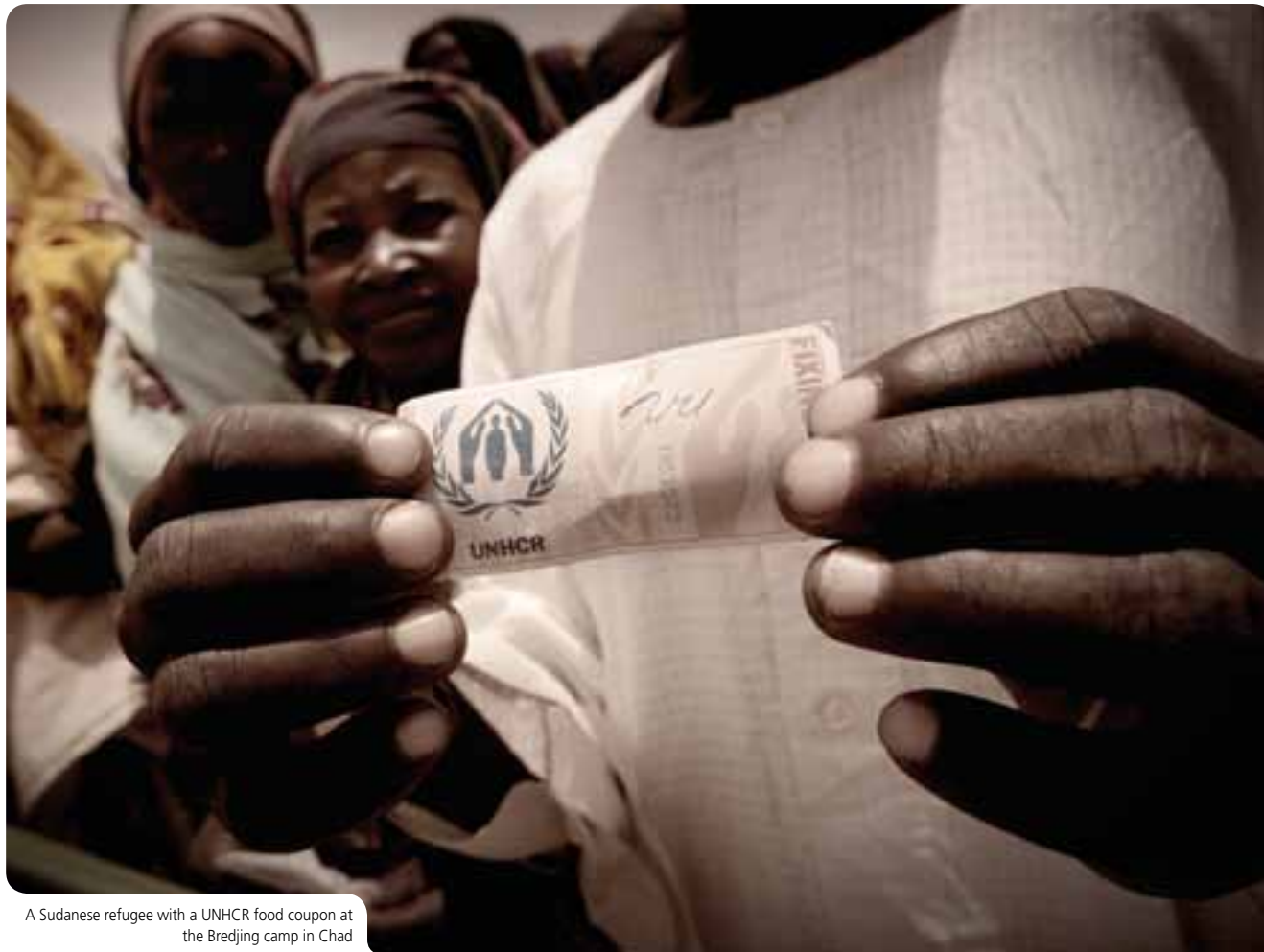


# collective bargaining

As the recession has hit, so funding has been curtailed for many African NGOs. How have they adapted to continuing their work?

By KERRY DIMMER





A Sudanese refugee with a UNHCR food coupon at the Bredjing camp in Chad

**In Africa, NGOs have evolved into being** much more than simply donor operations. They have become crucial enterprises within communities, providing knowledge, upskilling opportunities and, in some instances, business opportunities. More than that, they have started picking up the slack where many governments are unable to provide essential services. In short, they have come to be a major part of the backbone that supports any given African country's socio-economic milieu.

To survive the current European economic crisis, African NGOs are facing a double-edged sword. Along with the withdrawal of funds by cash-strapped governments, NGOs now all compete for the same sources of capital. This has highlighted the need for Africa to develop local funding for its NGOs and encourage new sources from the private sector.

The largest and most successful NGOs are those that are funded by both governments and corporate organisations. An example is the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), which works to support active capacity development programmes with projects in 45

African countries. Its voluntary contributions come from African and non-African governments and multilateral institutions like the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the UNDP and the IMF.

Bakary Kone, the ACBF's External Affairs and Partnerships manager, confirms that the independent international organisation, headquartered in Harare, Zimbabwe, has experienced the withdrawal of funding from some of its traditional donors as a result of the economic crisis, effectively birthing some new problems.

'Our challenges are multifaceted,' he says. 'One is the increasing tendency of some donors to invest only in countries and sectors of their own choice, and not always in consultation with recipient countries. Another challenge is the developing trend of some donors to undertake development support work on their own which reduces recipient countries' ownership. Finally,

capacity building does seem to be a priority in South-South co-operation and in Africa's relations with some emerging countries.

'It is inconceivable, but if the ACBF ceased to exist all the capacity-building programmes in 40-plus African countries would close, given that the ACBF is the single largest provider of resources and technical advice for capacity development on the continent,' says Kone.

'The ACBF support also extends to other NGOs, our focus here being to facilitate their participation in policy formulation and the monitoring of policy implementation. We believe that the private sector has everything to gain from a capacitated Africa, especially if we engage with partners from emerging countries.'

Colleen du Toit, CEO of the organisation Charities Aid Foundation Southern Africa (CAF), makes the point that many NGOs are adopting income-generating activities as well

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The Scandinavian NGO Vision for All is active in East Africa, helping locals with eyecare

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as acquisition and merger solutions. 'There are bound to be duplications of organisations performing similar, or even the same, functions, where both a community and NGO would benefit from a "merger",' she says. 'The problem is that it is difficult for such NGOs to find one another as this sort of information is very hard to find.'

National Lotteries have been viewed as a source of funds for struggling NGOs, but in truth, lotteries rarely pay off well as essentially all they do is redistribute funds, and there are no guarantees that funding will be ongoing. South Africa's National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund, says Du Toit, has been fraught with problems in governance and administration.

Authentic NGOs are rarely created with a profit-making motive, but it is no longer useful to think that the value of a cause is enough to secure support. To compete for a piece of the diminishing pie of donor funds, NGOs are also under pressure not just to be creative in fund-raising, but also to provide a way to measure the impact of a contribution, in other words, accountability.

This is of course a very murky area, not only costly but also complex, given that most NGOs work in environments with many other complementary role players.

Compounding this further is the restriction that source funders are placing on NGOs to only fund certain projects, rather than support the organisation as a whole. But even a little goes a long way in Africa, particularly when an outstretched hand is empty.

Another problem arises when donor countries may start influencing local government policy through NGO funding. Adam Habib, deputy vice-chancellor of Research, Innovation and Advancement at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, says that it is difficult for NGOs to ignore the extending arm of the foreign policy operators and remain impartial to politically charged funding.

'For instance,' he points out, 'if the value system of a donor government is opposed to contraception/abortion, but wants to provide US\$15 million to HIV/Aids, you could say that an NGO whose policies support contraception/abortion may be guilty of changing their agenda

to secure the donation and continue with their cause.

'But you really can't take a hard line on this, because if you are a dissident sitting in a jail, imprisoned by your government, do you really care where the NGO that is giving you food, secured its funding and under what terms? No, you have to look at the NGO case individually and determine its actual position rather than taking an abstract view.'

Having celebrated 20 years in service to Africans, the ACBF is more than qualified to offer advice for the survival of NGOs, whose role is critical to Africa's continued development.

'Our vision is to see African NGOs acquiring more qualifications so that they can become credible development partners,' says Kone. 'Our recommendation to NGOs is that they strive to stick to their areas of intervention and develop skills and experience rather than running off into different fund-raising activities that have become fashionable. Patience, experience and competence always pay off in the long run.' **AD**