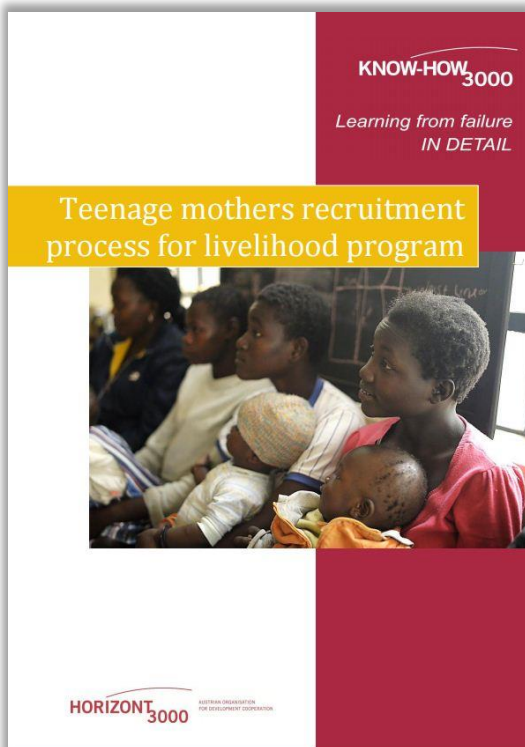


Talking with MCFp about failures and the benefit of learning from them

by Kristina Kroyer

The Mathare Children's Fund panairobi (MCFp) was one of 7 organizations who participated in our KNOWLYMPIC GAMES 2015, where we invited partners to hand in a relevant experience in their working field and gave them the chance to win great prizes. We sat together with **Titus Mwangi**, project manager at MCFp, and **Britta Wulfekammer**, HORIZONT3000 Technical Advisor at MCFp, to speak about the experience they contributed, called "Learning from failure: Teenage mothers recruitment process for livelihood program", and about the exchange visit, they won as their KNOWLYMPICS prize.

MCFp was one of two organizations who decided to share a negative experience, and not a positive one. Why did you decide to do so and what have you gained from it?



Titus: Well, first and foremost: Why not? It was a learning experience for us, which allowed us to develop lessons learned and help us to avoid more failures in the future. We did not see the experience necessarily as a failure, but rather as a process. It did not only end up as being a disappointment or negative experience, because we learned from it and we grew from it. Disappointments are part of every program once in a while. If you look at implementation processes, it is always about having some failures, too. So, why not put up a negative experience for the others to learn from?

I think dealing with failure is a culture we need to cultivate – otherwise there will be no vision. By learning from failure, we get to build resilience and it also acts as a motivation. We get to learn skills to be tolerant to frustrations, to approach a task, to find different solutions to different problems and also to seek help from different people. It is a learning life skill, as you learn how to deal with frustrations and disappointments.

What do you think is the main difference between reflecting on a positive and a negative experience? What is the benefit of each?

Britta: In short, the positive experience is creating motivation and confidence, but the positive experience might also let you stagnate, it might not bring you any further. If you only have positive experiences, you do not grow, because you continue to do what you used to do. But a negative experience is also about learning and creating a dialogue. You have to sit down with your staff and stakeholders to discuss about what went wrong. You don't do that necessarily after a positive experience.

It seems that you have already thought a lot about the process of learning from negative experiences. Was analysis and sharing of experiences important to MCFp before?

Titus: Analysis and sharing of experiences has been there, but we never really documented it. We would analyse and share experiences on a need-basis. If there is a difficult case we are dealing with, we would sit

down, share out what is going on and think about it. Then of course this would influence our intervention. But we really never ever documented whatever we share.

Britta: On the internal level, this happens on an ad-hoc basis and it is not in the culture to discuss failures on a regular basis. On the external level, MCFp is part of a lot of networks, where different NGOs and even governmental organizations are participating and who meet on a monthly or weekly basis to discuss and share experiences, but there is no culture of documenting.

Do you think the documenting failures helps, or is it enough to just speak about them and internally incorporate the learned lessons?

Titus: I think documentation is important. If processes are not put down for the purpose of the future, they can turn out unclear for the person who comes after me. Or if you take up a certain responsibility and it is well documented, either through mails or minutes, then you cannot run away from it. It is very easy for everybody, especially for your supervisor, to go back and say: 'Look, this is what we agreed on'.

Britta: People tend to forget, and documenting allows us to look back and see what happened. Furthermore, once you write things down, you think about it in a different way, because you have to think on how to put it in words. For example, when Titus filled out the questionnaire on the negative experience, he realized, that he thinks about a lot more things when he starts writing things down. In the same sense, it also helps to prevent misunderstanding, because once you put it down, you have to write it in a way that's understandable and logic.

Finally, please tell us about the exchange visit at 'Restart Africa' you won for submitting the negative experience. How did the visit help you to improve your working performance?

Britta: It was great to take the team out to a project that does actually the same things as we do. And it was especially great to not only take the management, but to take all our staff, including the lead mama who does our crafts and the social workers. The value of doing so was one of the key learnings from this visit and I would advise every other organization to do the same. Since we are a small project, we could take all staff, but my recommendation would always be to take at least a good mix from all levels. It was good, that the staff saw, that 'Restart Africa' started with the very same challenges we are struggling, and were successful in overcoming them. This made them feel motivated. The second thing I recommend to do is thinking beforehand of the questions you may have. Before visiting 'Restart Africa', we sat together and wrote down all our questions. So when we went there, we had a bucket full of concrete questions asking them: 'How do you do this? We have a challenge with this, etc.'



Photo © BWulfekammer

There were a few things we learned at the visit, which we were able to implement already: Firstly, we had a quality issue and it was always difficult for us to tell the mamas involved in the craft production 'this needs to be better', because they would think we were picky. So we learned about the quality process of Restart, where everybody, before giving something to the next person to fulfil the product, would be responsible that the quality was correct. Secondly, we learned about greater leadership of every person, which we immediately implemented, by giving people more responsibility in their work areas. We gave them a budget and

tasks that would make them grow. Thirdly, we had a big problem with the lead mama, who would not share her knowledge or train other people, because she was afraid of losing her job. So we would depend on her and, when she gets sick for example, we would not be able to fulfil her tasks. Restart did explain why sharing knowledge is important and we could see that they have youngsters sitting next to the others in order to learn on the spot. Immediately after we came back, we saw our lead mama with a junior sitting next to her to learn from her. That was a really good thing.

Long story short, we could learn about leadership, quality assurances, peer training and training exchange. In the end, we saw that we have very similar projects and that we were able to build a relationship at the visit. We understood that we could learn from each other and have a training exchange. They can send people to us and learn about marketing and online business, and on topics like child protection and policy dialogue. And we can send people to them, who in exchange can learn about quality processes, tailoring and design.

Do you have any other comment on KNOWLYMPICS?

Titus: When is the next KNOWLYMPICS?



Photo © BWulfekammer

We are happy to see, that MCFp is looking forward to the next KNOWLYMPICS and that they did benefit from the experience sharing as well as from their prize. Check out the documentation on their experience called “Learning from failure: Teenage mothers recruitment process for livelihood program” [here](#). To learn more about MCFp in general, visit their website [here](#).