

**Case study of the  
National Alliance for the Development of  
Community Advice Offices**

**A project supported by the  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation**

**By Vuyiswa Sidzumo**

## **Background and context**

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (CSMF)<sup>1</sup>, is a private American grantmaking foundation based in Flint, Michigan. It supports nonprofit organisations in the United States and a few countries in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and South Africa. It has supported the nonprofit sector in South Africa since 1988, and has altered its programs over the years to respond to topical challenges facing the country. Its current priority areas for South Africa are: 1) philanthropy development, which seeks to nurture the growth of philanthropy and improve its responsiveness to the needs of poor and marginalized communities; and 2) supporting the community advice office sector, which seeks to foster strong and sustainable community advice offices and related community-based organizations that provide free and accessible legal advice and related services to poor and marginalized people, ensure local community development, and help communities to hold local government accountable.

While the Mott Foundation does not directly implement programs, it sometimes uses its position to influence positive changes in the sectors that it supports. The project that will be described in this case study is one such intervention, and was designed to respond to what was identified as a crisis in the community advice office sector. The Foundation collaborated with another grantmaking institution, the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR)<sup>2</sup>, to convene several human rights organisations, legal aid clinics, and universities that work with community advice offices to help explore possible solutions. The aim was to collectively seek ways to respond to the crisis of declining funding to advice offices, which was resulting in the closure of many, leaving a service gap in many impoverished communities. The convened institutions provide various backup services to advice offices, including legal advice on cases that may need to go to court, and administrative and organisational development assistance to improve their functioning. Advice offices, in turn, provide a range of legal and social services to poor people including assisting people to: access government social grants; apply for birth certificates and identity documents; apply for pensions from former employers; get credit advice; resolve unfair dismissals and other unfair labour practices; deal with domestic violence; deal with and get reversals on illegal eviction orders, particularly from farms and government provided housing. They also provide counselling and health-related advice to people living with HIV. In many communities, they conduct workshops based on relevant needs of the particular community to sensitise people about their rights and how to access them, and serve as focal points for several government departments that have no presence in these communities.

## **Project description**

This case study focuses on the evolution of a project initiated by the CSMF in collaboration with the FHR, to address a challenge of declining funding to community advice offices. Advice offices are community-based structures that address various human rights matters. Their main activity is providing legal advice and related services, to poor people, at no charge. Many of these structures are run and managed by paralegals who have undergone basic legal training. Paralegals assist poor people to resolve legal matters mainly through mediation and dispute resolution, where feasible. When cases need to go to court, they are referred to a range of legal experts that provide free legal services to poor people. These include university legal aid institutions, nonprofit organisations, and legal firms that offer pro-bono services.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.fhr.org.za](http://www.fhr.org.za)

The project started off with ten institutions (including the founding funders, human rights organisations, and universities), and after a few years, it matured into what became the National Alliance for the Development of Community Advice Offices (NADCAO), established to proactively seek solutions for the long-term sustainability of advice offices. NADCAO was set up to help professionalise the advice office sector, confirm its role and niche within the broad area of access to basic human rights, and to seek long-term funding for it. The events described in this case study are the activities that led to the establishment of NADCAO.

## **Project objective**

The objective of the project was to revive advice offices to enable poor people to enjoy various human rights as enshrined in the country's Constitution. This was done by convening various role-players and coordinating efforts that would ultimately lead to the flow of funds to advice offices. The major problem, as described above, was the decline of funding to advice offices. This was a function of many things. The first was that many donors started redirecting their funding to other causes or other countries, which left not only the advice office sector but the entire nonprofit sector in a state of flux. The dwindling funding then resulted in the closure of many advice offices, leaving many communities without the much-needed support that these offices provide on issues related to accessing basic legal and human rights. Also, around this time, one of the major bilateral donors, the Swedish International Development Agency, through the International Commission of Jurists-Sweden (ICJ), was pulling out of the sector, after more than ten years of support. The ICJ had reached an in-principle agreement with Minister Dullah Omar in the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development to support the sector for a defined period of time while government was seeking various ways to channel funds to advice offices. Minister Omar subsequently died, and the new Minister had other priorities and did not fulfil the commitment. The ICJ decided to pull out as agreed, and this almost crippled the sector. More than half of advice offices across the country closed down, and many of those that remained started operating on a volunteer basis, receiving little or no funding.

## **Stakeholder analysis**

The stakeholders in this sector include: advice offices, the poor people they assist, and the nonprofit organisations and education institutions that support them; government departments whose line functions are serviced by the advice offices; municipalities; and donors. The direct stakeholders identified for the purposes of this project were the nonprofits and universities that work with advice offices. These institutions were grantees of the Mott Foundation and were selected because of their interest and investment in advice offices. The indirect stakeholders for the project were the advice offices and the community members they serve. Like Mott Foundation, the participating institutions were concerned about declining resources to advice offices, which was leading to many offices closing down, leaving many communities without much needed assistance.

The overall perception of the participating institutions, i.e. the project's direct stakeholders, was that the CSMF and the FHR used their influence to get institutions to tow the line and collaborate in this initiative. Many of them would later admit that the only reason they joined the group was for fear of losing funding if they did not cooperate. This meant that they did not trust the donors, nor did they

understand their genuine interest in the project. The perceptions, however, later changed for the better, as trust was built between all involved.

The perception of other stakeholders that were not invited to partake in the initiative was that the group was elitist, as excluding or ignoring important voices, and as not being accountable to the very constituencies it was trying to assist. Very few people knew or understood what the initiative was about or what it aimed to achieve, which suggested serious flaws in its outreach and communication strategies

Other perceptions of the stakeholders, relating to the field, were that the sector was weak, fragmented, indecisive, and was being held to ransom by a few organisations that were hoarding the space and acting as gatekeepers. There were differences of opinion even among the institutions around the table, and clear animosity in some instances. It was evident that there was a lot of mistrust among the participating institutions, which was making it difficult for them to make any meaningful impact on the ground. Grudgingly, all of them acknowledged that they needed to collaborate if they were to help the sector to survive, the difficult part was how they would work together to achieve that.

There was a strong feeling that donors were to blame for the mess that the sector found itself in, as the ICJ had pumped a lot of money into a single organisation (which was also a participant in this initiative) that was not seen as effective. The organisation was seen as a gatekeeper and not an honest broker, and one of the complicating factors was that it was tasked with not only organising the sector, but also being the conduit for funding, making it a player and referee at the same time. The personalities behind the organisation were also seen as problematic, and the perception was that the organisation operated on a system of patronage, where beneficiary organisations could only access resources if they towed a certain line. Some believed the organisation was the single biggest obstacle to the survival of the sector. On the other hand, the organisation in question also mistrusted the other participating entities, and saw them as elitist and not in touch with the agenda of transforming the sector and bringing it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Communication strategy**

The nonprofit organisations and universities that work with advice offices, and donors that fund in this sector, were contacted directly through emails and telephone calls. They were invited to meetings to discuss the plight of advice offices and seek ways to help them survive. Both the CSMF and the FHR believed (and still do) in the importance of the work of advice offices, and hoped that the invited institutions would share their vision and form part of a collective that would seek solutions for their survival. Letters co-signed by the directors of the two institutions were sent to the target institutions, inviting them to participate in an initiative aimed at saving the sector. The group met on several occasions, and designed what it believed to be the most appropriate road map to tackle the problem. The initial communication was focused on a small number of institutions. When the initial group had consolidated the initial efforts and clearly defined what needed to be done, it began a campaign to communicate its objectives and activities to other relevant stakeholders. Invitations to meetings were sent out to stakeholders that were not part of the initial core group, and the subsequent meetings served as information sharing and feedback seeking sessions with the wider sector. The efforts of the collective eventually led to the establishment of NADCAO, mentioned above. A national coordinator and an administrator were hired, and they were tasked with implementing resolutions of the collective.

In hindsight, the group could have done better to reach out to several stakeholders and bring them on board in the design and implementation of various tasks. The group became very inward focused, and did not pay sufficient attention to gaining the confidence and trust of others, especially the direct stakeholders, which were the advice offices and the communities they serve. The fear at the time was that if the group was expanded too soon to include other stakeholders, it would dilute the energy and would render the initiative unmanageable. It was also believed that expanding the group would make decision making difficult, and would complicate the management of relationships between the role players. While there was merit to some of these concerns, this created a gap with critical stakeholders.

The employment of the coordinator subsequently resolved the problem, and he spent the better part of the first two years trying to gain the confidence of the stakeholders who were initially ignored, especially the advice offices, which should have been at the centre of the initiative. The coordinator held provincial meetings and invited all known advice offices to such meetings, to talk about NADCAO, what it was set up to do, and to get feedback from stakeholders on what needed to be done. He also used the opportunity to hear first hand about some of the day-to-day challenges facing advice offices. He followed the meetings up with regular newsletters posted to each advice office, as many of these offices do not have computers or internet connectivity. He also held meetings with decisionmakers in government, especially government departments whose areas are serviced by advice offices, e.g. the Department of Social Development, as advice offices help many poor people to apply for and access social grants. A website was then developed ([www.nadcao.org.za](http://www.nadcao.org.za)), targeting advice offices (at least the few that have internet connectivity), other nonprofits that are interested in the work of advice offices, education institutions, legal firms, government departments, possible investors in the sector, and the general public.

## **Project evaluation**

The project has never been formally evaluated. There were, however, opportunities to receive feedback and this proved very useful. The first lesson was that bringing diverse groups together can be a very tricky exercise. The assumption made was that because the institutions involved were all passionate about the cause and were all keen to save advice offices, they would work well together. This was not the case. The group spent the better part of the first two years fighting amongst themselves, and at times forgetting the reason they were brought together. A lot of work needed to be done to get the individuals within the group to trust each other and work towards a common goal. While some progress was made during this period, the setbacks proved more challenging and difficult to recover from. The group, however, after many sessions and a lot of painful encounters, began to trust each other and things moved more smoothly after that. Some of the things that could have been evaluated would include:

- Group dynamics and what should have been done to anticipate the difficulty of bringing different people and institutions together that would not ordinarily come together on a common project of this nature.
- What would have been the most appropriate ways to involve advice offices in the initiative, as they were after all the reason the group got together?
- What was in it for each of the institutions involved? Did they understand their role when they agreed to participate in the project or did this come as a surprise to some of them?

- Was the approach to this initiative too top down? Did it need to be? How should it have been done differently? What are the lessons from this kind of approach?
- Were the initiators too optimistic about the possible outcome? What were the blindspots?

### **Possibilities for participatory communication**

The project was initiated by donor agencies that were well meaning and were attempting to address a serious gap. Many of the institutions that participated in the initiative did so for fear of backlash and loss of funding from the participating donors if they refused to cooperate. Some of these institutions have since admitted that if the organisers were not donors, they would have never participated. While this was an unintended and even unfortunate perception, the result in this case has fortunately been a good one. It could have, however, turned the other way, and this should be the lesson for all the stakeholders. The participating institutions have now formed genuine and good relationships with each other, and are able to collaborate successfully on various other initiatives. The relationship between the donors and the participating institutions also improved quite significantly during this period, and resulted in more trust and better communication.

The project failed to involve directly the most critical stakeholders, the advice offices, and this was a serious oversight. The attitude reinforced the notion that the more sophisticated institutions and those that hold the purse strings know better. There was no direct involvement of the advice offices, who understand the needs of their constituencies better. While it is true that too much consultation and participation could have also been problematic, this important aspect should not have been ignored. There is no doubt that the efforts of those involved were well meaning, but the outcome could have backfired as the environment could have been incorrectly analysed. The desire to come up with quick solutions to the problem clouded people's judgement. The behaviour displayed by not seeking inputs from the beneficiaries was both arrogant and mischievous. A possible major risk, not identified at the time, was that resources could have been unlocked for a sector that is no longer serving the intended or relevant needs of poor people. Subsequent actions through the formal establishment of NADCAO have gone a long way to resolve these problems, as NADCAO's starting point was consultation with affected stakeholders. It has taken a different approach by putting the advice offices at the centre of all efforts, while using the experiences and expertise of bigger institutions to make the initiative a success.

## **News values of the project**

The news values are the stories of the people that are assisted by the advice offices that the initiative was trying to save. The cases they handle range from unfair labour dismissals, evictions from farms, abuse of farm workers by employers (including beatings that sometimes lead to death), accessing social grants, assisting orphans and vulnerable children, and so on. One way to present these to the media would be to document a very specific story about a case handled by an advice office, putting an affected person at the centre of the story, and highlighting the human element. The story could then be elevated to what may be a generic issue in that particular field or area, and use the opportunity for advocacy for the particular cause.

A recent example is an advice office in Soweto that has been assisting elderly people, particularly women, to reverse decisions to evict them from municipal houses. One of these women, Mrs. Evetrina Ndawo, was interviewed as part of highlighting the importance of the work of advice offices, and she shared her story in a YouTube video<sup>3</sup>. Her troubles started after her husband died and she was told to vacate the house she had lived in for more than 30 years. She did not know where to go, and went to the advice office for assistance. The advice office intervened and the order was reversed. The office has resolved many similar cases, and could use the publicity to highlight what seems to be an issue affecting elderly people. It could also use the opportunity to further educate others about this problem and give guidelines on what to do in case of a similar incident. A paper like the Daily Sun could be used to reach the general public and for educational messages, to provide information on what to do or where to go for people with similar cases, and about rights. Papers like the Mail and Guardian, City Press, and Sunday Independent could be used for advocacy purposes, to reach out to policy and decision makers and sensitise them about the impact of [misinformed] decisions that they take, and the implications thereof. The story could attempt to draw their attention to the plight of the many elderly people who have approached the advice office in Soweto, with statistics on the numbers and areas affected. While the issue, through the story, would be highlighted in one part of the country, it has the potential to positively influence how similar issues are resolved in various other parts of the country.

## **Demographics of the target audience and its influence on media selection**

**Nonprofit organisations and universities** – the main target audience were nonprofit organisations and universities that work within the field of human rights, in particular, those that work directly with advice offices. These are mainly well established institutions that have a track record in their respective fields. These institutions would use mainstream daily and weekly print and electronic media as sources for news. They would also rely on community print and electronic media as both a source of news and as a means to share information about their work.

**Government departments** – government departments were indirect stakeholders in the project, as the aim was to influence their allocation of resources and encourage them to provide financial support to advice offices. Government departments would use the broadest range of news sources including mainstream and community print and electronic media. National departments would use information from national sources as well as provinces. Provincial and regional departments would use both national and regional media relevant to their respective provinces.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHWPL00XBkc>

**Advice offices** – advice offices would rely mainly on local and provincial sources of news, both in the print and electronic media. Their main source of news would be community radio and community newspapers, where available, as these would keep them informed about the challenges and needs of their target communities.

### **Story angle for City Press**

**Headline:**

*Flaws in municipal policies result in eviction order for 71-year old woman*

The story would highlight a problem that has been resolved by an advice office. The idea would be to highlight the problem faced by an individual and how they are being deprived of their rights. The story of the 71-year old Mrs. Ndawo, who faced possible eviction and the impact this would have had on her life would be a good choice. It would highlight the plight of many other elderly people who face the same fate, review the various municipal policies related to housing and how these need to be amended to avoid similar occurrences. The story could also have an angle on the advice office that assisted the elderly woman, and focus on how these institutions are assisting thousands of poor people with similar cases and allowing them to access their human rights and dignity. The story could also carry a message for policymakers on the sometimes unintended consequences of policy decisions or clashes between policies at various levels of government.

### **Story angle for Daily Sun:**

**Headline:**

*71-year old woman faces eviction from her home of 30 years after death of her husband: Is this the freedom we fought for?*

The story would zoom in on the 71-year old Mrs. Ndawo. The idea would be to tell the story of how she was given an eviction order after the death of her husband. It would focus on the subsequent nightmare, the uncertainty about her fate, and how the fear of being homeless at the age of 71 even negatively affected her health. She would also talk about how the advice office helped with the reversal of the eviction order, and how she has since referred many of her neighbours to the advice office for assistance with similar cases and other human rights related matters. She would also highlight the importance of knowing your rights and how to access them. The story could end with information about how people could access help if they face similar issues that impact on their rights.