

Personal Stories of Change

Warren Nyamugasira: A perspective from an NGO representative

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Warren Nyamugasira, Chair of the Uganda National Working Group (UWSD), worked as CEO of the NGO Forum during his membership of UWSD. “My main motivation was to push the NGO agenda to limit what we supposed to be a drive by the World Bank, among others, towards water privatisation,” Warren says. “The Uganda Dialogues had significant CSO participation (NGO Forum, AWEAPON, DENIVA, etc.) largely for this reason. As the CEO of the Uganda National NGO Forum for local and International NGOs, we wanted to get to the real truth about PSP in the ‘sacred’ water sector.

“I became involved after receiving a formal invitation by the Minister of Water and Environment, taking the personal endorsement of the minister to lend great credibility to the initiative. I was fascinated that a minister in the government – that we NGOs thought was in collusion with ‘hated’ players such as the World Bank to sell water off to the lowest bidder – also had misgivings about PSP. This personal endorsement conveyed to me a sense that the outcomes would be important in informing policy. I wanted to be there when this happened.”

Some of the difficulties faced by the Uganda NWG, albeit not unusual as compared with the other National Dialogues, seemed more acute. However, as Warren notes: “I stayed involved even when things became difficult because I genuinely believed that there was something unique – special – about the Dialogues. That was the safe space where the truth could be told, and, so to speak, reconciliation [could be] embarked on and this ‘alternative forum’ would provide the right direction for the sector and save resources for getting water to those who needed it the most.

“The Uganda Dialogues, in my view, succeeded in helping us in the NGO sector to realise that there was no such ‘project’ for selling the water sector to the lowest bidder, as we held it; in fact, if well regulated, it would be a good thing to increase private sector participation because the gap between the resources available and the need to attain MDGs was simply too great to close with only public resources. We demonstrated that an ‘alternative’ forum was overdue if the real issues in the water sector were to be confronted and addressed. By including ‘sanitation’ in our name, we were able to raise its profile and call for a separate institutional arrangement for it.

“I have worked with service delivery and advocacy NGOs for much of my working life. Slow progress in access to water has been a major concern. We advocate that water provision is primarily the role of government. In reality, this is only the case in big towns.”

Warren Nyamugasira: A perspective from an NGO representative *cont.*

Of his initial expectations of the Dialogue, Warren says: “I had been an ardent subscriber to participatory processes. However, initially, I was impatient with the insistence on having representation of the main stakeholders before we can say that we had ‘Dialogues’. To build an initiative about ‘conflict’ made me very curious as well as sceptical initially. However, with time, my perception of the usefulness of Dialogue changed as I realised that the common pitfalls of papering over the cracks in many participatory processes undermined their genuineness. I also realised that for once, the real issues affecting the water sector could be addressed without the usual power imbalances. For once I was faced with the prospect of operating on a ‘level playing field’ and I wanted to make the most of it!”

For Warren, The Water Dialogues have scored a number of major achievements. “The presentations of this novel idea to donors in the water sector, the Annual Sectoral Reviews and the Ministry Policy Committee; also, the engagement with the CEO and team of the national water provider was a significant landmark. Another achievement was the realisation by colleague NGO participants that while we criticise pre-directed research, we practice the same in the sense that all the research we had variously carried out came to the conclusions we wanted to hear, just like we were accusing the World Bank and National Provider of doing. The solutions lay in Dialogue and agreement about the methodology as well as the ‘evidence’ in the findings.

“One of the ‘a-ha’ moments for me was a meeting with the CEO of the national water provider and his realisation that the Dialogues were not a gimmick by one stakeholder but something behind which were people of integrity who shared the same of vision of universal access of water and who could also listen to reason and appreciate reality.

“The meeting with the said CEO was necessary to secure greater buy-in by the biggest actor in the water sector in Uganda – the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC). The CEO is highly considered globally as an achiever who has turned NWSC into a profitable para-statal agency run on business principles. NWSC was a member of the NWG, represented by a delegated staff.”

Warren says that, unbeknown to the NWG, the CEO was under a false impression regarding the origins and leadership of the Dialogues. This misunderstanding over specific members of the group, whom the CEO had concerns about, had seriously crippled the credibility of the Uganda Dialogues. “While these were never verbalised issues in the Dialogues, not even by the representative of the NWSC, they became the lens through which the highly influential CEO unfavourably viewed the Dialogues,” Warren says. In fact, it transpired through conversations with the CEO that his view had been that The Dialogues might even have been established to undermine NWSC’s approach.

“The powerful lesson here is that important initiatives can be stifled by un-spoken but strongly held perceptions,” Warren says. “The CEO was so relieved to discover that this was actually not the case at all that he offered to put some funding into the Dialogues. Unfortunately, this happened rather late in the day as far as the Dialogues were concerned.

Warren Nyamugasira: A perspective from an NGO representative *cont.*

But the excitement generated by one of the Dialogues' findings, that informal vendors are an 'extension of the service provided by the national service provider,' which means that its coverage is greater than officially recorded, can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that NWSC joined those who now realised the value of the Dialogues. Indeed, the finding surprised a number of us on the NWG. And it went to further reinforce the fact that indeed Dialogues were open to influence by research findings (in our case a 'quick and dirty' study) as long as the Terms of Reference were agreed upon by the NWG and not seen to be eschewed by the perspectives of one or a few. Consequently, since closure, the NWSC has been one of those asking: 'What has become of the Dialogues?'"