

CHRONICLES OF A TRANSFORMATIVE MOVEMENT: STRENGTHENING OUR INTERCONNECTEDNESS

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Abstract

How does a movement transform itself into an organization while retaining its inherent values? This article documents the processes The Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD), a global consortium of over 1500 civil society organizations, is instituting as it co-creates its future based on its values of interconnectedness, inclusion, consensus decision-making, and distributed leadership. MCLD was formed in 2015 by a group of community-led practitioners committed to transforming the humanitarian and development sector: insisting that local communities should take center stage in envisioning, planning, actively implementing, evaluating, and learning from development activities. Soon other like-minded organizations, at local and global levels, joined MCLD. However, growth often necessitates some form of organizational structure, particularly to access and manage funds for its activities. After providing more background on its origins, founding principles, and membership, this article shares the transformative journey of MCLD to sustain its commitment to shared leadership and collaborative decision-making. The article offers a framework for how a movement can remain true to its identity and moral imperatives amidst the need to be practical, sustain action over time, and cater to different members and where they are in the journey. This framework is built on conversational survey data and reflections of new and old members across the globe.

Keywords: Collective action; Collaboration; Social Movement; Community-Led Development; Localization; Locally Led Development; Collective Leadership; Leaderful Ecosystems; Mutuality; Equitable Partnerships; Shift the Power; Consensus Decision-Making

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The most radical future I can see for the development sector is one that has zero agenda, zero thematic focus and zero mission—other than to facilitate the changes defined by poor families and communities. Imagine what would happen if an organization showed up with nothing but two questions: “What do you need?” and “How can we help you make that happen?”

Martin Burt, in Miltzer (2019)

Just four years after its publication, Martin Burt’s vision for the development organization of the future no longer seems radical. Challenged by the Black Lives Matter movement and growing calls to decolonize and shift power, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), foundations, funders, and governments are beginning to embrace ideas of localization, locally led development, and community-led development. I have been working in the international development and humanitarian sectors for almost two decades, and never before have I seen such a momentum towards change. New alliances, coalitions, and networks to support the transformation of these sectors are emerging daily. Yet, with some exceptions, most of these collaborations continue to have organizational structures stemming from the very systemic injustice they seek to address.

This continuation of the hub and spoke model of organizing (albeit with the hub now shifting to New Delhi or Nairobi), or of federated structures where the power still centers around those who raise funds, is not always a symptom of appropriation by traditional power holders. I regularly come across organizations of all sizes struggling to find more equitable and inclusive structures. The challenge seems to be the absence of a viable alternative.

Some mavericks are venturing into uncharted waters, experimenting with ideas like Holacracy (Schell & Bischof, 2022) and Sociocracy (Eckstein, 2016) or developing structures that are too new to even have a name. We may not have the perfect

alternative models but our quest to find them can offer valuable lessons for international development. It is with this intention that I write this article. Through it, I offer you our story, the story of the Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD).

In September 2015, as the UN General Assembly was adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly A/RES/70/1, 2015), a group of 18 INGOs came together to transform the way we do development. The Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD) was thus born. Today with over 1,500 local civil society organizations and 72 INGOs, MCLD is a vibrant collaborative space for collective action, committed to ensuring that every person has a voice in decisions that affect their lives. In at least 17 countries, local and international civil society organizations have self-organized to create MCLD National Associations. These Associations serve as a safe and inclusive “container for change” (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016, p.9) that enable member organizations and individuals to address power imbalances within our sector and among them. The values-based foundation, momentum, and fluid structures that characterize a movement have enabled us to nurture interdependence and interconnectedness among members. However, our rapidly expanding membership and the demands of a sector in flux are pushing us toward more formalized and fundable structures.

This article recounts how a movement sustains itself and develops into an organization without losing its character and values-based foundation. It shows how co-creation and equitable partnerships between hundreds of organizations connected like trees in a forest (Duncan et al., 2018) can be a basis for everyday work, strategic planning and institution building. And how this requires intentionality, sustained effort, continued negotiation, and an ongoing interrogation of its own inclusiveness. The road is not easy, nor is success guaranteed. But seven years of being a movement and seven months of being a movement in transition have taught us valuable lessons about interconnectedness and mutuality.

These lessons have been curated through conversations with MCLD members, small group meetings, discussions, email responses, and a survey circulated among MCLD's 17 National Associations which act as an umbrella for local organizations operating in different countries. We sought targeted responses for this article (survey, small group conversation, or email) from at least one member of each National Association. The article also draws on intentional conversations MCLD has been having about its future. The conversations and the survey were in English and French. In keeping with the values of MCLD, this article recounts stories and lessons in members' voices after obtaining their consent.

STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE

This article is divided into six sections. This first section has introduced the article, recounted its purpose, and explained its methodology. The next section introduces MCLD and its original structure. The third section (Nurturing Interdependence through Movements) looks at the fundamental characteristics of MCLD linking it to the definition of a movement, characteristics that we seek to preserve during our transition. It explores how these characteristics have helped MCLD develop interconnectedness among its members over the last seven years. Section four (Restructuring a Values-Based Movement) delves into the process of restructuring MCLD and the challenges we are encountering during the journey. Section five (Making Leaderful Ecosystems Functionable, Sustainable and Fundable) summarizes the lessons we are learning through our transition and section six provides the conclusion.

MOVEMENT FOR COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT: THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE

When members of a few INGOs met in New York at the sidelines of the 2015 United Nations General Assembly, the idea of local communities leading their own development seemed radical. The long history of community-led action in the Majority World (Alam, 2008), often called the Global South, had been successfully forgotten.

The 2016 Grand Bargain (Hough et al, 2021), a unique agreement between some of the world's largest funders and humanitarian organizations to get more means into the hands of people in need, had not been inked. And #ShiftThePower (Wilkinson, 2017), a call for new ways of thinking, being and doing for more equitable, people-led development, had not been coined.

Yet, it was clear that the prevalent top-down systems of development and humanitarian action had not delivered. Led by John Coonrod, Co-founder of MCLD and the Executive Vice President of The Hunger Project, and Pierre Ferrari from Heifer International, this small group of INGOs decided it was time for change. "We considered calling ourselves an alliance but that seemed too formal and 'institutional.' It also required a greater degree of agreement. We wanted a big tent - we were really calling forth a concept. When Pierre suggested Movement, it seemed to click," explains Coonrod. While not a traditional social movement, MCLD embraced many characteristics of one. It sought to radically question power yet embraced the idea of working with local governments. It had no formal institutional structure, yet it quickly sought to enroll local civil society organizations as members. It identified five goals: a) Voice and agency for women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalized groups; b) Adequate community finance; c) Good local governance; d) Quality public services; and e) Resilience.

Membership in MCLD required a commitment to its values, but no other contribution was necessary. The Hunger Project (THP), a small INGO committed to ending hunger and poverty, hosted the MCLD's Global Secretariat, funding personnel time and activities while serving as its fiscal sponsor.

Since its beginning, MCLD recognized that the real work of community-led development (CLD) happens locally. Hence, National Associations (what were then called National Chapters) were created. The first National Association was launched in Malawi, and predates MCLD Global. To begin with, National Associations were groups of local

organizations and country offices of INGOs that came together to champion CLD and devolution in their countries. They were often hosted in the country offices of INGOs as those were the only sites with space to host meetings and with resources for administrative support. In Asia, we partnered with the Local Governance Initiative and Network (LOGIN), a network with similar objectives. In Latin America, we worked through MCLD Mexico, hosted by THP. Gradually membership grew. As calls for localization and shifting power grew, more and more INGOs and local organizations joined MCLD.

National Associations began to develop organically, often mobilized by a local organization that came across MCLD at some meeting. Take the case of Nigeria, where a chance meeting I had with Dr Rebecca Dali, the founder of Centre for Caring, Empowerment and Peace Initiatives (CCEPI), in 2019 led her to mobilize dozens of local organizations in the country's conflict-affected northeast region. Associations began to register themselves and define membership norms. They were no longer limited to Majority World countries. In November 2016, MCLD Netherlands was launched. Meanwhile, at the global level there was a growing awareness that agendas and strategy need to be led by National Associations, not the Global Secretariat that comprised 3.5 full time staff members in Washington DC and one each in Kenya, Uganda and Benin. By 2022, MCLD had over 1500 local civil society organizations members (half of them Francophones), 72 INGO members, and 17 National Associations that varied extensively in organization style, activity levels, and momentum.

NURTURING INTERDEPENDENCE THROUGH MOVEMENTS

Since MCLD began its process of transition to a more formal institutional structure in September 2022, many people have asked why we chose to co-create this new structure in full transparency - we post monthly updates on the transition on our website and newsletter. For us at MCLD, there was never a choice. After all, we were a movement.

In this section we will delve into MCLD's defining characteristics that can be traced back to its structure as a movement and how these help us to nurture interdependence and mutuality. Literature on social movements and organizations offers some valuable insights on this. Hildy Gottlieb (2015) distinguishes movements from organizations based on how success is defined, leadership, and means. This distinction is relevant in explaining MCLD's success in strengthening relationships among members. Here we distill MCLD members' views about the consortium into five defining characteristics and show how it links to the broader characteristics of a movement.

Collective Action Toward a Common Vision

Gottlieb asserts that movements begin with values, organizations with action (2015). Most MCLD members recognized a common vision, collective action, and decentralization as the essence of a movement, while they saw organizations, coalitions, and associations as more hierarchical and formally structured. Paul Chisunka from Amos Youth Centre, Zambia, described a movement as “thought and ideology in action meant to bring about positive change and impact with the collective participation of people with diverse backgrounds and abilities.”

Appolinaire Oussou Lio from Groupe de Recherche et d'Action pour le Bien-être au Bénin noted that a movement is a dynamic grouping of individuals or associations that “is committed, acts and innovates in a concrete way, close to the needs of all, especially the most vulnerable. The associative movement federates energies for a common goal: that of progressing together. Unlike organizations, coalitions, associations and programs, the movement is the “mother” of other groupings and more participatory and inclusive. It adapts to changes in time and space.”

Sothin Ziba from Phukira in Malawi explained that a movement is “often driven by a sense of urgency or moral imperative and may be fueled by a shared sense of identity or purpose. In contrast, organizations, associations, coalitions, and programs are more

structured and hierarchical, with clear leadership, governance, and decision-making structures in place. These entities may also focus on specific issues or causes, but their approach is typically more formalized and institutionalized than a movement.” Pascal Djohossou, MCLD regional coordinator for West Africa, pointed out that a movement “operates on a voluntary basis, and on shared principles recognized by the movement members, as a set of key prerequisites that are to be applied to specific agreed fields of implementation. The Movement raises funds for its operational cost and for needed actions to leverage its expansion and influence at a wider level.”

Radically Challenge Existing Power Dynamics

Getachew Eshete from Heifer International Ethiopia noted that a movement is about changing the customary way of doing things. “They challenge the status quo,” he said. This echoes Gottlieb’s (2015) contention that movements seek sweeping change that affects everyone, while organizations are satisfied with incremental change.

The distinction between movements and organizations can also be understood using VeneKlasen and Miller’s expressions of power framework (2002, p. 45). They identify four expressions of power. *Power over* signifies authority, domination, or control, and can be exercised through decision-making or influencing. *Power within* refers to self-worth, confidence, and self-esteem that is a pre-condition for action and may be strengthened through an awareness of rights and capacities. *Power to* refers to every person’s potential to take action to shape their own world, while *Power with* refers to collective action based on shared power, respect, and mutual support. (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002; IDS at Sussex University, 2011)

Organizations are structured around the idea of *power over* (Boards, executives, and supervisors exercise this) and depending on their leadership and size may sometimes exhibit *power to*, strengthening the *power within*. In contrast, movements channelize *power within* and *power to* to exercise *power with*. This in turn reinforces *power within*

and *power to*. This ability to exercise *power with* is also what draws organizations to MCLD. As Elene Cloete from Outreach International said, “Movements are fundamentally about challenging the current power structures. That is also what brings smaller organizations like ours to it. We know we need the strength of the collective to engage with big bilateral or multilateral agencies.”

Continuous Movement is the Very Nature of a Movement

The only constant in a movement is movement. It keeps it vibrant and alive. Teshome Lemma from The Hunger Project Ethiopia, defines a movement “as a structured form of collaboration with fluid membership to achieve a common objective.” Dr Rebecca Dali from CCEPI Nigeria uses the metaphor of water to describe MCLD. “It is always flowing, and therefore always fresh.” Sylvia Hernandez from The Hunger Project, Mexico, notes that “because movements are not static like alliances or networks, they can adapt to changing socio-political and economic contexts.”

The challenge for any social movement is to sustain the momentum. Sustained volunteerism by the same group of people over a long period of time can be exhausting. By allowing a constant flow of volunteers in and out of it, a movement retains its momentum and critical mass to continue its mission. At MCLD, we think of movements as a relay race, not a sprint. Holta Trandafili from World Vision underscores the importance of this. “MCLD’s relay race model allows me to engage in something I am very passionate about at my own pace and in the context of my own realities. I come in when I am able to, give it my best effort for that time and then step back to catch my breath, literally and metaphorically. It takes away the pressure of constantly delivering on top of a full-time job. Instead, it becomes a space for me to realize my ideas and passions.”

It Is All About the Process

Djohossou believes that “A movement is all about the process. It is about facilitation and inclusion to create shared meaning with different groups. Organizations, associations, coalitions or programs go for short-term vision and are more hierarchical and outcome-oriented.”

This process of collective decision-making and action enables a movement to forge a collective identity (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Melucci, 1989, as cited in Fominaya, 2010) which in turn nurtures interconnectedness among diverse actors, many of whom have never interacted or have previously competed over resources. Collective identity resides in “a shared sense of ‘one-ness or we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity” (Snow, 2001, p. 2). Scholars agree that in social movements, a strong connection exists between collective identity, a shared collective action project, and the context and political structure within which these movements operate (Fominaya, 2010).

In MCLD, we have seen this collective identity being forged, re-forged, and nurtured every day through interactions between members. It happens during capacity-strengthening sessions in which members learn from each other; In the collaborative research team meetings where members co-develop tools, sharing not just expertise and ideas but also fears and frustrations, sighs, and smiles; In monthly meetings where members share challenges and opportunities; During the pandemic when members of the Malawi National Association mobilized resources internally to launch a radio show to dispel COVID-19 misinformation; In Benin when organizations pooled resources to launch a food security program in the wake of the Ukraine war. These continued interactions enable organizations to move from competition to collaboration.

We have also seen complexity theory at play. Madden holds that when “individuals come together for a common purpose, under favorable conditions a qualitative ‘phase

shift' may occur. The whole becomes greater than the sum of parts. This phenomenon is called "emergence" (2017, p. 2). When this happens, people collectively solve problems, accomplish work, deepen their relationships, build trust, and form their shared story. Additionally, "community members are willing to set aside certain vested interests based on a more encompassing set of values or interests, without sacrificing their core values or individuality" (Madden, 2017, p. 2).

"Our process of co-creation builds shared consensus which reduces friction among members and leads to sustainable outcomes as members support the course," Steve Ogutu, the Executive Director of MCLD Kenya, notes. This process can also ensure inclusion. "The difference between MCLD and other formal structures is that anyone can be part of our movement, be they literate or illiterate, powerful or marginalized, as long as they share our vision and passion," Ogutu adds. Dr Dali explains, "In MCLD no one commands, no one shoots down any idea. We engage, we hold each other's hand to rise together and walk together. No one is left behind."

The processes of co-creation, consensus-building, and addressing challenges together not only reinforce the movement's core principles, but also contribute to shared identity formation, creating spaces of shared and equal belonging.

A "Leaderful Ecosystem" that Belongs to Everyone

When I asked MCLD members, "Who owns a movement?", the response was unanimous. "Everyone. For MCLD it means you, me, all of us," Aiah Marrah from Mansofinia Agric Farmers Organization in Sierra Leone, shared. However, on the question of leadership two sets of answers emerged. While most saw leadership as shared, collective, dynamic or situational, a few saw it as vested in individuals who listen, facilitate and serve.

According to Hernandez, “unlike in organizations, leadership in a movement is about people not position.”

Ziba explains that “leadership in a movement can take on many different forms and is often decentralized, meaning that there may be multiple leaders or no single person in charge. Leadership is less about formal authority and more about influence, inspiration, and the ability to mobilize and empower others. Some movements may have charismatic figures who emerge as de facto leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, leadership in a movement is about bringing people together around a shared vision or goal, inspiring and motivating them to take action, and creating a sense of unity and purpose within the community.”

Duncan et al. describe leadership in movements through the idea of leaderful ecosystems. They identify five key elements of leaderful ecosystems: Engage the broader system, intentionally embody equity, flex across the leadership spectrum, value multiple ways of knowing and create space for inner work needed for transformation (Duncan et al., 2018). At MCLD we are building leaderful ecosystems that strengthen shared leadership, are flexible, value multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, and intentionally build relationships to embody equity.

RESTRUCTURING A VALUES-BASED MOVEMENT

In 2022, seven years after its launch, MCLD realized that its existing structure could no longer meet the demands of its members and of a sector grappling with its own power hierarchies. We needed more human resources: staff who could serve as coordinators, support volunteers in different National Associations, advocate with local governments and funders, develop tools through learning-by-doing, and facilitate mutual capacity

strengthening among members. This required financial resources beyond the support extended by THP. Resources were also needed to support Association activities. For instance, in Liberia, members conducted a training using a small \$5,000 microgrant from MCLD, and mobilized 150 acres of land for demonstration farms and to pilot collective farming. Now they need resources to start this work (Jude C Nwachukwu, Personal communication, February 16, 2023). MCLD cannot generate the needed resources without a structure that meets the compliance and legal requirements that come with funding. “The first question anyone will ask us would be about our governance structure,” says Coonrod.

Yet, we did not want to turn into another coalition with hierarchies of power and decision-making, forcing views from the Minority World (typically referred to as the Global North) on the Majority World. The key question for us was, how do we create a structure that remained true to our values even as it inspired the confidence of funders?

But first, what are these values that we seek to preserve? The word cloud below (Figure 1) shows the values of MCLD as espoused by members in the survey administered for this article. We generated it on a free online website called [freewordcloudgenerator.com](https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com) based on survey responses. The bigger the size of a word, the more people used it. Thus, most participants cited inclusion as a value, followed by co-creation, collaboration and human dignity. These are the expectations we have to live up to. We need a structure robust enough for compliance, yet adaptive enough to ensure inclusion and sustained momentum. We also realized that the Global Secretariat should not create this future structure. After all, if MCLD was owned by all its members, its future had to be determined in consultation with them.

Figure 1. Values of MCLD



It's All about the Journey

We began our journey of co-creating MCLD's future with a two-day design thinking workshop in November 2022 with select MCLD members and individuals from other networks and alliances, to identify a structure true to our values (as captured in Figure 1). The workshop allowed us to interrogate our existing assumptions and structures. For example, participants strongly advocated that National Chapters as they were then called be renamed National Associations - the former was considered a colonial legacy. At the end of the workshop, we set ourselves a clear goal: Fully establish a new values-based organizational structure that is inclusive, equitable, accountable, transparent, and fundable at much higher levels by the end of 2023.

We did not, however, propose an organizational structure. Instead, we drafted principles that would underpin a new emerging structure. One was intentional listening, and not just with the most vocal, accessible, and active members, but with as many of our constituents as possible.

As we listened, we also turned to consensus decision-making, a process we apply regularly in our National Associations and in the Global Secretariat for designing strategies and activity plans. "Consensus decision-making is a process that builds trust

and creates ownership and commitment. An effective consensus process (consensus-building) is inclusive and engages all participants. Consensus decisions can lead to better quality outcomes that empower the group or community to move forward to create their future together” (Hefte, n.d., para. 1).

Consensus refers to both the means and the end, the journey and the destination (Arietta & Wallace, 2000 in Sagi, 2015). It is the process through which people can “productively resolve issues, make choices, or develop strategies” (Sagi, p. 24). It is also the outcome at the end of this process. Consensus-decision making does not mean that everyone will agree on the final decision (outcome) or all the details of it. However, it does imply that everyone would have been heard, would understand the process of decision-making and would therefore be satisfied by the outcome and agree to support it for the mutual benefit of the group (Hefte, n.d.). At MCLD, we sought to use this process of consensus-building for strategic decision-making on structure and direction. It seemed difficult, but as Madden (2017) pointed out, consensus building is much better suited for strategic direction and decision-making than for operational and tactical issues.

Our biggest challenge was to make our co-creation process as accessible as possible. We had to find ways to determine who to reach. The fluidity of membership and the relay race model which had sustained the momentum in MCLD now became our biggest challenges, as it is difficult to determine the exact number of active or semi-active members at any given time.

Recognizing that different people and cultures prefer different forms of engagement and have differential access to technology, we designed different connecting exercises. First, we announced the intent to co-create our future and promised members regular monthly updates through our website and newsletter. This was our commitment to transparency and accountability. Next, we set about exploring our members' vision for

MCLD, its National Associations, and the Global Secretariat. We sought to understand what drew them to MCLD, what kept them engaged, and what they saw as their own roles within MCLD. We did this through discussions and breakout groups on our monthly membership calls, and by opening a new forum for intentional listening and dialogue: the listening cafes.

The listening cafes are virtual spaces where members who may be uncomfortable speaking in group settings or want to delve into more details can arrive at their own convenience and share their vision for MCLD and their recommendations on structure, advisory group members, and our process. We sought to understand what they saw as the role of National Associations and of the Global Secretariat, including whether the latter is even needed. These cafes are in true form conversations that could happen among colleagues in a coffee shop. A schedule is announced, and members can log in on any date/time that is convenient. Cafes are conducted in English, French, and Spanish. Each cafe broadens our understanding of what our members seek from MCLD. Many times, members bring up roles that we had never imagined or wanted - for example, issuing certification based on commitment to CLD, or channeling funds to local organizations. Yet, the process of listening has taught us to set aside our own aspirations and to dig deeper into those of our members. Through this we have discovered new possibilities and forged new relationships. Using Duncan et al.'s (2018) metaphor, the trees in the forest have begun to become even better nourished.

Alongside these listening cafes, Global Secretariat members have also been conducting calls with INGO leaders to listen to their vision for MCLD and to understand their ability and willingness to financially support MCLD. With them we have been co-designing a contribution structure that is fair to all, from small one-country INGOs to the largest global INGOs.

Despite all this, our process is not as inclusive as we would like. We have only reached a small proportion of our members. Yet almost everyone in the conversations and the surveys felt they were actively shaping the MCLD's future. "When you feel ownership over an organization and process, you also realize that you have to take responsibility for making changes. No one else will do it for you. In a movement we are all responsible, we are all accountable and we are all leaders," said Hernandez.

Oossou Lio adds, "Like the hummingbird, I believe I have contributed my small part to the co-creation of the future through MCLD. My opinion and ideas that do not impose themselves but rather expand the thinking for the improvement of the future of MCLD."

Of course, there is a strong bias here: Only people active in the co-creation process participated in these various fora. This signifies how important engagement has been for those participating. Now, we are learning from our National Associations, who have followed consensus building principles for a while, about how to involve the more silent and dormant members.

Emerging Structure and Principles

This list summarizes emerging insights from the co-creation process thus far:

- A "Network of Networks" - no global headquarters anywhere, no "hub and spoke"
- Not "Chapters" but National Associations
- Broad process of co-creation and ownership through consensus building and intentional listening
- Majority World leadership with democratic decision-making
- Shared services requested by National Associations for efficiency and financial accountability
- US-based INGOs become a National Association; they are not global members
- A menu of possible national structures - not one-size-fits-all but with a shared constitution of key principles

- Higher standards for organizational membership alongside individual, fluid participation
- Continued strong financial support from THP and many more funders

We have also gained clarity on organizing principles and the roles for the National Associations and the Global Secretariat. Strategic direction and decision-making for MCLD (who becomes a National Association, how do we ensure that Associations imbibe and nurture MCLD's values) will be through a Global Council with equal representation from every Association. There will indeed be a Global Secretariat, but it will be populated by staff seconded (temporarily assigned) from different National Associations. National Associations will continue to determine their own strategies, membership norms, and activities. Many have already started the process of registering themselves. "We first needed to ensure that our membership was coming together due to a shared commitment and passion. The last few years have helped us build strong foundations. Last year we felt ready to register so that we can accept funds," explains Ogutu.

Even as this process is ongoing, some members have begun to question the role of community members in the organization of MCLD. "We are all about centering the voice and agency of communities in our process. Yet where are the community voices in our conversations about MCLD and its direction? Yes, we don't directly work with communities, but all our members do. Do the communities not have the right to influence our processes?" questions Hernandez.

While the question of direct community involvement in MCLD remains one of the many we need to answer through consultation, members have clearly articulated their vision for the Global Secretariat. They included coordination, supporting shared learning, offering shared support services, global advocacy, enforcement of MCLD norms as decided by the Global Council, and fundraising as its roles. Francis Oyat Otoo from

Family Harvest Foundation, Uganda, reminded us that all this should be done “specifically for pushing the voices to be heard by the regional lead while knowing that it is not the headquarter of an INGO.”

“The Global Secretariat should be the global nerve center for all MCLD activities and provide guidance on the implementation of systems to effectively and sustainably manage and govern national MCLDs. This would require a governing council which would then delegate managerial functions to the development management team at the Global Secretariat. Each National Secretariat would then interface with the Global Secretariat. The Global Secretariat may also have representation from all the member national MCLDs who can report directly on affairs relevant to their countries or regions, through national sub-committees. The Global Secretariat may exercise oversight over the national MCLDs and convene an annual conference to deliberate over matters affecting all the members, where motions can be presented, voted on, and binding resolutions made, including regarding disciplinary cases,” said Chisunka.

When it came to National Associations, members saw them as fora for collective action, national level advocacy on CLD with governments and other stakeholders alike, and voices for CLD. Beranger Tossou from Youth Service Africa, Benin saw the role of the National Associations to guide, orient, mentor, and ensure adherence to CLD standards.

Challenges of the Road Less Traveled

Over seven months of listening and co-creation have made us appreciate why more organizations are not experimenting with their structures. The journey is fraught with challenges and, as most Global Secretariat staff admitted, success is not guaranteed. For one, where are the good practices for us to emulate? Being a trailblazer means preparing your team for setbacks and failures. We have consulted like-minded networks, approached organizational consultants, and sought lessons learned from

organizations currently undergoing a transformation. Mostly what we have is a list of things “not to do.”

Many questions and challenges remain. Making co-creation and consensus-building inclusive is not easy, especially when membership is fluid and often dependent on the passion of select champions within organizations. When those champions move, we often lose our influence and points of contact with those organizations. We need to find ways to ensure that while organization members remain active, individuals can have rest periods in between sprints - the relay race model is important for sustaining momentum. Also, as Djohossou warns, “As more and more national associations register, we need to avoid the prototypes of hierarchical organizations widely available and to be able to reflect what a movement is meant for.” We need to balance decisive leadership on operational and tactical issues with leaderful ecosystems that will continue to frame strategic decisions. And we have to do so in a manner that does not take forever and allows work to continue.

The literature on collective identity-setting points to the need to define ourselves as distinct from others who are not part of the collective. This process may strengthen interconnectedness within a movement but also raises the danger of exclusion.

Inclusion in a vast network is hard work. Members like Chisunka and Tossou raised the issue of language barriers and the need to move beyond colonial languages. There are also technical issues: “In Kenya, it’s been challenging to regularly engage CBOs based in rural areas with no internet connections/smartphones who are doing fantastic work in addressing pressing development challenges around gender, women empowerment, climate action etc. These organizations can’t participate via Zoom unless someone goes to their areas. With limited funds, this has become difficult. But we’ve continued engaging urban-based CBOs that intermittently have access to internet/smartphones for consultations,” says Ogutu.

Then there is the issue of translating an implicit commitment into an explicit contribution. We will likely lose many members who have thus far been happy to simply put their names on MCLD and not really do much about it. “I have learnt that a lot of organizations just claim to be community-led institutions, when the truth is, we are using it as a buzzword. Therefore, participation often hinges on the passion of an individual, not the full commitment by an institution. Being in the movement becomes a personal activity, compounding time poverty which we know is very real in our sector. So how can we enable passionate individuals to steer their institutions to uptake CLD practices especially when they are not in decision-making positions?” questions Ziba.

Finally, there is the poisoned chalice: funding. Almost every member raised the need for resources for coordinating and expanding on the ideas of the MCLD. Yet funding comes with its own set of demands around what are stable structures. Funders seek guarantees of performance and compliance. Most also like to be the ones who “created” a new model, instead of merely stepping in to support it. At MCLD we have zealously guarded ourselves from being co-opted by the compulsions of the aid system. Will we be able to continue to maintain our independence and our values with the strings that come attached to money?

MAKING LEADERFUL ECOSYSTEMS FUNCTIONABLE, SUSTAINABLE, AND FUNDABLE

Chisunka sums up some of our lessons, “The main lessons learnt are that co-creating must be inclusive and provide an equitable platform for sharing of ideas. The main challenge in co-creating is that it takes individual and collective participation which first requires building trust among targeted participants. With consistency, information sharing, accountability, and transparency, participants' confidence and commitment grows. This in turn expands participation and the range of resources available from multiple sources.”

Transition and evolution are constant, be it with partnerships, organizations, individuals or movements. At any given moment, a movement is framed and reframed in the minds of those who make it and those who encounter it. It is also constantly made and remade, as people and organizations come and go. It has no fixed composition and therefore no blueprint for the role of every member. Every member defines their own role at any given time, and as their lives change, so do their roles. Thus, transitions for a movement are never complete or absolute. They are constantly happening in a multitude of ways.

A big challenge to restructuring the movement remains the ability to retain this dynamism within a structure that demands stability and security. However, there isn't necessarily a disconnect between the two. By focusing on processes, not persons, a movement may be able to ensure both the security and the sustainability of its efforts.

Our National Associations also show how consensus-building can work. "In Nigeria, I wrote to all like-minded organizations to create MCLD. We came together, understood the norms and decided to adapt them to our own context. The government would not allow us to register as a movement. So we took on a different name even as we retained the characteristics of a movement. We met to decide what we will do and how. We selected activities, voted on trustees and rules together, framed duties of leaders, terms of leadership and membership. Once we figured out our priorities and structure, we entrusted the lawyers amongst us - there were eight - with the responsibility of translating our shared understanding into legal terms and ensuring compliance," explains Dali.

Uganda followed a slightly different process. The Association had long existed, but they decided to register last year. "We created a steering committee. For the duration you are on the committee you have to be a fully active member. Members shared roles and

responsibilities on registration. The Steering Committee directs and decisions are taken through voting with members and consultation with regional structures. These regional structures were created as different regions have different needs and contexts. Leadership is rotating. All this creates a balance of power,” explains Matte Jockas from Wilmat Development Foundation, Uganda.

CONCLUSION

Mbongi is a Kikongo word that means a place of learning or a house without walls (Perry & Duncan, 2017). The journey to co-create MCLD’s future has become our Mbongi or learning place. In reaching out to members to understand their vision for MCLD and intentionally listening, we have begun to better understand our members and their aspirations. Thus far, while our members guided our strategies and, to some extent, our activities, we had never consulted them on their broader vision for MCLD and for their roles within it. Our goals had been created at the time of our launch, and members joined if they shared those goals. But movements are never static. Therefore, our vision cannot be static either. It has to adapt to the changing context of our times and reflect the evolving aspirations of our members.

This learning journey is therefore not just another way to keep our members engaged or to foster ownership towards the new structure; it has also become a way of strengthening our interconnectedness. “Once again we have discovered that the process is just as or even more important as the timing. As we are being inclusive, we have intentionally adjusted timelines, added more listening cafes, and sought out more voices. We are prioritizing this over a quicker timeline that was initially decided on internally. Our approach emphasizes that working as a collective is key, and that voices matter. Members of our movement have strong voices and are eager to be heard. We are keen to make the space for them to do so as we take next steps as a collective,” explains Sera Bulbul who is staff of the Global Secretariat.

Yes, creating a structure that focuses on nurturing interconnectedness and not on preserving the sanctity of the organizational structure itself is challenging. However, if we adopt Duncan et al's (2018) vision of the movement as a "forest of interdependence and necessary mutuality" (para. 11), then intentional inclusivity, deep listening, and equitable partnerships are the only way to thrive. They require time, resources, patience, continuous consensus building, and a willingness to accept that the product may not always be a success. But there is immense growth, learning, unlearning, and value in the process itself.

Finally, a word about authorship in movements. This article may carry my name but the ideas and opinions that spurred it come from the many people who shape MCLD daily. The article's ownership therefore rests with all members of MCLD, including the few listed at the end of this article. MCLD's future is being shaped by its members every day through design workshops, calls, listening cafes, National Association meetings, and many other avenues. The thing about movements is that they can never be owned by a single person, just like any tasks or ideas within movements cannot be attributed to a single source. Someone comes up with a suggestion based on all that they see, hear, read, and do; another chimes in; a few more challenge and refine it; and the idea keeps growing in scope, scale, and impact. It gets molded and remolded, adapted and re-adapted, till it gets normalized, dies out, or becomes bigger than anyone ever imagined. Big enough to influence policy makers, big enough to change practices, big enough to invite the interest of a journal.

A big thank you to all MCLD members for shaping the Movement and its future everyday. For this article, alphabetically listed, a special shout out to:

Sera Bulbul, MCLD, USA

Joseph Chingalu, CRECCOM, Malawi

Paul Chisunka, Amos Youth Centre, Zambia

Elene Cloete, Outreach International, USA

John Coonrod, MCLD, USA

Dr Rebecca Dali, Strategic Action for Community Development Nigeria (SACDN) and
CCEPI, Nigeria

Pascal Djohossou, MCLD Benin

Getachew Eshete, Heifer International Ethiopia

Sylvia Hernandez, THP Mexico

Ann Hendrix Jenkins, MCLD, USA

Matte Jockas, Wilmat Development Foundation, Uganda

Shimeta Ezezew Kassa, Afro Ethiopia Integrated Development, Ethiopia

Teshome S Lemma, The Hunger Project Ethiopia

Appolinaire OUSSOU LIO, Groupe de Recherche et d'Action pour le Bien-être au Bénin
(GRABE-BENIN), Benin

Aiah Marrah, Mansofinia Agric Farmers Organization, Sierra Leone

Samuel Mutambo, The Hunger Project and MCLD, Zambia

Jude C Nwachukwu, MCLD Liberia

Steve Ogutu, MCLD Kenya

Francis Oyat Otoo, Family Harvest Foundation, Uganda

Annette Scarpitta , FOPAC, DRC

CHAKPLA ESSI MANSAN SÉNA, ONG AIL, Togo

Anima Sharma, India

Emmanuel Singa, MCLD Central African Republic

Béranger Tossou, Youth Service Africa, Benin

Holta Trandafili, World Vision International, USA

Sothin Ziba, Phukira, Malawi

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