



It is very rare for a reviewer to meet the author of the very work being reviewed. In my case, I bumped into Mary Ndlovu in Johannesburg at a conference on Zimbabwe and transitional justice in 2013 just when I was in the middle of reading her above-mentioned book. I did let her know that I was reviewing her book and what a resourceful person she is. When I first saw the title of her book, I was quickly reminded of Geoff Nyarota's *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Newsman*. However the two are not quite the same either in terms of content or quality.

If I were to sum up Mary Ndlovu's book in just one sentence, it would be that it is about an organisation that is swimming against the tide all the time, even when things seem to be calm. Interestingly, this book was published in the midst of the global economic and financial downturn and was more particularly pertinent for the Zimbabwean context, which has been crisis-ridden for more than a decade. This makes the book more complex. Indeed, Ndlovu's is one of the most comprehensive texts not just about the subject matter but about everything else mentioned or discussed in the book. It is thus one of the most difficult books to review for a number of reasons. Firstly, Mary Ndlovu has extensive knowledge of the subject matter – the Zimbabwe Project Trust – having served not only as its board trustee but also as one of the trustees who remained as the bridging link between the old and the new governance structure when the board decided to step down. Secondly, not only does she have theoretical or academic knowledge of the NGO world, but she also worked for a Zimbabwean NGO for ten years till 2003. In addition, she also worked in Zambia, thereby acquiring the regional

experience needed for a project of this nature. Thirdly, Mary Ndlovu traces the history of the Zimbabwe Project from a political, historical, economic and at times anthropological point of view.

The book is about almost everything that has to do with Zimbabwean history, state, governance, political economy and people. For most people, they need to read this book to understand Zimbabwe. At some level, therefore, the book ceases to be about one organisation but rather becomes a story of the country and its components. As I shall discuss later, what Ndlovu writes of the Zimbabwe Project Trust, while specific to that organisation and the way it responded to the ever-changing political and economic environment, can be said to apply to any civil society organisation in Zimbabwe in particular and in Africa in general. I have had the advantage of working across Africa with various civil society organisations and their stories are not different from that of the Zimbabwe Project Trust.

Swimming against the Tide

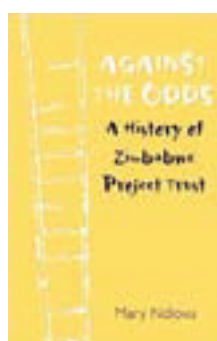
Bhekinkosi Moyo

Against The Odds: A History of the Zimbabwe Project Trust

By Mary Ndlovu

Weaver Press and ZimPro, 2012, 420 pages, \$ 38.95

ISBN-10: 1779221681



Ndlovu must be commended for taking on such a huge and complex task. It has never been easy to write a biography for any individual, let alone or particularly one that the author has an intimate relationship with. Yet, I found Ndlovu's analysis very objective. She managed to strike some distance between herself and the role she occupied in relation to the subject in question. Hers is an institutional biography, making it one of the few I am aware of in the civil society sector. One such recent organisational biography that has resemblance with Ndlovu's is Alan Fowler's *ACCORD's Transformation: Overcoming Uncertainty 1976-2010*. In many ways, Fowler's book also traces ACCORD's history and describes how, over the years, the organisation has navigated the political and economic environments brought about by the state, the international context as well as its identity as an international and African organisation. The result is a fascinating treatise on ACCORD's institutional structure, identity, culture and

continuous play with programming and relations-building in the context of organisational changes. Fowler's work resonates with Ndlovu's; each traces an institution's life, showing how that institution grows and responds to contexts. Both authors are also internationals, Fowler being of British origin and Mary of Canadian origin based in Africa with a lot of experience in the sector.

It is Ndlovu's book however that is of interest for us here. She traces the concept and formation of the Zimbabwe Project in exile, its activities during the liberation struggle, focusing mainly on refugees in such countries as Mozambique, Zambia, UK, etc. She then traces the life of the organisation as it responded to the new developments of the early 1980s. The organisation relocates from London to Zimbabwe to respond to issues around demobilisation and mobilisation of the ex-combatants. As a logical step, the organisation immediately sees its work as cut out in the area of empowering ex-combatants; as such, its focus in 1981 on cooperatives seems appropriate and a welcome move. That the cooperatives fail later on is another matter. Ndlovu then follows through to discuss the various forms that the organisation assumes once in Zimbabwe as it responds to the ever-changing developments in politics, economy and donor relations, among other factors. Thus, from a humanitarian organisation, the Zimbabwe Project Trust morphs into cooperatives training through its Community Mobilisation and Training (CMT), to savings and credit schemes, land resettlement and then back to humanitarian assistance. In all these various stages, a number of important factors emerge that merit discussion in this review.

The first is political. From the beginning of the project, there was always a relationship with the political class. It was because of the war of independence that a number of refugees emerged and the project responded to address the challenge of refugees. To do so, the project had to work closely with the liberation movement leaders in such areas as identification of the refugees, logistics and anticipating factors that could scupper the success of the project. As the organisation relocates to Zimbabwe and begins addressing issues of ex-combatants, the project had to structure its relations with the government on the one hand and the ex-combatants on the other. During this time, the government does not seem interested in the welfare of the ex-combatants and they become the constituency for the project. However, when the government, and in particular ZANU PF, runs into trouble with the economic crisis and the threat of the opposition, ex-combatants become an asset for the party and as such are co-opted by it – leaving the project to impact negatively on programming. The relationship that

develops between the Zimbabwe Project Trust and war veterans, as they were later to be called, is very intriguing as they are manipulative and a threat to the very existence of the project, especially in the Victoria Falls area. And the relationship with the state is symptomatic of its general relationship with other NGOs in the country. It views them as a threat and therefore vigilance is always called for. This comes out very clearly in the various stages of the organisation, whether it is sister Janice using her friends in government to get what she wants or the state devising various methods to frustrate the activities of the project – conduct so familiar in the life of any NGO in Zimbabwe.

The second factor is the usual one of funding. The project goes through various phases of funding and relationship with donors. Starting with flexible funding, the organisation goes through project funding, capacity development and partnerships. Having had Novib for a long time providing it with core funding, the project finds itself at some point threatened financially

when the main donor decides to cut back on funding and also adopts new frameworks such as Results Based Management Framework. A lot can be said here but the main point is that what the project experienced is not divorced from the many donor regimes and changes that have taken place over the last years. This is not peculiar to Zimbabwe or to the project but is a global phenomenon.

The third factor is that of people. The role played by the various directors, board members and donor contacts is very important for any organisation. The same is true of the Project. A director like Judith Todd had lots of contacts both within the country and internationally. This helped the project in securing financial support and political goodwill. The same is true with Themba Nyathi, who went on to join politics. How each individual influenced the direction of the organisation is detailed in Ndlovu's book. There were other influential people both within the organisation, for example some board members, but also from without, such as program officers on the donor side.

There are other factors covered in the book such as systems and operations, accountability, strategy and monitoring which I have not discussed. This is simply because I wanted to make the point that what Ndlovu has chronicled is real time analysis of an organisation as it navigated the different waves in the sea of political and economic changes. The book is a must read for all interested in policy work, organisational development, donor-grantee relations, governance and the overall political economy of civil society organisations.

References

- Fowler, A., 2012, *ACCORD's Transformation: Overcoming Uncertainty, 1976-2010*, Nairobi: ACCORD.
- Nyarota, G., 2006, *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman*, Cape Town: Zebra Press.

