

Inside Development

Inclusive Development

'Two is better than one': Why some NGOs are choosing co-leadership

Many organizations in the development sector are choosing co-CEOs over a more conventional model. Here's why.

By **Amy Fallon** // 22 August 2024



Co-leadership gains traction in development organizations. Photo by: Shutterstock

When NGO [GNP+](#), the Global Network of People Living with HIV, embarked on its 2021 search for not one but two bosses for what one of its co-leaders now calls an “arranged marriage,” their board chair was doubtful.

“When role-share was first suggested as an alternative model of leadership I had questions — will this be efficient, what about egos, will it cause confusion with external representation?” said [Jacquelyne Alesi](#), the chair of the GNP+ board, on the organization’s site. “However, having looked at the idea in more detail I now see co-leadership through a new lens of mutual accountability, flexibility, and support — all central to a feminist leadership model.”

A few years on from the decision and one year into the co-leadership of Spongile Nkosi and Florence Riako Anam, the leadership of GNP+ has been emboldened after several years of instability. They are just one of many in the development sector that have chosen co-CEOs over a more conventional model.

“To have two co-eds, both women and both from Africa, has never happened,” Anam told Devex. “Predominantly even within the sector, the usual dynamic is that one leader will be from the global north and one will be from the south and one will be a man, one will be a woman.” She called it a “powerful leadership decision” by the board.

Nkosi said that before the setup was put in place, GNP+ had seen the “longest time of instability, particularly around leadership and around the government structures, our board and also organizational systems.”

“For us at GNP+, which is primarily an issue-based, community-led organization, this model allows for us to focus on both the advocacy and representation work that is our primary work while ensuring the organization’s operations and governance aspects are also prioritized,” Anam said. “The opportunity to share power means sharing insights, there is someone else to think things through with.” Stability led to confidence from the network’s team, partners, and donors, and having co-leaders created a sense of leadership accountability, she said.

Nkosi added: “I do think we have to recognize that the leadership of GNP+ has never been as strong as it is now.”

An appealing choice

Ruby Johnson, the former co-executive director of [FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund](#) for six years with Devi Leiper O'Malley — with whom she also co-authored a November 2022 [report](#) after interviewing more than 25 organization leaders and practitioners on the insights and practices of feminist co-leadership — says few chose it a decade ago. Today it’s appealing to many.

While it’s hard to get statistics, Johnson told Devex: “My feeling is it’s becoming more popular and more something that people are considering.” While the practice is rooted in feminist leadership, with some such as [Mama Cash](#), [Womankind Worldwide](#), [Black Feminist Fund](#), [FARE SHARE of Women Leaders](#), and more having adopted a shared decision-making style, others outside this area include [STIR Education](#), disability justice nonprofit [ADD International](#), [ActionAid UK](#), [Open Philanthropy](#), and [Greenpeace UK](#).

[Research](#) from global leadership consultancy [Oxford HR](#) published in 2023 found that there had been increased interest in the model, with 47% of respondents working in an organization with it.

It said the findings proved that co-leadership was a “viable and effective model to bring increased diversity to senior leadership teams, leading to more sustainable organizations, reduce feelings of loneliness through power sharing, and foster succession planning, thus helping to future-proof organizations”. But there was no “one-size-fits-all” model.

“I think for GNP+ it was also selected to try and alleviate some of the challenges that were being faced with having one singular leader at the top, the workload between the responsibility of leading the advocacy and the representation and the issue-based functions of the organization,

and also keeping the internal structures organized,” Anam told Devex, noting that previous GNP+ leaders had experienced burnout.

No ‘your role’ or ‘my role’

Under the co-leadership model, Anam is in charge of advocacy and external relations, communications, and partnerships with community networks, partners, and donors, while Nkosi looks after internal operations including finance, admin, HR, and governance.

“This was looked at not only as a way of sharing power but also as a way of enabling the executive functions of the office to operate properly in what is a typical issue-based organization,” Anam said.

She said that although they had spoken to [UHAI EASHRI](#), Mama Cash, and FRIDA, among others, Nkosi and herself had to carve out their own leadership style.

“You’re thrown into this arranged marriage with very little room to figure it out, the two of you — how you want to learn, your work ethics and standards and values,” said Anam.

But the pair were adamant that there is no “your role” or “my role.”

Anam said: “There's no ‘my failures’ and ‘your failures.’ We are a collective. We call it a collective space. We can leave the collective space and go do whatever it is but we have to keep coming back to make sure that we are aligned.”

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Nkosi was originally recruited alongside a male leader as part of the first co-directorship. But he then left due to illness and Anam arrived. Today GNP+, a long-serving community-led network for people living with HIV founded in 1987, is registered in South Africa, although the main office is in the Netherlands. Most of the organization work remotely but it has offices in Cape Town and Amsterdam.

“We all know that two is better than one, and with that, I think that we can achieve so much together,” said Nkosi in a video posted on the GNP+ site.

ADD International took a page out of this leadership book in May 2022, with trustees looking for a “transformational change,” Mary Ann Clements told Devex. Clements, who is based in the United Kingdom, is a co-CEO with Fredrick Ouko, in Nairobi. She said that the board had been inspired by FRIDA but that they’d also learned from [Chance for Childhood](#). ADD International is keeping the model for its current 10-year strategic framework period.

Ouko told Devex that one question from staff members was whether they would have to report to both Clements and himself on issues, but this is not the case.

“It’s the same thing,” he told Devex. “It’s not that one is a deputy and the other is CEO. We had to be intentional around ‘how do we make it simpler for the staff to understand that this is a shared role?’”

There was a “double confidence” that came from shared decision-making, said Ouko.

“What it does allow you to do that the normal model might not I guess is have that extra voice and more diversity,” added Clements. “It’s a model that can support the bringing in of lived experience and that can be part of how we decolonize [the sector].”

She stressed however that organizations needed to look at how power is flowing through the whole organization. When the new structure was announced, ADD International also said that they were looking for at least four new trustees with lived experience of disability.

STIR announced in April that they were embarking on the co-leadership road for six months and would extend it if successful.

“We’ve both been at the organization for quite a long time so it was partly a way of developing internal talent and growing talent,” Jenny Willmott, who is now an interim co-chief executive with John McIntosh, told Devex. She is based in Uganda while McIntosh is in Northern Ireland.

Willmott said that STIR hoped they were ahead of the curve and the board had recognized that the pair’s complementary skills could be of benefit as co-leaders. She had previously been senior director of program delivery at STIR while McIntosh was director of learning and impact.

Co-CEOs, she said, were also able to “share the load” and be a “safe sounding board for each other.”

McIntosh said that while he was focused on external issues and Willmott on the internal, they may try to mix this up going forward so they can each build on their non-focus areas.

Alex Kent became co-CEO of [Restless Development](#) alongside Kate Muhwezi when the NGO was emerging from COVID-19, with the model being seen as the best structure to ensure supportive leadership and stability.

Today Kent works 90% as a full-time employee and Muhwezi 72%, said Muhwezi, which dispels notions that having two CEOs is more expensive. Both are U.K.-based.

"No, this isn't a job share," Kent told Devex. "This isn't taking one role and splitting it fifty-fifty; this is really putting two different brains, different skill sets together. On the big stuff, two heads are better than one — modeling collective decision-making."

She said that success often came down to trust, the relationship between the co-leads, and chemistry.

"I often joke it's like having a second wife," said Kent.

Muhwezi said that the setup had allowed her to stay calm after she was forced to take six weeks off work for surgery shortly after being appointed as she knew that Kent would be leading the charity.

"I don't think that I would ever have applied to be a CEO anywhere on my own, because I don't feel that or I didn't feel then that I had the necessary skills to do so, whereas together we're stronger," she told Devex.

Kent stressed though that just because a co-leadership model may work once "don't think it automatically has to then be forever more as well," as Johnson's research stressed.

Johnson said that there were lots of reasons that co-leaders often "break up." Not all were negative.

"Not everyone's designed to be in a relationship where they share power," she said. Sometimes co-leaders were not clear on the division of their role, and did not take the time to develop a relationship or establish a shared vision and trust with the board.

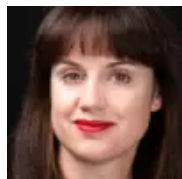
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Amy Fallon is an Australian freelance journalist currently based in Uganda. She has also reported from Australia, the U.K. and Asia, writing for a wide range of outlets on a variety of issues including breaking news, and international development, and human rights topics. Amy has also worked for News Deeply, NPR, The Guardian, AFP news agency, IPS, Citiscope, and others.