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Community-Based Music Festivals as Tools for Advancing Public Goods

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Kabale, Uganda iKnow Music Festival in September 2018 with an estimated attendance of 25,000.

Summary: Music festivals offer a unique opportunity to identify and promote community-driven initiatives while avoiding common policymaking pitfalls. The Global Livingston Institute (GLI) has demonstrated the broad capacity of these events to catalyze change around the world by hosting a series of free concerts in East Africa “centered around culture sharing, public health, and economic development.”¹ This paper shares four lessons about the project of advancing public goods through intentional, responsive, and community-based music festivals.

Introduction:

Policymakers and practitioners are always looking for creative and innovative ways to meaningfully impact the communities where they work. It was in this spirit that Jamie Van Leeuwen founded the GLI in 2009 following his travels across Uganda and Rwanda through the Livingston Fellowship that he received from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation.² In response to what he saw as an under-informed and colonial approach to international development efforts by NGOs in the region, Van Leeuwen sought to genuinely understand the needs of East African communities by applying a simple maxim: *Listen. Think. Act.*

¹ “Concert Series,” Programs and Projects, Global Livingston Institute, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://www.globallivingston.org/program/concert>.

² “Our Story,” Mission, Global Livingston Institute, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://www.globallivingston.org/mission/#mission-header-story-section>.

By fundamentally reordering the development sequence, GLI has empowered community leaders, students, policymakers, musicians, and other key stakeholders through high-impact projects in the region for nearly 15 years.³

Uganda's well-documented struggle against HIV peaked in the 1990s when estimated prevalence rates reached 18-30% amid a lethal combination of intense stigmatization, insufficient public education about sexually transmitted diseases, and a general lack of awareness about one's own HIV status.⁴ These factors posed a serious problem for public health officials attempting to reach at-risk individuals. However, sustained efforts at education and frequent testing helped to reduce prevalence rates to 6.5% by 2016.⁵ The GLI's innovative contribution was to use music as a powerful tool for organization, education, and collaboration.

Beginning in 2014, the GLI and its local partners produced a series of music festivals designed to facilitate HIV testing and reproductive health services among high-risk populations. Against a backdrop of high HIV prevalence, high stigma, and low reproductive health education, these events provided a novel way to talk about complex issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at the community level. While the goals of each successive festival have adapted to reflect local trends, the results have been consistent and robust:⁶

- The GLI has hosted 25 free concerts throughout Uganda and Rwanda since 2014.
- Almost a quarter of a million people have attended concerts that have featured over 500 local and international artists.
- Local health providers in partnership with GLI administered 25,000 free HIV tests and distributed 386,000 condoms.
- Just under 3,000 individuals have been linked with on-going HIV care and treatment following concert attendance.
- Over 20,000 individuals have received free hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer screenings (non-communicable diseases), among other general public health services. We have also connected these participants with education and access to resources for young people and their families with Down syndrome.
- Through direct investment in local economies, the concert series has generated over \$4.1 million in combined economic impact in East Africa in primarily rural communities.

The format of these community-based music festivals has harnessed this productive energy for a variety of public initiatives, including culture sharing, public health education, destigmatization efforts, mental health training, and a recent emphasis on combating non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

³ "Programs + Projects," Global Livingston Institute, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.globallivingston.org/pro>.

⁴ Jay Vithalani and Marta Herreros-Villanueva, "HIV Epidemiology in Uganda: survey based on age, gender, number of sexual partners and frequency of testing," *African Health Sciences* 18, no. 3 (September 2018): 524, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ahs.v18i3.8>.

⁵ Vithalani and Herreros-Villanueva, "HIV Epidemiology," 523.

⁶ Global Livingston Institute, "Concert Series."



As the iKnow Concert Series expanded in 2016, the GLI launched an initiative in Lira, a city in Northern Uganda, where 15,000 individuals from the community attended the concert and had access to free HIV testing and other basic public health services.

Lesson #1: Listen. Think. Act.

Often missing from community development is a critical listening phase prior to the formulation of any plans that may be adopted. When absent from the process, this can mean that even the most well-intentioned projects fail to correctly identify the needs of their stakeholders, resulting in misguided and uninformed presumptions about what might be best for the community. It is especially important to avoid this mode of engagement in a region like East Africa, given its history of colonization.⁷⁸

In contrast, the core vision and values of the GLI is for community leaders and activists to resist the impulse to immediately jump to the implementation phase. Instead, the objective is to more intentionally leave space for cultivating relationships in the community, engaging in productive dialogue, and tailoring any proposed actions to the needs that are uncovered through that organic and patient process. When done correctly, the result of this approach is a set of vibrant, sustainable, and mutually comprehensible partnerships that can properly identify and promote public goods through sustained collaboration.

Music festivals—especially annually recurring events—facilitate a back-and-forth dialogue between organizers and attendees with the unique opportunity to receive real-time feedback. This framing allows the former to ask the latter, “*what do you need and how can we help?*” rather than the hubristic statement, “*here’s what you need and how you can help.*”

⁷ Nazifa Rashid, “British Colonialism in East-Africa during Nineteenth Century,” *International Journal of Art and Art History* 1, no. 1 (December 2013): 22, http://ijaahnet.com/journals/ijaah/Vol_1_No_1_December_2013/3.pdf.

⁸ Yahya Sseremba, “The History of Dictatorship: Custom, Authority, and Power in Precolonial and Colonial Uganda,” *Africa Spectrum* 58, no.1 (January 2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00020397221149037>.



Ugandan musician, Gravity, performs at iKnow Concert Series in Masaka, Uganda in 2017.

Lesson #2: *Make It Easy; Make It Fun.*

Once the contours of a community’s challenges have been mapped out, trusted local leaders can begin to implement a strategy for promoting responsive solutions. But what happens if that strategy is complex or uninspiring? In their acclaimed book *Nudge* on choice architecture and decision-making in society, Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler recommend that “if you want to encourage people to do something, make it easy.”⁹ We would add “make it fun” to this mantra. The GLI concert series has been successful in both respects.

When the concerts were primarily aimed at the culturally sensitive goals of mass HIV testing, destigmatization, and public health education, the most formidable challenges included reaching the target populations who were most at risk in a way that was exciting and engaging but not cost prohibitive. The GLI’s free music festivals represented a novel solution according to Van Leeuwen and GLI’s Chief Operating Officer Ryan Grundy:

⁹ Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: The Final Edition* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2021), 107.

“By offering screening in a central location away from home villages, a music festival could mitigate some of the concerns about confidentiality while allowing easy access to expanded HIV screening in young populations that may not have otherwise chosen to seek testing.”¹⁰

According to Rumbi Gumbie—who has worked as a research program manager and consultant with the GLI—the free concert format has been particularly effective at reaching young males with HIV testing and counseling, leading to significant attitudinal changes:

“In 2020, we asked what services the attendees would like to see offered at the concerts, [and] a majority of them mentioned HIV testing, counseling, and condom education. Outside of these concerts, health providers had struggled to get people to attend clinics and WHO/UN designated sites for HIV testing. The environment provided by these concerts, especially for young people, allowed for a comfortable and anonymous space in which something so highly stigmatized in their communities could be done.”¹¹

In other words, consistent with the GLI’s community-informed public health goals, the free music festivals solved efficiency, engagement, and economic challenges simultaneously. They made community outreach easy and fun through what Grundy refers to as *edutainment*:¹² a portmanteau of education and entertainment that makes it enjoyable to learn about an important topic—be it public health, economic development, culture sharing, or any other vital subject.

¹⁰ James Van Leeuwen et al., “Music Festivals Serving as a Catalyst for Collaborative HIV Prevention Education and Expanded HIV Testing in Rural Uganda,” *International Journal of Community Development* 6, no.1 (June 2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.11634/233028791503915>.

¹¹ Rumbi Gumbie, Email correspondence, November 28, 2023.

¹² Interview with Ryan Grundy, September 19, 2023.



Local community partner Reach a Hand Uganda and Global Livingston Institute Team celebrate another successful concert series.

Lesson #3: Empower Key Stakeholders.

Music festivals connect artists with audiences, but they also provide an environment for unconventional interactions between members of the public sector, private sector, and civil society—including nonprofits and NGOs—and this represents an exciting opportunity for advancing high impact public initiatives.

“With global partners ranging from the US embassy to the regional Ugandan and Rwandan governments to Rotary International and dozens of local community health organizations, the iKnow Concert Series serves as a model for international development done right, and for future successes around the world,” according to Dr. Andrew Ward, one of the founders of the iKnow Concert Series.¹³

Of note, each of the three categories of policy actors—the public sector, private sector, and civil society—has its blind spots and accompanying policy failures that community-based music festivals can help to avoid.

Civil society often faces the problem of “coordination failure,” where a “lack of cooperative infrastructure” means that individuals cannot generate the organizational capacity to unite as a collective movement for a common cause.¹⁴ Despite widespread support for a specific goal, civil society groups may still fail to mobilize for action.

¹³ Dr. Andrew Ward, Email correspondence, November 22, 2023.

¹⁴ Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing development: Does participation work?* (Washington: World Bank Publications, 2013): 65.

Festivals overcome this limitation by creating a physical space at a specific point in time for the participatory gathering of hundreds or even thousands of community members with music serving as the organizational node.¹⁵ Coordination is baked into the process of organizing a music festival, eliminating a formidable obstacle to advancing public goods.

The *public sector* may have the most direct administrative power, including taxation and regulation, but in democratic systems, political actors may ignore important public goods that do not directly contribute to securing votes or maintaining public office—often referred to as a problem of “misaligned incentives.”¹⁶ However, as community-based music festivals are not primarily a government function, they provide a vehicle for a public-private partnership (PPP) where the incentive structures are locally informed rather than politically motivated.

Finally, the *private sector* harnesses the ingenuity of highly motivated individuals to create efficient and profitable enterprises, but market participants may lack the necessary information to make an optimal decision. Economists call this a market failure of “information asymmetries” and find that certain organizational structures—PPPs, social enterprises, etc.—can avoid this problem.¹⁷ The GLI’s edutainment platform gives individuals more information about public health, economic development, and cultural issues, filling the content gaps that the market would otherwise leave uncorrected.¹⁸

¹⁵ Van Leeuwen et al., “Music Festivals,” 4.

¹⁶ Joshua A. Blonz, “The Welfare Costs of Misaligned Incentives: Energy Inefficiency and the Principal-Agent Problem,” Finance and Economics Discussion Series 2019-071 (Washington: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2019) 1, <https://doi.org/10.17016/FEDS.2019.071>.

¹⁷ Jiao Luo and Aseem Kaul, “Private action in public interest: The comparative governance of social issues,” *Strategic Management Journal* 40, no. 4 (September 2018): 476, <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2961>.

¹⁸ Jessica Adams et al., “Music as a vehicle for reducing HIV stigma and increasing access to testing in rural Uganda: A quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study,” *Sociology International Journal* 3, no. 6 (2019) 434, DOI: 10.15406/sij.2019.03.00208.



Local health providers in Uganda conduct health screenings as part of the services provided through the concert series.

Lesson #4: Keep In Touch.

The final and perhaps most important lesson is to follow up with the festival participants to ensure that public goods are advanced after the music stops and the crowds go home. Van Leeuwen correctly notes that “testing a bunch of people for HIV is only effective if you then follow up with treatment and services.”¹⁹ While the festival itself provides the organizational scaffolding for community-driven change, most of the work must be done throughout the rest of the year if the festival’s impact is to be durable.

In the GLI’s experience, keeping in touch has two distinct advantages:

First, it guarantees that whatever public goods the festival organizers decide to promote, the broader goals receive commensurate and consistent attention long after the excitement of the festival fades. In practice, follow-up actions taken by the GLI have included crafting individualized plans for those identified as HIV positive in order to link them to care and medical treatment; public messaging campaigns across social media to promote SRHR dialogue; hosting periodic workshops and fundraising events; presenting at international conferences; providing free access to SRHR services; sponsoring educational and culture

¹⁹ Jamie Van Leeuwen, Email correspondence, November 20, 2023.

sharing opportunities for students; and initializing rural community development projects.²⁰ By continually strengthening local partnerships and maintaining a presence among stakeholders, the GLI has demonstrated an abiding commitment to the community's long-term objectives. This kind of dedicated and intentional follow-up is ultimately the deliverable that the festival sets in motion.

Second, this model creates a sense of issue ownership within the community and leads to increased collective buy-in. Raymond Bokua, GLI Staff Member and Manager of Operations in Kabale, Uganda, says that the free concerts “have always been a highlight of the year in our town... I feel so proud. I feel thankful for all the donors and partners involved, and I hope this initiative continues to grow and impact more people in different parts of Uganda, Rwanda, and East Africa.”²¹ Raymond is a perfect example of how GLI's festivals have empowered community leaders, encouraged participation in a cause, and strengthened community bonds while becoming a source of local pride. The impact of these behaviors and attitudes can be felt throughout the year in the form of positive social change, but only if sufficient follow-up efforts accompany the concerts.

Conclusion

Music festivals can be powerful engines for change when intentionally tailored around the needs of a specific community. Because of their unique capacity to bring together creative leaders for a local event, festivals can facilitate intergroup dialogue; help align incentives; coordinate and mobilize individuals; and provide public education in the form of edutainment. And while not a panacea for all policy failures, a music festival does offer an unorthodox context for analyzing collective problems and advancing public goods. With sustained follow-up efforts, festival organizers can increase the depth and durability of their relationships in a community.

The lessons outlined above have been key to the work of the GLI in Uganda and Rwanda, but they can be scaled and adapted to work in any number of scenarios and communities. We hope this generates discussion about how to accomplish the advancement of public goods through the gift of music.

²⁰ Global Livingston Institute, “Programs + Projects.”

²¹ Raymond Bokua, Email correspondence, November 21, 2023.

About the GLI:

The Global Livingston Institute (GLI) is a community-based research institute developing strategic partnerships in both East Africa and in the United States with a focus on education and social impact aimed at stimulating innovation, empowerment, collaboration, conversations, and personal growth. Modeled after the Aspen Institute and the Rockefeller Bellagio Center, GLI creates a place at the table for students and community leaders to innovate complex solutions to poverty. The organization is divided into two core areas of focus: Education (Listen. Think.) and Enterprises (Act.).

GLI operates with a strong commitment to impact the health and vitality of communities in the US and East Africa, and to foster cultural, economic, and intellectual relationships between them. Over 4,500 students from the United States representing 32 academic institutions have participated in our Global Classroom programs. Scholars engage in immersion experiences with their counterparts in Uganda and Rwanda on equal footing to reevaluate core principles of international development and emphasize placing stakeholders' needs at the center of any action plan. The focus is on shaping best-practices community development skills that are applicable in both domestic and international settings. Put simply, we are training the next generation of community leaders to learn from past mistakes, prioritize authentic dialogue and cultural exchange, and to build partnerships and understand community context before moving to premature action.

In Their Own Words:

From 2013-2019 a large, dynamic, multidisciplinary, and intersectional team worked to produce the international phenomenon known as the HIV Awareness "iKnow" Concert Series. With a mission to use music and the arts to improve people's health and well-being and promote community-based development initiatives, we produced 21 concert events across eight cities in Rwanda and Uganda. Featuring over 2,000 performers from three continents, these massive free festivals attracted targeted populations at greatest risk for exposure to HIV and related health matters. Music has tremendous formative power for individuals and communities and is especially important and meaningful to young people in their developmental years, and is connective to behavioral shaping via music heard in the home and community. While the youth may not listen to traditional leaders such as pastors or politicians or teachers, they did respond en masse to the calls made by culture-bearers to take actions necessary to protect themselves and their loved ones. It is enormously impactful to have leading rap and reggaeton stars hold up their test results and urge their fans to follow suit. More than 300,000 people attended these concerts, and over 35,000 of them were tested for HIV and connected to ongoing free care. Additional health services were also provided ranging from cervical cancer screens, adult surgical circumcisions, mental health screens, and distribution of nearly two million condoms. The economic impact of this initiative is practically incalculable as it didn't just provide jobs and infusions of hard currency into impoverished local economies, but literally saved lives and decreased the burden of disease on communities across the region. Accounting purely for the real time economic impact without the projected savings just mentioned, the combined value of all 21 events amounts to well over \$10 million (2023 USD value adjusted). With global partners ranging from the US embassy to the regional Ugandan and Rwandan governments to Rotary

International and dozens of local community health organizations, the iKnow Concert Series serves as a model for international development done right, and for future successes around the world.

Dr. Andrew Ward, PhD, Founder & Chairman, HIV Awareness "iKnow" Concert Series

As a youth who comes from Kabale, a small town in Southwestern Uganda, a sub-region where 45,000 individuals live with HIV. Kabale has a population of 240,000 and the HIV prevalence rate is over 6% and rising, the HIV Awareness Music festivals were more than welcome for us. The free health services include HIV testing, Condom distribution, and Cervical cancer screening among others plus the Free Music and dance performances from both local and International artists have always been a highlight of the year in our town. The economic impact that the music festivals bring to the Ugandan economy in the towns where the concerts are held is great. From hotel accommodations, transporters, food and drink vendors, event organizers, etc. As a member of the GLI staff and somebody who has been involved in making this a reality, I feel so proud. I feel thankful for all the donors and partners involved, and I hope this initiative continues to grow and impact more people in different parts of Uganda, Rwanda, and East Africa.

Raymond Bokua, GLI Staff, Manager of Operations at Entusi, Kabale, Uganda

When I think about the concerts in East Africa, the power of messaging jumps to mind. Not only is there constant messaging from the emcees and the sponsors, but most importantly, from the artists. The performers, especially the headliners, are local heroes in the local communities who carry a tremendous amount of influence. Hearing them encourage the audiences to get screened and tested is not only inspiring, but most importantly, it works!

Rob Drabkin, Singer-Songwriter, GLI Board Member, Denver Colorado

The GLI Music Festival in Kable has become an annual event that brings people from around the world together to share in a common joy of music and a love of life. Music is a language we all speak. It is universal, and at its core, the music festival is the most raw demonstration of this. During my time at the music festival, I saw the community working alongside GLI to make this event not only something the community would be proud of and enjoy but something that would impact them beyond just the concert in terms of health. Thousands of people from the region lined up and flooded the venue in the middle of a rainstorm in a somewhat muddy field. The mentality of the event was rain or shine, literally. Despite the rain and the minor flooding, thousands of people were tested for HIV and related health conditions, musicians from around the world sang in their native languages, and communities were brought together through music. Inviting musicians from the US, around Africa and Uganda to come together and mix their

talents and love of music is just one way that GLI has been able to listen to the community, think with them, and then act in a way that can positively impact the lives of many.

Isabelle Fries, Colorado Teacher, GLI Board Member, Denver, Colorado

Less than 30 years ago, music was used as a tool to propagate hate, discrimination, division, and so many other things that led to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis. Seeing the GLI festivals bringing together thousands to not only enjoy good music but also to get health care services for free is amazing. Being able to give an opportunity to the communities living around and far from the venues where the festivals take place to see artists that they rarely see and receive various health care services that would normally not be easy for them to get is priceless.

Ishimwe Clement, Music Producer & Record Executive, Kigali, Rwanda

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