

## **Business on the Frontlines VI&VII, 2014, 2015**

### **Serving Touching Tiny Lives, Lesotho**

Founded in 2004 in Lesotho, Touching Tiny Lives (TTL) is dedicated to helping orphaned and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS and malnutrition. Locally staffed and managed, TTL strives to save as many lives as possible, one child at time. Fueled by migration for mining to next door South Africa and high levels of structural violence, Lesotho suffers HIV rates hovering around 24% - the second highest in the world – with AIDS as the leading cause of death in the country. Local children are at the heart of the HIV/AIDS pandemic's medical, economic, and socio-cultural impact. TTL estimates about 36,000 children to be living with HIV, with another 150,000 children are AIDS-related orphans. TTL responds to the crisis by providing holistic care to vulnerable children and their families through a unique model consisting of two programs: Outreach – which includes a Village Health Worker training program – and the TTL Safe Home.

#### **What was the problem?**

TTL funding and operational models were disconnected. TTL's funding was entirely external and insecure, being granted on a year by year basis with no endowment. Without a genuine expansion into long-term, sustainable funding approaches, the TTL's life-saving programs were at risk. The BOTFL Lesotho Team was challenged to propose potential income generating activities, potentially growing into sustainable businesses over time for TTL. The ultimate goal was to decrease TTL's dependency on external funding and bring the NGO toward increased self-sufficiency.

#### **What did we do?**

In addition to weekly Skype calls with in-country partners, the BOTFL team also undertook in depth research initiatives on Lesotho in an attempt to better understand the current and historical cultural, economic, geographic, political and public health landscape. In February 2014 the BOTFL team traveled to Lesotho to meet local stakeholders and explore potential areas of external opportunity for TTL. The team began by conducting a thorough analysis of the local economy through interviews with the local businesses, Chinese-owned businesses, NGOs. The team looked at their business practices, interactions with each other, and interactions with TTL. As a consequence, they outlined a series of key takeaways ranging from 'copycat' competition among local businesses, to the competitive advantages of Chinese-owned businesses, to partnership opportunities with other NGOs.

The BOTFL team also conducted a series of meetings with TTL local staff and management. These discussions revealed that TTL staff had limited training on collecting data, had little accountability, and poorly utilized the skills of their staff. According to one TTL Fellow, the accuracy of the data management officer's data entry varied between 25% and 75%. And while local staff knew that the data was important to TTL, they were unaware of the significance of individual data metrics, which helped to explain data inaccuracy.



*Photo by Emily Block*

Finally the BOTFL team assessed the TTL Fellows program and determined that although the Fellows had extensive experience, their skills were often misused, they lacked the data needed to effectively apply for grants, and Fellowships were poorly structured. The biggest critique of the structure of the Fellowship program was that there was little to no overlap between when one Fellow would arrive and the previous Fellow would depart. This meant there was little time the transfer of essential institutional knowledge.

Upon completion of their field analysis, the team saw that TTL's management and structure needed to be improved before the organization could tackle the tough problems facing them. Internal communication around priorities and direction meant that front line staff lacked decision-making support and guidance from TTL leaders. The BOTFL team also developed approaches to match staff members with the positions for which they have the skills and interest.

### **What was the turning point?**

When the team traveled to Lesotho they were operating on the belief that TTL does what they do very well, and were simply being limited by a funding and organizational model they had outgrown. However once in country the team realized TTL suffered from organizational challenges which threatened TTL's ability to both generate revenue and operate effectively.

From the realization that TTL had considerable structural problems, the team shifted its focus from an external focus on identifying potential market opportunities to an internal focus on strengthening and building internal capacity for the organization. Only after TTL improved their internal efficiency could they create sustainable entrepreneurial ventures. Moreover, while the team remained sensitive to TTL's dedication to local autonomy, they determined that TTL's long-term growth and survival could be significantly enhanced if external donors took a more proactive role in helping TTL address its current capacity challenges.

### **What was the recommendation?**

The BOTFL team suggested a transformation in the relationship between TTL and dedicated external supporters to more fully leverage their unique resources, beyond financial. These changes entail a more focused Fellowship Program, the development of TTL's data management system, the formation of local, national, and international partnerships, and the restructure of managerial roles within TTL. The BOTFL team believes these improvements will lead TTL to reach four fundamental objectives that the team identified as critical for long-term sustainability:

- Funding diversification
- Operational efficiency
- Increased oversight and accountability
- Maximization of local and international donor relationship through capacity-building

The most important lesson BOTFL learned from this experience with TTL was the differences in serving large global international humanitarian organizations and much smaller local NGOs. Although larger humanitarian organizations may have more technical skills and resources, smaller NGOs can be much more connected to the ground, but can also be more disjointed and lack needed technical and management capabilities.

### **What actually happened? What was follow-up?**

As evidence of BOTFL's long term commitment to the success of each of its partner organization, in February 2015, a second team from BOTFL VII travelled to Lesotho to continue to support TTL in its internal and external transformation, in particular, by designing and conducting a week-long management training course for in country employees which was aimed at addressing the skills gap. TTL has made significant progress implementing the BOTFL team's recommendations, including efforts to provide "Leadership Training" for staff and an overhaul to re-align current staffing to better match staff skills with positions. Local TTL staff is working on drafting a strategic plan with input from the local board.

<http://www.touchingtinylives.org>

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