor programme and funding mechanism to a Ghanaian-owned and led national centre for active citizenship, civil society and philanthropy. This transition is a first of its kind in Ghana and a relatively rare phenomenon in African development practice. The story of how the Foundation made this difficult transition is thus a unique one, offering valuable lessons to other civil society actors and start-ups.

Adam notes that Ghanaians are quick to donate to causes they can see, for example the construction of a mosque or the displacement of communities caused by flooding. But when it comes to advocacy causes such as child marriage or the need to reintegrate alleged 'witches' into their communities, there is still much work to be done to develop the perception of local philanthropy.



As STAR-Ghana Foundation seeks to expand the concept of local philanthropy in Ghana, the aim is to move it beyond charitable responses to individual needs towards new forms of citizen intervention and activism. This is a challenging agenda, requiring a shift in perceptions about the nature and purpose of giving, but one that will ultimately transform and strengthen the relationships between partners in development.



STAR-Ghana Foundation emerged from the aspirations of Ghanaian civil society. Unlike the STAR-Ghana programme, which represented the aspirations of external donors, the Foundation was birthed from within the society. As such, it is a product of civil society that is strategically placed to support other CSOs.

Clarity of vision and a well-defined niche, communicated via a robust, democratic and politically savvy leadership structure, ensured buy-in for the idea of a new entity. A strong track record of effective programme fund management, together with financial and intellectual integrity, won support for the transition to the Foundation. The belief in the ability to co-create an enabling national climate and context for civil society sustainability, both politically and financially, now shapes the future of the Foundation.

This concluding section highlights a few lessons learnt about the Foundation's journey from donorfunded programme and funding mechanism to a national centre for active citizenship and civil society actions.

Taking a cue from the global and local context and correctly reading the signals from the aid effectiveness debates, Ghana's new lower middle income country status and the 'beyond aid' discourse, the committee understood that a nationally conceived agenda driven by its 3Cs&L functions would be critical to sustaining the programme once the donors pulled out.

**STAR-Ghana is an idea that keeps on changing, evolving, accommodating new challenging contexts as it moves towards its mission.**

**PROFESSOR AKILAGPA SAWYERR**

At a local level, the designers of the Foundation imagined a scenario where Damongo citizens defending the rosewood plantations in northern Ghana could jointly launch joint actions with the women of Ada similarly defending their rights to the local salt deposits on the southern coast. This dream of a locally-determined, national programme of citizens actions propelled the STAR-Ghana Foundation transition.

In 2020, the STAR-Ghana Steering Committee became the Governing Council of the Foundation, chaired by Dr. Esther Ofei-Aboagye, a highly regarded social policy analyst. Dr. Ofei-Aboagye was a member of the erstwhile Steering Committee of Star-Ghana from 2013 and chaired the Committee from January 2018 to December 2019.

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**AMIDU IBRAHIM-TANKO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STAR-GHANA FOUNDATION**

In reflecting on the Foundation's journey, the first lesson is about leadership. In an interview with New Now, the Foundation's Executive Director, Amidu Ibrahim-Tanko summed this up by recalling the popular maxim that “leadership is cause and everything else is effect”. He lauded the role of the Steering Committee in the realisation of the STAR-Ghana Foundation dream.

From the very outset of the STAR-Ghana programme, the first Steering Committee, led by the renowned Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr, a former chancellor of the University of Ghana, had an eye on what the future could hold for the programme, Tanko noted.



## Integrity

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**When you're trying to do something that hasn't been done before, you need to make sure you keep your books crystal clean and above scrutiny. This was a crucial aspect of our path to independence. We also worked with our partners to ensure that even the small ones learnt bookkeeping.**

PROF. AKILAGPA SAWYERR, FIRST CHAIRMAN OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE

The second lesson is about integrity, both in terms of managing donor funds programmes and in acting as an honest broker between different interest groups in the society and between donors and donor dependent CSOs. Integrity gave the STAR-Ghana programme credibility, both in the eyes of the donors and the groups it worked with on programme delivery.

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**We need to balance our activism with sustaining our reputation as an organisation that can be trusted as an “honest broker” on rights, balancing outrage with pragmatism and effective use of our opportunities and resources. However, we also recognise that overly cautious responses could cost us our edge as an effective and reliable sentinel of good and inclusive governance.**

DR. ESTHER OFEI-ABOAGYE, CHAIRPERSON, GOVERNING COUNCIL



In the case of the donors who had given A+ ratings to both STAR-I and STAR-II for their efficient and successful grant management and impactful delivery of programmes, such integrity made them receptive to the idea of transitional support

the Foundation after the STAR-Ghana programme was wound down.

Integrity was also important in the eyes of partner CSOs and other stakeholders in Parliament, government, traditional authorities, etc, who wanted continuity in their work with the Foundation as a trusted partner and grant-maker.

**Ultimately, we want a Ghanaian agenda – not one driven by where available resources are, the ideological or idiosyncratic preferences of the benefactors, their own political and economic challenges and shifts in development fashions and concepts.**

DR. ESTHER OFEI-ABOAGYE, FORMER CHAIRPERSON, GOVERNING COUNCIL

Moving forward in the realisation of its transition to a Ghanaian-led organisation driven by Ghanaian priorities, integrity is also about the delivery of an agenda that truly meets the aspirations of Ghanaian citizens for a better society.

## Relationship Capital

A third lesson has been about the importance of building and sustaining relationships. A keen example of this is the significant impact of the Parliamentary workstream, which was able to accumulate significant relationship capital through the often-daily working visits to the corridors of Parliament under STAR-I.

This guaranteed impact in terms of the significant changes that occurred to the Standing Orders, the functioning of Parliamentary committees, the opening up of parliamentary business to the public and

the creation of a website to enable direct feedback from citizens regarding project delivery on the ground.

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**One of the big lessons for me, from our work in Parliament, was how important social capital is. Two words sum up what is needed to protect it: sustainability and consistency. It's important for sustainability for the human capital to be retained**

DORCAS ANSAH, FORMER VOICE AND ADVOCACY MANAGER, STAR-GHANA FOUNDATION (PHASE 1)



By the same token, the phasing out of staff also poses the risk of loss of institutional memory to the Foundation. Assiduously keeping written accounts is one way of preserving institutional memory. At the same time, relationship capital needs time and effort to accumulate and great thought must be given to issues of sustainability and consistency in protecting this social capital investment.

## Stakeholder Consultations


**You've created a network of contacts that allows you to contribute to a national debate on building a stronger Ghana. The strategic direction you have provided has ensured that STAR-Ghana is the success it is today.**

BETH CADMAN, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF UK FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE IN GHANA



## Contact us

 STAR-Ghana Foundation  
Aar-Baakor Street, Ogbodjo, Accra  
PMB, Accra-Ghana

 +233 (030) 510665

 [info@star-ghana.org](mailto:info@star-ghana.org)

 [www.star-ghana.org](http://www.star-ghana.org)

## Connect with us

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An important lesson drawn from the experience described in this document is the importance of stakeholder consultations during the long process from conception of the idea to the launch of the Foundation. From the very beginning, consultations allowed the Steering Committee to draw programme staff, donors and civil society partners into the idea of creating an independent national entity and to win support for its implementation. The considerable investment in consultations across the country and with a wide range of stakeholders allowed for ideas and perspectives to shape the new independent entity.

### Local philanthropy

LAMNATU ADAM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
SONGTABA

 **People will donate to causes that appeal to the eye. But not to advocacy actions on something like child marriage. They may even think you're challenging them. For this reason, if I were to make a recommendation, it would be that whereas most projects are funded for one or two years, a longer duration of three to five years, with an element of flexible funding, would enable us to impact much better with our communities.**

Having completed its journey to independence, the Foundation still faces the challenge of long-term financial sustainability. As a former funding mechanism that has travelled in search of a sustainable, nationally determined programme of citizen engagement, it is keen to avoid competition with its partners over funds available to civil society and new forms of dependence.



The idea of an endowment fund, often associated with large foundations, is attractive but could take long to realise. Among other models being explored, local philanthropy may hold the greatest promise, provided it is redefined.

One of the attractions of this model is that it would enable the Foundation to sustainably fulfill its pledge to eschew competition with CSOs it has a previous or active funding relationship with. However, the reason it needs to be redefined has to do with current perceptions about the nature of local giving as a response to individual needs or unpredictable natural disasters.

One of STAR-Ghana's partners, Lamnatu Adam, explains some of the challenges of redefining the concept. Adam is the Executive Director of Songtaba, a CSO based in Tamale, capital of Ghana's Northern Region. With support from STAR-Ghana, Songtaba established a local fund, which they named "Saako", meaning "Relief" in the Dagbani language. The Saako fund was set up to support elderly women cast out of their villages on allegations of being witches and housed in alleged "witches camps" in several locations around Tamale.

**Local philanthropy goes beyond the raising of funds. It should include donations of time to facilitate citizen engagement with duty bearers, and to implement community development interventions.**

 AMIDU IBRAHIM-TANKO, EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR, STAR-GHANA FOUNDATION