

CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE



The Sugar Campaign for Change (SUCAM) Kenya

An inside history of success and continuing struggle

By David Harding
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international



Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'.

Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend.

ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes. *Critical stories of change* launches a new learning initiative in ActionAid International. The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

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I met many other people associated with the Kenyan sugar industry; they were also generous with their time, and again almost universally allowed a critical and open dialogue around the industry and SUCAM, without which the shades and balances in this case study could not have been drawn.

I have to give particular thanks to ActionAid International Kenya (AAIK) and its staff. AAIK opened its doors to an outsider to come and look at a campaign that has been very close to its heart for the past four years. Many AAIK staff gave time and thought to quite searching discussions on SUCAM and AAIK's work with the campaign. Others both arranged (and rearranged) the tight itinerary for my visit to Kenya, travelled with me to Kisumu, and introduced me to the many different actors interviewed – and still had time for long discussions themselves on SUCAM.

This case study is one of a series prepared by ActionAid and I must thank the other team members, Antonella Mancini, Koy Thomson and Andrea Cornwell, for all their help and support in getting to a final text, for the stimulating meetings we have had around all the case studies – and for their patience in what has been a long process!

As with any case study this text contains both a core of information and a particular interpretation and reading of that information. I have tried to ensure that the core information in the case study is accurate, but the interpretation and reading of that information, and the final summary, conclusions and judgements, though tested out in many discussions, are in the end my own.

About the author

David Harding has worked on development issues for the past 23 years and has a particular interest in questions of social development practice, working with change and learning in development, and in organisational aspects of development work. He works on an independent basis.

The Sugar Campaign for Change (SUCAM) is born – to work on an industry in crisis

Where it all began - the sugar industry in western Kenya



Thierry Geneen/Panos/ActionAid

Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria, is the main town in western Kenya. The journey by road to Kisumu from Nairobi takes you through Nakuru and then high up to the tea-growing areas around the town of Kericho. As the road then winds down the hills to Lake Victoria the green of the tea bushes begins to be replaced by another green – sugar cane.

Western Kenya is the home of Kenya's sugar industry. Wherever you go by road in western provinces, the tall green sugar cane is almost always present. The tractors and trailers carrying cane for processing are a familiar sight on the roads – the region has six large commercial sugar mills and over 150 smaller, artisanal 'jaggeries', where cane is more crudely processed.

Sugar is a key element in the regional economy of western Kenya. Indeed it is an important element in the Kenyan national economy. More than 200,000 farmers in western Kenya grow cane and it is estimated that up to five million people (20% of the Kenyan population) depend directly or indirectly on sugar cane farming as a source of livelihood. Small to medium-scale farmers make up the majority of cane growers. Each sugar mill has its own surrounding 'nucleus' plantation, but more than 85% of the cane processed in the commercial mills comes from 'outgrowers' working their own land. For small and medium-scale farmers, sugar is potentially a premium cash crop – not least because once past its initial phase of growth it requires little further intensive care up to maturity. For smaller, poorer

farmers, farming is often only a part-provider of household income – having a crop that needs little tending for part of the season frees time for other, 'off farm' economic activities.

The lush green of the ever-present sugar cane in the western provinces is deceptive, however. At the beginning of the new millennium, the state of the industry was much less healthy than the sugar cane in the fields. The industry was in fact on the verge of collapse.

The most visible indicator of the crisis in the industry was the financial state of all the commercial sugar mills. All were effectively bankrupt, with accumulated debts of billions of Kenya shillings. Behind the frontline figures was a complex picture of chronically poor management, endemic corruption and policy neglect. The level of transparency and information around the industry was so poor that even high-level insiders did not have a full picture of just how bad the overall crisis was. Sugar had been another cash cow for politicians and officials alike at the tail end of the chronically corrupt and incompetent Moi government period. There was no sense of direction or commitment from government to the industry and its future, and external economic advisers to the Kenya government had written it off (in their terms) as a viable competitive sector.

For cane farmers, the impact of the general decline, neglect and corruption affecting the industry hit hard in the years up to 2001. Two billion Kenya shillings were owed in back payment for cane processed by the mills – in many cases farmers had to wait more than two years for payments. Income from cane growing was eaten away by a multiplicity of payments and deductions to a host of middlemen (including the Outgrowers' Institutions – a middle-level body created by the mill owners to deal directly with farmers) who controlled key areas of access to processing or inputs.

The corrupt culture in the industry spread down to the day-to-day dealings with farmers who found themselves cheated and tricked throughout the chain of production and processing by unaccountable mill owners and middlemen. The supposed farmers' representative bodies, in particular the Kenya Sugar Growers' Association (KESGA), were also rendered ineffective by their own immersion in patronage and corruption, and by internal feuding. Protest by farmers themselves met a hard-edged response in a very authoritarian industry setting – one that could go beyond economic threats to direct violence.

Against this backdrop, the acreage of cane grown in the 1990s declined steadily throughout the decade, as did cane yields (the amount of sugar extracted from a given weight of sugar cane). Research and extension support in the industry was minimal. New cane varieties were not being introduced, and there was no support for working on more effective farming methods. In Kenya, sugar cane was taking 18 months to reach maturity, compared to less than 12 months in other cane-growing countries. Cane yield was significantly lower than in regional competitor countries. At all levels there was a deep crisis in both the economics of the industry and confidence amongst the key actors.

Initial explorations – and a network is formed

In May 2001, the western region office of ActionAid International Kenya was exploring potential areas in the region where it might need to work at an advocacy and campaigning level in order to address the key causes of poverty for the area.

Several things led to the sugar industry becoming the main focus for such work. The issues concerning the sugar sector seemed very clear – as was the scale of the crisis at the time. The sugar industry was crucial to the regional economy and the livelihoods of many small, poor outgrowers depended on it.

The precarious state of the industry had driven down incomes for these farmers. The closure of the Miwani mill in 1999 painted a stark picture of the impact that the collapse of the sector would have on small farmers in western region. Six years after the closure, farming families were still struggling to find alternative viable agricultural options. Sugar, livelihoods and poverty issues were strongly linked in the western region. And addressing the issues in sugar would need an advocacy level response – the issues were structural and political.

ActionAid's western region Policy Coordinator – responsible for advocacy and campaigning work – quickly became engaged with the issues and the industry and developed a strong commitment to work around sugar. But he also – importantly – found that he was not alone. By word of mouth and informal contacts he soon found himself talking with an existing small network of individuals (in Nairobi and Kisumu), some with a history of work in the sugar industry, but all very engaged and committed to working for constructive change in what they saw as a key sector in Kenya.

Several months of intensive research and even more intensive informal discussions convinced the Policy Coordinator and AAIK that there was both a strong need to work around the issue of sugar at the level of campaigning and lobbying, and that there was a good basis of people and knowledge with which to launch such work.

The Kiboswa meeting – SUCAM is formed

On 2 October 2001 ActionAid convened a three-day meeting of stakeholders in the sugar industry at the Kiboswa Poverty Study Centre, just outside Kisumu. Several hundred participants attended – farmers, members of Outgrowers' Institutions, and representatives of farmers' organisations such as KESGA. Millers were notable by their absence.

The meeting was held in the shadow of the Kenyan government's recently published Sugar Bill. It was seen as "a brainstorming meeting to strategise with key players on the best course of action to take with regard to the Sugar Bill and sugar policy in general, and build a coalition of partners to carry the process forward".

Although ActionAid had convened the meeting, the planning for it had been carefully done by members of the informal network that had developed since May 2001, working with the Policy Coordinator. It was this group that presented to the meeting a series of analyses of the industry and some suggested strategies for building a campaign.

The Kiboswa workshop was a success. It galvanised energy to take a campaign forward. And the campaign got a name – SUCAM, Sugar Campaign for Change.

A mission statement and objectives were set out:

SUCAM'S Mission

To promote the development of a viable and efficient sugar industry that will ensure that sugar cane farmers in Kenya enjoy a life that is just, fair and free of poverty.

SUCAM'S Objectives

Ensure that farmers have a greater say in the management and development of the industry.

Promote participatory management in the sugar sub-sector.

Demand greater accountability and transparency in the management of the sugar industry.

Enhance efficiency and cost-effective production, processing and marketing of sugar.

SUCAM'S Values

A commitment to and firm belief in:

fairness, justice, equity, truth, transparency, accountability, democracy, honesty, non-violence, change

respect for all stakeholders in the sugar industry

respect and commitment to protect sugar cane farmers' rights

spirit of volunteerism. Zero tolerance for corruption

consultative and knowledge-based decision-making.

SUCAM – a 'movement of ideas'

But what was this animal – SUCAM – that emerged from the Kiboswa meeting? What were the distinguishing characteristics of SUCAM in its first phase?

At the heart of SUCAM was what was now called the 'core team' – a small group of eight (soon increased to nine) people, which included members of the informal network that had pushed for the formation of SUCAM from May 2001. The Policy Coordinator also became a member of the core team.

This group was clear from the start that SUCAM was not a 'grassroots' body in its makeup and ways of working. With the exception of one member who was a farmer, the core team was made up of professionals – NGO leaders, an ex-MP and academics. The general secretary of KESGA was part of the first core team for some of the first period. SUCAM itself they saw not as a 'people's movement' but a 'movement of ideas' – a campaign led by a group passionately committed to the sugar industry and with a good, in-depth of knowledge of the sector.

The core team led the SUCAM campaign, making the major strategic and tactical decisions from the start. They did so through a process – in the first phase – of intensive, continuous consultation and discussion with each other.

But one of their first aims was also to build a wider coalition that supported SUCAM, and was kept well informed about SUCAM. One of their first initiatives was to begin a process of 'civic education', taking information and campaign ideas out to farmers and raising awareness of sugar issues and SUCAM at the grassroots level. They sought to inform and build support. The core team developed strong and firm principles and 'boundaries from the beginning' about how SUCAM and the core team should work, partly in recognition of the dangers of not being a group grounded in a grassroots base. But they were clear that – in the end – SUCAM was a campaign led from above.

SUCAM's focus from the beginning was on the need for structural change in the industry. The issues in the industry ran both deep and broad – for SUCAM the way the industry was governed and managed needed to change wholesale, and the sector urgently needed to be put on a much more viable economic footing. For the core team the priority was to tackle the *apex structures in the industry* – where the power lay to effect structural change.

And for SUCAM, the chance (and the urgent need) to engage at this level only was there immediately after the campaign's formation. By November 2001 the new Sugar Bill was due to be debated in the Kenyan parliament – and the bill as it stood did not promise the sort of structural change that SUCAM felt would square with its objectives.



Thierry Geneen/Panos/ActionAid

What were initial principles and parameters for SUCAM?

- Zero tolerance for corruption. We would be fighting corruption in the sugar industry and so we had to make sure that as a campaign we were clean, and demonstrate this through our transparency and accountability systems.
- Decision-making within the core team would be consultative, knowledge-based and through consensus.
- The power of information and truth is greater than that of violence.
- Recognition (and acceptance) that what we were getting into was a political process challenging serious political powers.
- We must be consistent with our information, strategy should not change half way (dependent on our analysis).
- There is no blueprint for change processes – SUCAM was going to be a learning experience and experiment from inception.

From a SUCAM presentation

The first phase of SUCAM's life – from the Sugar Bill, to elections, to the Kenya Sugar Board

The Sugar Bill as SUCAM's first challenge

In February 2005 we were sitting in the parliamentary offices of the Honourable Wycliffe Osundwa, an MP for one of the Western Region's sugar growing constituencies and chair of the revived Sugar Parliamentary Committee (SUPAC). We were talking about sugar, prospects for the industry and the politics of the sector. The conversation turned to SUCAM and its role in re-shaping the Sugar Bill in 2001, and getting an amended bill through into law.

"An important catalyst in these matters" was how the Hon Osundwa described SUCAM's activities at the time of the bill. He might have gone further. When the bill came up for discussion in late 2001 it was, effectively, SUCAM who re-wrote key parts of the bill and organised the parliamentary forces to ensure that the amended bill got through. Although SUCAM's amendments were taken up by MPs, and although in the end it was those MPs who voted them through, without SUCAM nothing in the way of radical reform to the bill would have happened.

The bill, as originally tabled, was little more than a half-hearted attempt to shore up a badly listing 'status quo' in the industry. In particular it sought to ensure that control of the governing structures for the (largely government-owned) industry remained in the hands of the milling companies and the government itself. It did not address the multiplicity of abuses and structural deficiencies in the production processes and the management of the industry itself.

The SUCAM core team drew up 17 amendments to the bill. Foremost among them was a proposal to change the way members of the Kenya Sugar Board – the proposed new supreme governing body for the sector – were appointed. SUCAM

proposed both that farmer/grower members should have a majority of seats on the new board and that those farmer members of the board be directly elected by farmers, not appointed by government. Further, that the chair of the board should always be a farmer-member.

This primary amendment, along with the others proposed, was designed to go to the heart of SUCAM's campaign aims – to give farmers more power in the running and management of the industry, and to make the industry more transparent and accountable. The Kenya Sugar Board was the apex of the sector – so this was a direct strike at a very high level.

In December 2001 the Sugar Act was passed by the Kenyan parliament. The new act included most of SUCAM's amendments. Behind this simple statement lies a story of intensive organising and lobbying work.

In its first phase of existence SUCAM proved itself to be a formidable lobbying force. Around the Sugar Bill – a mixture of creative tactics, a huge commitment of time and energy, and a willingness to push out beyond the boundaries of 'orthodox' lobbying produced a brilliant, and irresistible, guerrilla campaign.

Where more orthodox lobbying had sometimes gone no further than holding information meetings with groups of MPs, or wining and dining them in a nearby restaurant, SUCAM kept up multi-faceted and continuous lobbying pressure on MPs. The range of activities ran from straightforward information provision through to what SUCAM unashamedly calls more 'in your face' tactics of frequent contacting and checking MPs to ensure they remained committed to amendments, and would vote at the right moment. Several SUCAM core team members spent most of their waking hours in late 2001 in and around the parliamentary building. They cultivated contacts, kept up pressure, and continued to press the SUCAM position on the bill.

The power of excellent information

Physical lobbying activity alone, however, could not have explained SUCAM's power in effecting radical change in the Sugar Bill. Underpinning the arguments and the documents presented by SUCAM was a programme of intensive and high-quality research and information work. In an industry where no-one could clearly see the whole picture, SUCAM's information stood out head and shoulders above the rest. In a very short space of time SUCAM became the most respected source of information for the industry. Drawing on a range of different sources, including many industry insiders prepared to work confidentially with SUCAM, the campaign produced a tough and detailed picture of the crisis in the industry and the case for change.

When working in a highly contested, highly political struggle, persuading others to come on board to your position requires that your information sources need to be impeccable, all of the time. SUCAM's informational work was not only high quality but always accurate. It was never caught out. Testimony to this was the fact that the Sugar Task Force, appointed in early 2003 to look at the need for change in the industry in the aftermath of the new Sugar Act being passed, relied on SUCAM's information as "vital", in the words of the Chair of the Task Force, in helping him quickly get a "balanced" view of the industry. And a further, more light-hearted confirmation of the status of SUCAM's information came from the Chief Executive of the new Kenya Sugar Board, who admitted laughingly that when he applied for the post, and needed to get a good understanding of the industry, the first place he went to was the SUCAM website.

No disconnect from the base

It might have been easy for the core team in this first period to be doing little other than camping in the parliamentary precincts, lobbying where the 'action' seemed to be. But the core team were clear that, in their words, there must be "no disconnect from the base" – that, while they were not a grassroots movement, they must stay closely in touch with that wider coalition, and in particular cane farmers.

During the first year of its life SUCAM ran an intensive programme of civic education in all the sugar-cane growing areas of western Kenya. They went out to the cane farmers for days at a time with information about the industry, the proposed positions that SUCAM was putting forward for change, and opened up opportunities for discussion around all the major issue areas that the sugar industry faced. The idea was to build a more aware and informed constituency amongst farmers, better able to argue for their own rights, and better able to hold their representatives (and SUCAM) to account. This was true outreach work. It was carried out by volunteers working with SUCAM, trained and supported by core team members. These volunteers for the most part were farmers themselves, and members of the new Zonal Committees of KESGA, formed after the Kiboswa meeting. The emphasis was firmly on the issues, and on building awareness – not on SUCAM itself, as a campaign or a body. The civic education work ranged across the whole western province cane-growing area – holding meetings, building contacts and engaging farmers in informal discussion wherever they could meet them.

It is difficult to assess the full impact of the civic education work in this first period. But you can get some indirect sense of how effective it was. Certainly it ensured that SUCAM was a known force amongst farmers (despite not pushing its profile) – and quite quickly a trusted force. Talking to farmers in 2005, they confirmed that SUCAM soon became a body that farmers saw as "speaking for them". And the political players in

the industry soon knew this – MPs for sugar growing constituencies quickly came to appreciate that SUCAM had the ear of the farmers and that, through SUCAM, farmers knew where their MPs stood on key issues, particularly the Sugar Bill.

From quite early on SUCAM had concrete evidence that it had the trust of farmers, in that farmers would turn out for SUCAM of their own accord, in contrast to the tactics of 'herding' and paying for farmers to attend meetings that had been the practice in the past of those in the industry seeking farmer support. Even more strongly, in various encounters and meetings in western region and Nairobi, SUCAM could bring farmers in to physically bear witness to, and support, their positions.

Other forces in the industry also quickly provided a backhanded compliment to SUCAM's success in this early work with farmers by trying to disrupt and break up meetings and SUCAM's overall work. The millers, the Outgrowers' Institutions and KESGA, as we will see later, all tried in various ways to limit SUCAM's work and influence amongst farmers – and all saw SUCAM as a powerful threat.

Whether SUCAM managed to achieve some of its more ambitious goals through civic education – building deeper political and economic awareness and confidence amongst farmers – is less easy to assess. Farmers certainly were more informed, but the feeling is that, in the first years at least, they remained a largely passive force, content to let SUCAM do the talking for them. As we will see, their own 'self-organisation' did not prosper in this early period.

The civic education work then was vital in launching SUCAM's name and getting the trust of that 'wider coalition' that SUCAM sought to build. It allowed SUCAM to test the waters on its positions and to know its constituency better. It was the strong, visible face and presence of SUCAM out in the field. And the civic education work reinforced SUCAM's legitimacy in speaking for farmers, and lobbying around the industry.

From the Sugar Bill to the Sugar Board elections

Kick-starting the campaign with a frenetic pace of activity around the Sugar Bill was something SUCAM could not avoid, even if it had wanted to. The bill offered a golden chance to re-write the legislative framework for the industry.

But, with the bill becoming an act in late 2001, SUCAM still found itself, in that first helter-skelter year of existence, driven by events and with no let-up in the pace of activity.

The new Sugar Act now set out an outline framework of possibilities for change in the industry. But there was much work to do, and quickly, to ensure that that framework was optimally taken up and fleshed out into a good working reality.

The elections for the new farmer representatives to the Kenya Sugar Board were to be held in April 2002 and it was essential that farmers were aware of what they should be looking for in candidates, so that effective and potentially accountable representatives were elected to the board. The government and other powerful actors did all they could to delay and confuse the electoral process, and SUCAM had to come in to ensure that the process was, in the end, fair and open, and that it did happen.

In early 2002 the government also sought to retrieve some of its losses, proposing a set of amendments to the new act that had to be fought off.

Responding to all of this again meant working at many different levels. In the western region the work at the ground level intensified. Civic education work had to shift in both content and form – to look at how to work with the openings provided by the new act, to look at the structural changes needed in the industry, and to prepare farmers for the elections to the board. But in this latter work, SUCAM could not afford to be seen to be a 'partial' actor – supporting particular candidates or interests. A decision was taken – after intense discussion – to shift to the more

neutral and distanced medium of short radio broadcasts, rather than fieldwork, during the immediate pre-election period.

And at the national lobbying level, SUCAM had to keep up the pressure for the new act to be defended and implemented. It had to work to ensure that the opportunities provided by the newly developing 'atmosphere' surrounding the industry were turned into real structural change, new strategies and better governance and management.

A year of confrontation

And there were many who did not want change in the industry – certainly not the change SUCAM and farmers wanted to see. The first year of SUCAM's life was defined by this 'event driven' pace and shape. But it was also a year of intense conflict around the future of the sugar industry.

The new act may have opened up possibilities but it, and its implications, were also bitterly resisted and challenged by many forces in the industry. Mill owners saw their power in the apex structures eroded, and their patronage and chronically poor management exposed and challenged. The multitude of civil servants and officials who worked in, or governed, the industry so ineffectively could see the writing on the wall for them. Private companies such as Booker-Tate – brought into contract-manage some mills – found their contracts and their performance around those contracts questioned. And many political actors had their fingers in the sugar pie – both as part of the patronage system in the domestic sugar industry, and as members of lucrative cartels importing cheap sugar into Kenya – often illegally – to meet the gap between domestic production and consumption. SUCAM and its work did not want for enemies.

SUCAM found itself a target of hostile action at all levels. Individual core team members were targeted at their work place, with pressure brought to bear on their employers to discipline or sack

them. Campaign meetings in the field were disrupted or threatened. Individuals working for SUCAM were victims of beatings and threats of violence.

ActionAid found itself targeted because it was SUCAM's funder and, for some, the real driving force behind the campaign (the western region Policy Coordinator, visibly active as a face of the campaign and a core team member), was still an ActionAid staff member. Irate KESGA officials burst into ActionAid's Nairobi office and demanded to meet the country director. A formal complaint was made by the Booker-Tate company, which managed one of the mills, to the British High Commission about ActionAid's alleged unwarranted and misguided interference in the workings of the sugar industry. SUCAM responded by asking for a meeting at the High Commission to debate the issue with Booker-Tate. SUCAM brought core team members and several dozen farmers to the meeting. The case it put made a strong impression on the Commission staff and effectively defused the situation.

ActionAid International Kenya's senior management held its ground and stuck by SUCAM under considerable pressure during this difficult and fiery first year. SUCAM itself held its nerve and gradually saw its image and level of acceptance change amongst key players in the industry. The early perception of SUCAM was perhaps as 'guerrilla activists' waging war on vested and political interests in the industry. By the end of 2002 SUCAM was, thanks to the quality of its analysis, information and level of support amongst farmers, increasingly accepted as a key force in the process of change in the industry. By mid-2003 the new and more constructive individuals heading the Kenya Sugar Board and the Sugar Task Force (and who were slowly making inroads into the management of the industry) were able to see SUCAM more as a critical ally than an outright threat. As SUCAM itself put it, the mood had moved from one of "confrontation" towards a certain level of "consensus" about the direction in the industry.

A deep disappointment – the continuing lack of effective farmers' organisations

SUCAM had many successes in its first year. The legislative framework for the future of the sugar industry was rewritten, the Kenya Sugar Board now had a majority of elected farmer representatives, and farmers across the cane-growing region were getting informed about, and engaged in, the industry in new ways. SUCAM had played an important and often defining role in all of these changes. SUCAM itself, one year on from that first meeting, was now an important force in the industry.

But in one critical area SUCAM confessed itself to be deeply disappointed in the lack of progress made by late 2002 – sugar cane farmers still did not have their own effective, accountable organisations working with them, and for them.

SUCAM itself was clear that it did not see it as a SUCAM task to organise farmers, or even intervene in the mucky politics of farmer organisation. SUCAM did not have the human resources, the time, the legitimacy or the experience to engage here. Getting directly involved in organising farmers also carried the danger that SUCAM would be seen as yet another self-interested group trying to build its power base on the back of farmers. What SUCAM could do, and did try to do, was to raise awareness amongst farmers of the importance of having effective, responsive, farmer organisations, and awareness of some of the *qualities and criteria* farmers should look for in their organisations. But it was then up to the farmers to take that information and awareness and act on it.

It may be that SUCAM underestimated here the capacity for resistance to change of the old guard farmers' bodies, particularly KESGA. Throughout this first period, KESGA proved itself stubbornly impervious to external pressure for change and too absorbed in its own internal feuding to take even minimal constructive initiatives of its own accord.

“You may think that it’s easy to have a farmers’ organisation working and in place, based on theoretical democratic organs. You may think you have a role in this process. The truth is that the only people who have a real role are farmers – and SUCAM was trying to organise and create a farmers’ organisation without generating the demand from farmers for that organisation. The only role SUCAM can play – and should – is political awareness. The rest is up to farmers.”

From a slideshow about SUCAM

SUCAM may also have been too optimistic about the farmers' own confidence, trust and capacity to push their own initiatives in relation to organising themselves. As one very senior figure in the industry perceptively commented, sugar-cane farmers had experienced years of betrayal by people claiming to work in their interests, and so there was deep distrust and scepticism surrounding any new initiative. And there was absolutely no confidence in being able to 'reform' the old bodies such as KESGA. There was therefore an important gap between any growing awareness amongst farmers of a need for effective organisation, and the persistent absence of an active ability and confidence to do anything about it.

The history of one initiative that was tried demonstrates the difficulties involved in shifting the quality of organisation in this period. The Kiboswa meeting did decide to create more local accountability and democracy within the KESGA



Thierry Geneen/Panos/ActionAid

structures by pushing the setting up of local Zonal Committees (ZCs) as an intermediate layer between farmers and KESGA top officials. This initiative did not prosper, however. Despite elections for the Zonal Committees taking place in April 2002, the ZCs never gained farmer support and were not seen as representing farmers. Many of those elected were far from being the strong and capable actors the new bodies needed to succeed. The central KESGA structures – wanting to give no power away whatsoever – could get away with taking little notice of the ZCs, and by 2003 they had all collapsed as viable entities. As one SUCAM core team member put it, the farmers watched carefully all the work in setting the ZCs up but then didn't “turn up” to support them.

At the end of this first phase, with so much achieved, the lack of progress at the level of farmer organisation was a concern and a disappointment for SUCAM, but at this point it was perhaps no more than that. Later on the true impact of this vacuum on SUCAM's work would become more obvious and more serious.

Driven by events, chance and energy

By October 2002 SUCAM could look back on an extraordinary first year, with some spectacular achievements and its rise from nothing to becoming a key force in the sugar debate and the politics of the sugar industry.

What were the factors that enabled SUCAM's small, core team to have this level of impact? As we have noted, the core team brought high levels of passion, energy and commitment to the work. Their tactics and strategy were astute and creative – their lobbying went far beyond staid conventional approaches. Above all their work was grounded in excellent research and impeccable information – they quickly became the most respected source of information for the industry. They continuously discussed, adapted and re-worked the campaign in a fast-changing context. And the campaign was grounded in a strong discussion of principles for engagement which provided a sound ethical framework – vital when having to work (in a positive sense) opportunistically in a corrupt and unprincipled environment.

SUCAM itself has noted that chance played an important role in its work. For the first two years, chance provided them with many opportunities, and chance and luck often worked for them. The timing of the Sugar Bill, an approaching general election in December 2002 (which ensured that many MPs were more willing to stand up to a governing party all knew would be out of power soon), and the choices in 2003 of unexpectedly effective leaders for the Sugar Task Force and the new Kenya Sugar Board, were all factors which gave unexpected space and opportunity with which SUCAM could work. But if the opportunities were there it was SUCAM's own sharpness in responding, and its creative ability to surf with the changes, that also stood out.

Being event and chance-driven can, however, turn well thought-out planning and priorities upside down – and this happened to SUCAM in its first year. SUCAM's initial strategic impulse was to coalition build, undertake intensive awareness campaigns and help farmers tackle the thorny issue of their own organisation – to invest solidly first in getting a grounded and more aware base with which SUCAM could work. Then SUCAM would “promote and lobby for farmer-friendly policies”. In practice, the presence of the Sugar Bill, and everything that flowed out of work around that, meant that SUCAM was thrown into “promoting and lobbying” from the very first moment and had to scramble to do what it could to build awareness and an effective broader coalition with less focus and time than it would have liked. It did not help that the major structural initiative to re-ground farmer organisation – the Zonal Committees – did not prosper.

But, as SUCAM went into its second year, core team members could be forgiven for thinking that the job was more than half done. The new legislative frame for the industry was a positive one. The Kenya Sugar Board had both a new and excellent Chief Executive Officer in place, and farmers were holding the majority on the board. The apex level of the industry had certainly been shaken up and rewritten. And SUCAM itself was riding high on the credit it was getting (whether enthusiastically or grudgingly given) by all actors in the industry for its role in all of this.

From guerrilla war to a seat at the table of the structural reform process – the second phase of SUCAM's life

Two different events in February 2005 illustrate some of the potential and the challenges for SUCAM today, and give a sense of the different fortunes SUCAM enjoyed in different areas of its work in its second phase of existence, from mid- to late-2002 to the end of 2004.

One Saturday morning in early February 2005, SUCAM held a press conference at the Silver Springs Hotel in Nairobi. The day before, the Minister of Agriculture had issued a statement about the sugar industry and, in particular, had touched on the delicate issue of controlling illegal imports of sugar. SUCAM had put out a press release in response and was meeting the media today to put its case.

In a corner of the hotel bar, around 20 journalists crowded around the Chair of the SUCAM core team, Peter Kegode, and three or four other core team members. It was an impressive turn out at short notice – not just national print media, but radio journalists and a national TV crew too. A statement was read, questions were taken, and the meeting dissolved into smaller knots of journalists talking in more depth to the core team members. It was clear that they all knew SUCAM – in fact they knew many of the core team personally – and that they recognised that when SUCAM speaks it's an important voice in the sector that needs to be heard.

This mirrors the experience of previous days in both Kisumu and Nairobi. Days where SUCAM met the Chief Executive of the Kenya Sugar Board, the Chair of the Sugar Task Force, MPs and farmer executives on the Kenya Sugar Board. This list – and the fact that SUCAM got to see such key people at short notice – is testimony to the group's level of influence and access in the industry. The SUCAM core team members are now greeted not just as old friends, but also as important fellow players in the industry. The discussion often moves from the agenda of talking about SUCAM to considerations of current strategy and events in the sector.

But there is another picture from February 2005 with a different underlying message. Several days before the press conference I had been sitting in an ActionAid vehicle at a crossroads in a cane-growing area, with ActionAid's western region Policy Coordinator. He was no longer a SUCAM core team member but still very involved with sugar issues. We were on our way to a SUCAM civic education meeting and were waiting for a local contact to join us and direct us to the location. As we waited a young man appeared. He had clearly been involved with SUCAM and joked with the Policy Coordinator, saying, "Where have you been? You've abandoned us!" The word 'abandoned' was one I heard several times over subsequent days in reference to SUCAM, talking with farmers and other actors such as Outgrowers' Institutions, in the field. At one level it seemed grossly unfair – SUCAM was still out there, it seemed, with its civic education work, still producing information for farmers, still arguing their case at the highest level in the industry.

And yet it reflected a certain truth. Later that day I sat in the shade of a veranda of a small house, in a rural market place, talking with David Wafula, a core team member from 2003, and a sugar-cane farmer, while we watched a civic education meeting with farmers. He wasn't surprised at the word 'abandoned'. He thought that SUCAM had perhaps been spending too much effort and time working at the policy and structural level. In its work with farmers SUCAM had perhaps used the radio medium too much and had somewhat "lost the physical face to face" contact.

But it was more than just that. The core team itself had somehow lost some of the intense energy and focus that it had in the first period. David Wafula also reflected that they had met less frequently in 2004, and that the informal contact between team members between meetings (which previously had been frequent and allowing for good discussion) had been thin. Perhaps the old 'brotherliness' was not so much there – some differences were emerging within the core team. And somehow the sense of direction for SUCAM for the next period was not so clear. It seemed things were changing and SUCAM needed to look hard at its priorities, its institutional identity, and how it could keep its lines of communication with farmers' groups open.

But was there now sufficient energy and trust amongst core team members to really rethink SUCAM effectively? The last meeting, in September 2004, that had hoped to look at strategy, had been dominated instead by a conflict over alleged mishandling of expenses by one core team member, and an underlying sharp difference over how to deal with this between the ActionAid staff member on the core team (and ActionAid itself) and others. No strategy discussion had subsequently taken place.

There was a strong sense here that SUCAM had somehow let things drift during 2004, and that the old energy and drive were no longer there. There was also a feeling that perhaps what SUCAM now needed to be was something different in form and strategic emphasis than it had been before. But this 'something different' was not yet clear or agreed within SUCAM itself.

How did these two different pictures come about? How do they fit together? And what do they have to tell SUCAM in 2005 about where it should be looking for its work and direction for the next few years?

SUCAM's second phase agenda – supporting structural change

As it ended its first year of hectic, events-driven work, SUCAM was able to enter its 'second phase' of life being more pro-active and more strategic in how it approached new possibilities and persisting problems in the sugar industry.

For SUCAM, the over-riding focus from late 2002 was to work for structural change in the industry – "a pragmatic and long-term structural reform agenda...that must be instituted to push the industry towards economic efficiency". The Kenyan sugar industry had to become more efficient to be able to compete and survive in the regional and global sugar markets. As we will see, the time frame for getting the domestic industry in sufficiently good shape to do this was perilously short.

SUCAM put forward ten priority areas where it would concentrate its energies in the next period. They fell within six broad themes for SUCAM's work:

Structural and directional	Getting 'robust and efficient' Sugar Industry Agreements negotiated and consistently implemented Reviewing and reworking national policy and international agreements and restrictions for the industry
Institutional	Strengthening farmer representation Improving research resources in the industry – working with Kenya Sugar Research Foundation (KESREF)
Immediate and beneficial	Researching and regularising taxation and deduction for farmers Ensuring all debts to farmers are cleared
Reacting and preventative work	Supporting KSB in enforcement mechanisms on <i>importation</i> of sugar Ensuring that a set <i>privatisation framework</i> is followed in the industry
Punitive work	Supporting investigations and audits at all levels in the industry Advocating for prosecution for corruption
Cross-cutting	Promoting gender – working more actively with women (and youth) in sugar farming through SUCAM than in Phase 1

This is a broad and ambitious agenda – and seemingly an impossibly ambitious agenda, in its scope, for an organisation whose 'activists' numbered nine people – all except the western region Policy Coordinator working voluntarily with other commitments and jobs.

But, certainly for the first year of the second phase (up until the end of 2003), SUCAM managed to cement its position as probably the most dynamic force working in the sugar industry for constructive change.

The second phase started slowly. Sugar farmers were on nationwide strike in late 2002 in a response to a decision by the millers to unilaterally push down the price for cane – part of more general skirmishing and resistance by millers to the new Sugar Act and the new, farmer-led Sugar Board. It was a reminder that some of the most powerful actors in the industry were still far from willing to move into a new era of cooperation and negotiation. SUCAM worked with farmers to counter-pose a new pricing policy – with good results. Late 2002 was also a pre-election period,

with every expectation of an important change in government, and SUCAM kept a lower profile during the election campaign.

But with the new NARC government in power in early 2003, SUCAM moved to push once more to consolidate change in the industry. There was successful pressure to revive, and re-invigorate, the Sugar Parliamentary Committee at the start of the new parliament. The strike in late 2002, revealing the latent conflict in the industry and uncertainty over key issues such as pricing, was a key factor in persuading the new government to establish an investigative Sugar Task Force. (The strike also surfaced some local spontaneous leadership, which would re-appear in 2005 in the Miwani area particularly).

When the Sugar Task Force began work in mid-2003 – with an excellent chair heading it – SUCAM was both formally and informally active in informing and lobbying the task force, which drew extensively on SUCAM materials. The task force swept round the sugar-growing areas in a three-month, highly participatory blitz of consultation and information gathering, and produced a challenging but formative report.

The task force pushed open the door for an industry-wide discussion on a long-term agenda for reform in the sugar industry. Its report contained a strong and incisive analysis of the key structural problems the industry faced. It suggested that the industry now needed a clear strategic blueprint for the next period.

When the Kenya Sugar Board (with a new and again excellent chief executive in place) began to discuss how to respond to the task force report, SUCAM found its position in the industry recognised. SUCAM was invited to be part of the initial strategic planning meeting to work out a process for creating a 'blueprint'. Not only was SUCAM then continuously involved in the preparation work for a full industry meeting, it ended up being asked to host this meeting – perhaps the ultimate acknowledgement that it had 'arrived' as a fully recognised force in the sugar debate.

This top-level 'blueprint' involvement was, however, only one of the levels at which SUCAM found itself having to work. And at other levels the climate was still quite a resistant one. SUCAM found itself playing all the roles of gadfly, activist and valued collaborator in dealing with what were still only 'semi-reformed' structures and actors in the industry, and the position on the ground, in this period.

Although SUCAM itself would say that a certain degree of consensus was achieved in the industry during 2003, resistance to change was still prevalent. Elements within the Ministry of Agriculture, the top officials and managers in the mills and their governing bodies, policy makers in the treasury – scepticism and obstruction were rife in all these areas. The farmers' representatives on the new Kenya Sugar Board were struggling to make their weight felt – and to work cohesively together. The new chief executive of the Kenya Sugar Board was having to work under considerable political pressure to water down or fudge change – from sugar importers, outside economic advisors and his own ministry. Management practices in the mills were shifting slowly (and some corrupt contracts were cancelled) but not without resistance. SUCAM constantly had to be on the alert for back-sliding and underhand resistance to change.

On the ground, with farmers, SUCAM's level of engagement varied over the first year of the second phase. At times SUCAM deliberately limited civic education work, feeling much of what they were putting out was repeated information – and the farmers were complaining that they knew what the issues were, but couldn't see any action around them. But at other times – when SUCAM was advancing new positions, explaining the proposed changes in the industry, or when new issues came up – SUCAM tried to get out there again to keep its constituency engaged and informed.

And farmers were beginning to see some shifts for themselves in the way the industry was now working. Most importantly, the huge backlog of debt was beginning to be cleared (by December 2004 it had come down from two billion Kenya shillings to 500 million), and farmers were beginning to be paid on time, as new industry agreements came into force. SUCAM again had lobbied hard to ensure this key beneficial change happened immediately for farmers.

Thinking global and regional – SUCAM goes international

Sugar is a global industry. Many countries see sugar as a 'strategic' industry and will consequently play a hard game to ensure they get a greater share of international markets.

In 2002-03 Kenya began to feel the hard edge of the global sugar industry. Up until this point Kenyan sugar had a certain level of protection – in import tariffs and quotas – from imported sugar, either from the south-east Africa region or further afield. But in early 2003 these temporary safeguards allowed by COMESA, the regional trade organisation, lapsed. Cheap sugar flooded in from producer countries in the region and other producers such as the European Union and Australia, which subsidise or otherwise protect their own industries. Kenya's sugar became unsellable, stocks rose at the mills and there was real pressure to reduce the price of cane.

The Kenyan government had been ineffective in the international sugar trade arena for many years and it was slow to respond to this new crisis. SUCAM was able to mobilise MPs to demand action, and was ready with arguments to take into the COMESA negotiations that had been called. SUCAM continued to push for tougher action in COMESA over the year and backed this up with some imaginative action domestically, including a raid on a supermarket to protest about the sale of cheap, imported sugar.

The result was that a one-year retention of safeguards was later extended through to early 2007 – giving the Kenyan sugar industry a short but precious breathing space in which to continue the reform process and improve its ability to survive in the global sugar market. But the writing was on the wall – after February 2007 the Kenya sugar market would be open, and local production would have to compete with the rest of the sugar world in that market.

Success and change 2002-03

The last months of 2002 and the whole of 2003 saw SUCAM confirm its position as a key actor in the sugar industry.

By the end of 2003 SUCAM's core team had access and influence at high levels and had been invited into national planning processes for reshaping the industry. Their influence was felt in the detail of pricing agreements, through to the shape of structural reform, and up to the moves in the international arena to provide temporary protection for the sugar industry.

In a subtle way SUCAM shifted in this period. It retained its watchdog role, and could move quickly into an activist response if needed. But the weight of its work was now much more technical and constructive, proposing reform, acting as an informal 'think tank', and lobbying around these positions.

SUCAM's language over this period – in its briefings, reports, and even in its calendars for farmers – became more complex and technical. Within the core team itself it was probably only three or four key people who were responsible for most of the analysis and shaping of SUCAM positions around the reform agenda and other more technical aspects. They also tended to be the main interlocutors with the higher echelons of the industry.

But ironically, at the end of 2003 – a high point in SUCAM's success – an apparent decline set in, with SUCAM losing its strategic grasp and becoming 'disconnected' from the farmer base of the coalition. What happened here?

Finding new energy, a new strategy... and a new form?

In many ways it is no surprise that SUCAM visibly faltered during 2004. SUCAM was a typical campaign in that it enjoyed huge initial energy, high levels of commitment and a tight unity of purpose, provided by a small number of people working informally together. This cannot last – at some point most campaigns are forced to relook at themselves, their activity and their form, once that initial fiery ‘organic’ first phase has passed.

By the end of 2003 SUCAM was clearly in a different energetic state from that of 2001-02. At one simple level, the high level of activity had carried a high personal cost – many core team members were burnt out, exhausted from the relentless activity of the last two years. SUCAM's work was still carried out by volunteers, all with other jobs. Much of the analysis and lobbying work fell onto the shoulders of an even smaller, inner group of three or four members. The inherent unsustainability of this was bound to catch up with those involved.

But the core team had also changed significantly in composition by the end of 2003. Four out of nine of the original members left, or were asked to leave, during the period from mid-2002 onwards. Some saw opportunities in the changing sugar industry – to stand for a director position on the new Kenya Sugar Board for example. Others left over tensions about payments to core team members for work done – SUCAM had a tight policy on volunteerism.

New appointments were made which kept the core team at nine members. The new members included two sugar cane farmers, and representatives of NGOs and networks. But the changes fundamentally shifted the urgent, dynamic feel of the core team that had originally come together from a passion and commitment about sugar. New members, good as they were, came in with a more representative and objective view of the work. The core team became less a campaigning team and more a managing team – which had implications for the energy and perspective of SUCAM itself. For some of

those remaining, having to ask some of the original core team members to leave because of questions of self-interest was clearly disappointing – the original ‘purity’ of SUCAM had somehow been tarnished.

In its first year SUCAM had also managed to find someone who worked as a paid coordinator – and who, fortuitously, did an excellent job. His style fitted the pace and style of the campaign – and he facilitated and worked well, providing the kind of constant communication between the core team members that had marked SUCAM's first phase. When he left, however, SUCAM struggled to find a good replacement. His immediate successor became a source of tension between some core team members and ActionAid – and he was, in the end, dismissed at ActionAid's insistence. Later coordinators did a good enough job, but were working with a much less energised and dynamic core team by that point.

The area of tension around the second coordinator was just one of several that crept into the core team's workings from 2002 onwards. An emerging set of tensions around ActionAid's role and engagement with SUCAM took on more importance – although it also became difficult to distinguish clearly at times for team members between the role of ActionAid itself and the role and person of the western region Policy Coordinator, a key core team member and ActionAid staff member (we look at this more later). New core team members brought new perspectives and styles, meaning that differences of opinion – both directional and personal – between new members and the ‘old guard’ developed. In 2004, the level of informal and formal discussion within the core team had reached a new low. Key issues were not being addressed.

What also caught up with SUCAM by the end of 2003 was the continuing absence of any effective farmers' organisation in the sugar industry. KESGA had sunk even deeper into a paralysis of internal feuding – split into two competing factions taking court action against each other. The attempts to create a lower level set of structures – the Zonal Committees – had failed.

There is a clear limit to the extent to which a small core group on its own can sustain effective contact with tens of thousands of farmers spread over a large geographical area over a long period of time – particularly in the absence of a significant network of organisations at grassroots level. SUCAM maintained its civic education work – with different levels of presence at different times – over the second phase of its life. But the civic education alone was not an effective conduit for a genuine two-way dialogue, and did not enable the farmers themselves to work on or bring forward their own ideas and priorities.

The SUCAM core team found itself becoming distanced, disconnected and less accountable to its base. As its own influence and access within the industry grew, so did its difficulties in maintaining an effective, accountable and responsive relationship with farmers.

One of SUCAM's original aims was to “ensure that farmers have a greater say in the management and development of the industry”. By 2004 SUCAM had ensured that farmers were beginning to get immediate greater benefits from cane growing, and had more security through the development of industry-wide agreements. But the voice of farmers themselves had no effective channel to reach the apex levels of the industry. The new farmer-directors on the KSB had probably even less connection and accountability to farmers than SUCAM – with no organised voice on the ground they relied on their own individual connections and by their own admission felt increasingly adrift from farmers as a whole. SUCAM itself was always open, through its fieldwork, to the ideas, positions and voices of individual farmers, but also suffered from the lack of any regional, organised voice.

SUCAM of course did have a ‘greater say’ – particularly those members of the core team who were most active and respected in top industry circles. It was an irony for SUCAM that its own voice – and powerful presence – in the industry increased many-fold during 2002-04, while the farmers’ organised voices became, if anything weaker, and SUCAM’s own connection to farmers became more difficult to sustain.

There were of course dangers here. SUCAM's integrity in its work for farmers rested, more and more, solely on its own self-assessed adherence to its core principles, and its own perception of what was good for farmers in the industry. As the core team met less frequently, and the level of informal ‘checking out’ between members went down, there was more and more the danger of individual core team members responding from their own individual perspective.

“SUCAM, by the end of Phase 1 had become powerful. We could summon MPs, directors, farmers. It was very important for us to understand that we had, during this process, gained power, and that it was crucial for us to discard this power lest we misuse it and clout around or exercise too much control – after all we were only a lobby group, not the centre of power.

This understanding came when, immediately after KSB elections, we (because of our power) called elected grower-directors together in a bid to control who they chose as chairperson. The truth is – from hindsight – we had no right to have done that – but that was the first sign that power may be getting to our heads and luckily we recognised that sign early enough.”

SUCAM core team member

The danger was partially recognised, as the quote in the box on page 19 shows. But by 2004 SUCAM had perhaps not fully appreciated just how much the development of events in the industry, and in SUCAM's own position and reputation, had combined to create a very much stronger power position for SUCAM, compared to the power position of the sugar cane farmers themselves.

With all these changing dynamics and relationships, and exhaustion affecting SUCAM core team members, it is not surprising that SUCAM found itself somewhat lost and de-energised in 2004. This picture shouldn't lead to a simplistic criticism of SUCAM – seeing SUCAM somehow as having consciously 'poached' the power and let the more difficult aspects of maintaining its coalition decay. The situation was more complex than that. SUCAM was faced with a drift away from its original 'position' and aims – with a combination of events and changes creating a new and different context and 'location' for it to work within. Unfortunately for SUCAM, the new location is one that does not compliment some of its original aims. This is perhaps a failure of awareness, a failure to read well the turbulent changing situations over the three years, and a failure to see how SUCAM and its practice were quietly being repositioned.

In 2004, SUCAM needed to become aware again, to recognise the drift and changed context and rethink its own strategy. Ironically it was a period when the energies and internal cohesion needed to do this work were at their lowest. Up until the end of 2003 SUCAM had probably worked with a more tactical and reactive style than a deeply strategic one. It had ridden the wave of events and opportunities with a broad set of principles and aims. In some ways its view of the 'future of the industry' was quite an orthodox one – its arguments for efficiency with fairness could find an echo with many in the industry. Now it needed to be able to both re-read the context it was working in, its own 'position' and practice, and to look much more deeply at its strategy for the industry in the next period.

A postscript – SUCAM in late 2005

The discussions from which this case is drawn took place in February 2005. We left SUCAM at a moment when it faced both its own internal issues and a changing context for the sugar industry in Kenya. Both presented sharp challenges. Both suggested a need for a deep strategic look at how SUCAM might move forward most effectively in the next period.

In late 2005 how has the picture developed?

There have been significant changes in the external context for the Kenyan sugar industry, and the global market for sugar, even in these few months. The European Union's decision in mid 2005 to introduce sweeping reforms in its own sugar regime has sent shock waves of uncertainty rippling through most sugar-growing developing countries. The reforms propose a cut in EU sugar prices of around 39%, and an end to the special access of many of the so-called African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries (including Kenya) to the EU market, where they were receiving prices for their quotas of up to three times the global market price.

The full impact of the EU reforms on individual countries is, as yet, unclear. A report for the Kenyan industry, which SUCAM helped to draw up, suggests that other sugar-exporting countries looking for alternative high-price markets to the EU might turn particularly to Kenya, where consumer prices are currently amongst the highest in the world, and the domestic industry is still a high-cost producer. The report suggests that more efficient sugar producing countries might flood the Kenyan market with cheap sugar imports.

The report also notes that the window of protection for the Kenya industry, afforded by the 'safeguard agreement' negotiated with COMESA, restricting imports from the Southern Africa region, expires in just over two years. A gloomy conclusion of the report is that "unless our laws are tailored to turn round the industry in readiness for the post safeguard-measure (period), the

sector is sure to collapse". (*Sunday Nation*, 10 July 2005). SUCAM already knew in early 2005 that the sugar industry faced a tough struggle to somehow 'get competitive' for early 2008 – the new EU position gives a further turn to the screw.

In Kenya itself, a key challenge for SUCAM since early 2005 has been to respond to the second elections for farmer representatives to the Kenya Sugar board, held in early 2005. The Ministry of Agriculture, and some existing board members, were lobbying hard for the elections to be postponed, and the mandate of the existing Board continued. SUCAM's core team had some differences initially over how to respond to this manoeuvre, but finally decided both to support the elections being held and to mount a new civic education initiative to ensure that farmers were aware of the issues. Farmers responded strongly to the ministry's strategy and the elections were duly held.

In other parts of the domestic industry there are positive developments for SUCAM to note and work with. A highlight has been the strong emergence during 2005 of the Kenyan Women Sugarcane Farmers' Network (Kewosfan), centred on the area around Miwani, which suffered the closure of its local mill in 1999. Kewosfan has shown that there is a latent capacity for effective local leadership amongst farmers, and that this can begin to develop into a more regional presence.

SUCAM itself, however, is still in a period of mixed ideas around its own future and work. A new coordinator has brought passion and energy back to the core – and has increased the rhythm of consultation – so central to SUCAM's tactical effectiveness and working style in its first years.

But SUCAM has yet to sit down to look deeply at its strategy for the next period, and what might be its most appropriate form and shape. The core team has struggled to find an easy consensus on some key issues in the last period. The future for both the sugar industry, and this important campaigning body within the industry, still looks unclear and uncertain as 2005 draws to an end.

Identity, partnership and power – SUCAM and ActionAid

So far in this case study we have focused mainly on the experience, issues and lessons from the perspective of SUCAM. But there may be another useful dimension to the case – the question of SUCAM's relationship with ActionAid, and the issues and lessons that emerge for an organisation such as ActionAid in working with advocacy and campaigning issues through this sort of partnership arrangement.

SUCAM's very identity, and its relationship with ActionAid, came to be more of an issue in its later life. But the issue of identity and ActionAid was there from the beginning. The idea for a campaign around sugar originated with ActionAid. The Kiboswa meeting was held under ActionAid auspices. An ActionAid staff member, the western region Policy Coordinator, was a prime mover in getting the campaign started, became a core team member and was in many ways one of the most visible actors in SUCAM. He brought excellent analytical skills to the work, a strong ethical dimension and his own energy and commitment. In the work itself he proved to be a good communicator and lobbyist. He played a high-profile role in the first period of work, but remained an AAIK staff member.

At the same time, ActionAid was the only donor for SUCAM, and the Policy Coordinator, in the first phase, was both donor manager and core team member. So ActionAid, personally and organisationally, was very much in and around SUCAM from the start, and for many formed an integral aspect of SUCAM's identity. And yet SUCAM itself was, in its own words, "an independent lobby and advocacy coalition". The seeds of later tensions were somehow sown in amongst these early ambiguities of relationship. This, coupled with the Policy Coordinator's privileged position as an AAIK staff member, would produce tensions within the core team later.



Gideon Mendel/Corbis/ActionAid

For ActionAid itself, its relationship with a campaign such as SUCAM is an important issue in its own new approach to development work. ActionAid places great value on the notion of development work through partnership – and partnership itself brings with it implicit and explicit ideas about ways of working together, power and accountability.

But the role and weight of AAIK's presence in SUCAM's life raise questions about the nature of partnership in practice and about SUCAM's identity, even for those right at the heart of the core team. To what extent was – and is – SUCAM an independent animal? To what extent, in effect, an open or 'covert' AAIK campaign? Who calls the shots in critical areas of SUCAM's life?

In many ways AAIK's approach to supporting SUCAM was intended to maximise its autonomy of identity and action. AAIK deliberately never took credit for SUCAM's work or successes, and avoided any public linking of its name to SUCAM. Resources were fed through to SUCAM, particularly in the early period, using procedures designed to give flexibility with minimal bureaucracy. ActionAid never sought to influence, or obstruct, any strategy of SUCAM.

But, at the same time, AAIK was always somehow very present in SUCAM's daily life. The very procedures that gave flexibility also meant SUCAM

had to constantly refer to, and account to, the western region AAIK office. ActionAid vehicles were the means of transport for people and resources to the civic education meetings (using ActionAid vehicles was the most cost-effective means of getting the transport needed on a flexible basis). Key decisions about use of funding were referred back to ActionAid. AAIK staff undertook the two social audits of SUCAM, and ActionAid human resources staff were involved in the appointment of the second coordinator. Much of this 'presence' was there for good, pragmatic reasons – not as part of a conspiracy to take over – but its impact nevertheless created confusion and uncertain boundaries around identity.

From the beginning, the resource agreement with AAIK, and the strong presence of an AAIK staff member in the core team, meant that certain core ActionAid principles were brought into SUCAM. Core team members noted both that "ActionAid rules rule" and also that, in some significant moments, AAIK members of the core team came in very quickly to ensure they were enforced. In fact the situation was perhaps even more complicated – it may have been more the personal principles of the AAIK staff member than any policy positions of ActionAid itself that were 'enforced'. But for others in SUCAM these were ActionAid positions – and the tough line at times an ActionAid line.

For those inside and outside SUCAM, the AAIK influence was then both obvious and yet also confusing. The most recent coordinator of SUCAM, in discussion, laughingly admitted that after a year in the job she didn't know where AAIK ended and SUCAM began, or whether SUCAM was anything but AAIK.

In 2003, the issues of identity and ActionAid's presence and power in relation to SUCAM came to a head. There were several instances of alleged misconduct, involving a coordinator and a core team member, where ActionAid people on the core team insisted on a tough and speedy response. Many other core team members felt that their own capacity or willingness to handle the situation had not been trusted – as one member put it, ActionAid “should have stood aside as father and let the children play”. The incidents left a degree of resentment towards what was seen as too quick and too highhanded a response from the ActionAid-linked core team members. In the build up of tension that followed, the western region Policy Coordinator felt that it would be better if he stood down, in late 2003, as a core team member.

At another level this confusion of identity, boundaries and role, and the issues it sparked, were not effectively managed within AAIK. ActionAid gave strong and courageous support to SUCAM and its own staff at moments of tension and conflict during the first few years. But the subtleties of identity, boundaries and conflict of interest were never effectively recognised and managed – yet it is here that many key issues seem to lurk for ActionAid, its work in campaigning, and its understanding of the practice of partnership.

For AAIK there seem to be several lessons from the SUCAM experience. It does seem that AAIK in future needs to be clearer in detail about how it defines and works with partnership – and clearer about how the practice of partnership is played out in the actual processes and relationships. It will need to be much more alert to the unintended consequences of what may be seen to be proper and innocuous practices in working with partners.

There are several big, specific issues raised by the SUCAM case. At the level of engagement in activities or decision-making in partners' work, there perhaps need to be tougher and more clearly held boundaries. Can an AAIK staff member play an active role both as a de-facto ActionAid programme manager, a resource holder for a programme like SUCAM, and be an active and key player in the 'partner' itself and its work, without fatally muddling the issues of identity and power in the 'partnership'? Might it not be better either to ensure that AAIK staff do not play any role in partner activities and decisions, or, if AAIK staff skills are seen as vital (perhaps at the start of a partner's life), then have a process of secondment for a period?

There may also be a need to be clearer about other issues of process and change. It may be that the donor/resource holder (in this case AAIK) has to be over-conscientious about giving the partner space and time to find their own feet, and their own practice. There is perhaps a need to be more patient, and to accept more risk in allowing the partner to find their own way, and possibly to make their own mistakes. An AAIK staff member commented in the case of SUCAM that perhaps AAIK was “too panicky” about issues of integrity – and rushed in too quickly to ‘correct’ situations. The result was a sense that AAIK could, and would, step in very quickly to challenge and overturn what it saw as poor practice in SUCAM – a situation that gave SUCAM members little space and confidence to build their own practice. Getting beyond this may mean investing more time at the very beginning in talking through issues of values and practice which come with your funding support – building both a mutual understanding of what is expected, and a trust on the part of the resource holder in their partner. But then it also means giving space and licence for that trust to be demonstrated in practice – and assuming the risk that brings with it.

The issues that arose for AAIK in the SUCAM case are key issues for any development NGO that holds and disperses resources. The 'partnership' relationship is complicated and distorted by the resource-holding role and the power that gives –

or is ascribed to the resource holder, regardless of whether they feel they have it or not. You have to be overly clear about boundaries and overly conscious of how your practice operates to ensure that there can be a real openness and dialogue in the relationship – to ensure that the power of the money, or your perceived status in the relationship, is not quietly corrupting a true partner relationship.

Campaigns, rights and economic development – a balanced conclusion of SUCAM's work?

So how to judge the intensely energetic and influential presence of SUCAM in the Kenyan sugar industry between 2001 and today? Positively, on the grounds of the major structural and policy changes that SUCAM helped enact?

Or more cautiously, as a short-lived, bright light that nevertheless failed to sustain itself, build a solid organisational base in farmers or come up with an effective strategy to ensure medium-term sustainability in the industry?

And, if we look at SUCAM through a rights-based lens, how effective has SUCAM been in identifying key rights for sugar cane farmers, and in ensuring those rights are met? In the context of the Kenyan sugar industry – part of a global industry – what 'rights' are essential, achievable and realistic to demand at a difficult negotiating table?

A campaign is a campaign is a campaign – and judge it on that

SUCAM started life as a *campaign*. And campaigns have their own particular nature, strengths and limitations.

A campaign is of the moment. Good campaigns generate a whirlwind of energy and commitment, often quite raggedly, or informally organised, around a particular context and issue, and the opportunities of the moment.

That particularly intense energy of the first period cannot be sustained medium-term. The context changes – partly because of the success or otherwise of the campaign. Actors drop out or burn out – the energetic dynamic that was there at the beginning shifts. Very often with campaigns there is – as was the case with SUCAM – an energy dip, and a sense of loss of focus and direction, and clarity of form, some time into the campaign's life.

Campaigns are also usually very focused. They pick up on particular issues within a complex social picture. They do not try to deal with the whole (or set out to manage the whole) of that picture. Instead they pick out what they see as the key elements that need change and centre their energy around those points. It is in the nature and form of campaigns that they don't and can't do more – they are not social managers, or implementers of social policy. They are guerrilla fighters for particular change.

There are strengths and limitations in all of these campaign characteristics. And, for most campaigns, there comes a time of hard choices, at that point where the initial energy cannot be sustained, when some issues have been addressed and won or lost, but where the overall picture remains a problematic one.

Does the campaign 'transform' to be something else – something more formal, more ambitious in scope? Does it accept that its job is done, with all the gains and imperfections, and leave the stage? Both choices are hard for different reasons, especially when there are issues still out there to be addressed.

We should assess campaigns for what they were, and what they achieved, in their best moments, not in the period when their energy and focus may have diminished. And, on that basis, SUCAM must get a high rating. It generated enormous energy very skillfully and intelligently around structural change in the sugar industry. It played a pivotal role in ensuring that a new, positive framework of governance and practice was set in place for

farmers in the sugar industry. It worked with high ethical standards, and it put a lot of its energy, despite being a small 'elite' body at core, to drawing in and informing as wide a constituency amongst farmers as it could reach.

In that sense, SUCAM was a key actor in redrawing the map of the playing field for the sugar industry in Kenya from 2001 onwards. As SUCAM has found out, however, it is the other actors in the industry who now have to take full advantage of the opportunities that the new map provides. SUCAM core team members have strayed onto the edges of being more than just a campaign. They have been offered, at times, a taste of informal influence over strategy or governance in the industry. But viewed from outside it is clear that SUCAM, as it is, does not have the basis, the form or legitimacy to move seriously into being a formal major player at those levels.

It has been SUCAM's misfortune that the development of other key actors in the industry hasn't moved at the same pace as the opportunities SUCAM has helped provide. In particular it has proved difficult to encourage any new, effective and more grounded farmers' organisation across the industry. Here SUCAM may, retrospectively, have been over-optimistic that awareness raising and the campaign's momentum would shift the combination of KESGA's incapacity to radically change, and the apparent accumulated deep mistrust amongst farmers of becoming organised.

But, in 2005, you can look back and see some sparks of change in farmer organisation and leadership. The spontaneous leadership that developed around the nationwide strike in 2002, and the more recent emergence of the Kenyan Women Sugarcane Farmers' Network (Kewosfan), indicate that a potential and different farmer leadership is present, and that farmers will respond to that leadership. In both cases there can be no direct causal link between these developments and SUCAM's work, but it is difficult to see how either of them would have developed as strongly as they have without the new climate

in the industry, and the structural changes. SUCAM was the key actor in getting these pushed through.

And there is no doubt that SUCAM's civic education work in the field has created a different level of understanding among many farmers of the industry, its issues and their rights within it – all fertile ground for new leadership to work with.

Viewed as a campaign, SUCAM was both very effective and, in some ways, unlucky. The positive space SUCAM helped open up for the sugar industry may not be occupied as effectively as it could be by farmers. And the global economic context for the Kenya sugar industry looks particularly difficult over the next few years. In looking at its own strategy in the next period, SUCAM will have to face these realities, as well as those of its own historical form. Its success was as a campaign and it is not easy to see how it can effectively 're-invent' itself as something else (as an NGO, or a think-tank) that would allow it to maintain, or re-capture, the energy or impact of the first years.

A rights-based approach within the Kenya sugar industry?

SUCAM talked a language of rights for farmers in the sugar industry. As its initial manifesto from the Kiboswa meeting made clear, it was about:

- ensuring "that sugarcane farmers in Kenya enjoy a life that is just, fair and free of poverty"
- ensuring "that farmers have a greater say in the management and development of the industry"
- working to ensure that "fairness, justice, equity, truth, transparency, accountability, democracy, honesty, non-violence, and change" are what farmers can expect within the industry.

There are very basic and broad rights here – justice, fairness, equity and freedom from poverty. How effective has SUCAM been in securing such rights in its work? And are these rights appropriate, realisable rights to have as goals for the Kenya sugar industry?

As we have seen throughout this case study, the Kenyan sugar industry has never been a 'social' industry – one where the long-term social and livelihood interests of the industry's 'members' have been part of the industry's explicit agenda. Up to 2001 the industry was marked by deeply structural corruption, exploitation and even violence – farmers' long-term social and livelihood interests were simply not visible as issues of concern.

In the post-2001 period the climatic picture of the industry is different. There is, to some degree, a shared concern amongst all actors about the survival of the industry, and a recognition of the broad social impact if the industry were to collapse.

But the message within the industry is at the same time quite a hard and conservative economic one. To survive, the industry must transform and become more efficient and competitive. The unspoken message – given the archaic and inefficient nature of the industry up to 2001 – is that this will be a tough struggle and that in the restructuring, as ever, there will be casualties. In particular, the least efficient mills and least efficient (or most poorly located) farmers may not survive the cold winds of external competition. And there is no room for any socially argued protection for the industry or its farmers – liberalisation policy does not allow for this.

Added to this is the fact that the structural, global context has become a tougher one in the past year – the EU has sneezed and many domestic sugar industries in the developing world are likely to get a bad case of flu.

So where has SUCAM located its struggle for rights in the midst of this picture? Interestingly, SUCAM has never itself put forward a particularly 'social' economic position for the industry, or argued for particular rights for the poorest farmers in the sector. SUCAM has broadly supported the idea, in its own language, that there is a need to "push the industry towards economic efficiency".

It is difficult then to see, in this policy context, what it means to talk about rights of justice, equity and particularly freedom from poverty.

Does it mean simply that, within a context where many will lose their living from sugar in the next period, that there needs at least to be equity and justice around the struggle to compete? That there should be fairness and equity of opportunity – a level playing field – for all farmers in their struggle to make the grade?

It is difficult to see how even this limited translation of rights plays out in the Kenyan sugar industry – or how to make it play out. Farmers are in inherently unequal positions within the industry – by virtue of historical conditions such as their different landholding sizes, their physical access to mills, their proximity to mills with very different prospects because of technological or managerial issues. In the next few years, market forces will inevitably sort out winners and losers in the Kenya industry on the basis of these 'unequal' factors, as well as other more open ones (ability to adapt to new technology, for example).

Or does talking about rights here mean talking about a radically difficult, alternative, and socially based strategy for the Kenyan sugar industry which prioritises preserving livelihoods and protecting particularly the poorest (least 'rights-rich') farmers, regardless of the immediate narrow economic implications of such a strategy?

Again it is difficult to see how this plays out in the global economic context in which Kenya and its sugar industry sit. SUCAM has not sought to propose such a strategy – and it would be difficult to see it as easily workable. Such a strategy would imply protection for the industry, or some farmers within it. In the very short-term Kenya has enjoyed such protection – through COMESA – but only on the understanding that this gives room to prepare to enter the global marketplace on a totally liberalised basis by 2008. In the current global economic environment, and current trade climate, anything more long-term, or a policy explicitly based on social protection, would not seem to be an open option for a relatively non-powerful economy like Kenya.

The logic and language of the current dominant ethos in the global economy is very different to the language of rights. The liberal economic position says that all is for the best if purely economic factors rule. If farmers do not survive it is because they are not competitive. Their going under is, in the larger picture, for the best, as the national/regional economy will have more chance of success in a competitive global environment. As for those who go under they will have to find their new place in other markets, but with no necessary economic or social safety net for them if they don't. There is no right to anything of the order of freedom from poverty, and not even necessarily a right to equal opportunity to compete – it all has to be fought for, and it all comes down to competing economic power.

The language of rights assumes that in the world we are fighting for there will be, or could be, in the end, a right to a livelihood, or freedom from poverty – that over and above the battlefield of the economic terrain we recognise something of a higher order and social content, to which everyone should have access to.

The problem seems to arise when we espouse the language of these rights in a reality that is determinedly driven by liberal economic practice. In the case of Kenya sugar farmers there seems to be little opportunity for convergence.

There seems to be a basic tension here underlying SUCAM's work and its espoused position on rights. The rights it wants to fight for make no sense – are not appropriate ones to put on the table – even in a liberal economic context. Yet SUCAM's own strategic position on the future of the Kenya sugar industry accepts the liberal economic framework as the only possible one.

The issues around rights for SUCAM, in microcosm, are ones that many development agencies have to struggle with on a broader canvas. In one way they push us to recognise some of the deep tensions and contradictions that rule in our work. They also should stimulate us to seek new ways through – ways of talking differently about how we organise our world – that can provide a stronger base for our campaigning and advocacy work, and offer the prospect of resolution of these basic and important contradictions.

Critical stories of change is a joint project of The Knowledge Initiative and ActionAid International's Impact Assessment and Shared Learning Unit.

The Knowledge Initiative is a new organisation being nurtured within ActionAid International. The Knowledge Initiative reflects the importance ActionAid International attaches to the generation and use of knowledge for empowerment, and hence action. The Knowledge Initiative aims to help civil society organisations and others to realise individual and organisational potentials as generators of knowledge for progress, and for empowering poor and marginalised people to use their own and other people's knowledge as a source of power. It does this through new alliances and networks for experiential training and learning, action research, rights-based participatory approaches, and the pursuit of alternatives.

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