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STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

KENYA: NURU INTERNATIONAL AND NURU KENYA

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CONTEXT

Kenya has a vibrant civil society with a long history. Since independence, the government has encouraged the development of Kenyan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations to promote peace and security, fight disease, and assist with service provision. Today, Kenya, and Nairobi in particular, is the primary hub for international NGOs working in East Africa. Furthermore, devolvement measures included in the 2010 constitution have made locally led development a priority for Kenyan governance. The sector now comprises more than 8,500 registered organizations, employing more than 300,000 people full-time. Two recent trends, however, pose risks to Kenyan civil society.

In recent years, donors have increasingly been moving toward project-based funding, rather than unrestricted grants or general operating support. This trend has made it difficult for NGOs to seek funding while adhering to their core missions. It has also hit Kenyan NGOs particularly hard, as – given local funding is difficult to obtain – most receive the overwhelming majority of their funding from foreign sources. In this environment, exits can be particularly sharp: when funding for a project dries up, NGOs are in many cases obligated to lay off staff and discontinue engagement with communities.

In terms of political rights and civil liberties, Kenya is listed as "partly free" by Freedom House's 2016 rankings. The government has long been suspicious of the independence of the NGO sector, and since the early 1990s has sought to extend control over the sector with new legislation. As a result, Kenyan NGOs are increasingly reluctant to undertake lobbying and advocacy. While Kenya is still home to a vibrant civil society, NGOs report an increasingly hostile local context, with the government treating their actions with suspicion, in part because of their foreign connections.

STORY OF TRANSITION

Nuru, an international organization, began working in Migori County's Kuria West, with the organization's founders going door-to-door to speak with community members about local concerns. There was no premeditated program design – instead, programming was built up in an organic and collaborative way, responding holistically to emergent community development issues. Subsequently, over the course of almost a decade, Nuru worked closely with local communities to design, implement, adapt, and ultimately transition ownership of its programming. Nuru staff built sustainability into the foundations of their approach, planning from the outset for the exit of international staff and developing Kenyan capacity to assume management of the organization. All this was clearly communicated from the start.

Thus, a dual hierarchy was created, with international staff forming a "scaffold" around Kenyan staff, which was slowly removed as local capacity was built up through training and mentoring. This was for two reasons. First, to keep international staff and leadership focused on the end goal of local leadership, steering them away from getting caught up in the day-to-day management of projects; and, second, to provide psychological support to Kenyan staff in order that they could feel confident – within a cultural context of feeling inferior to foreigners – that they could lead and manage development projects implemented in their communities.

Triggers that signalled readiness for transition included the achievement of impact milestones, the technical and psychological capacity of local staff, and a strong Kenyan leadership candidate able to lead Nuru Kenya after Nuru International's staff exit. Building on this, Nuru International left strong networks and communities of practice, helped develop a sense of local ownership over projects, and made a successful transition toward Kenyan leadership. In 2015, Nuru International, including all its international staff, left Kenya, transitioning full control to the Kenyan staff it had trained and the leaders it had helped to develop over the previous seven years.

Four years later, Nuru Kenya operates in 68 sub-locations within three sub-counties across Migori County. The organization reports that in its ten years of operation it has impacted more than 93,000 local people via direct interaction with 15,500 farmers. It is currently involved in the operation of 14 cooperatives in Migori County, which are planned to be self-sustaining to full independence within the next five years. Ultimately, Nuru provides a potent example of what is possible when an organization places locally owned and locally led development at the forefront of its organizational strategy and its measurements of success.

KEY LESSONS

Listening is key. Nuru Kenya found success and community buy-in by learning about community issues before designing interventions, spending months listening to community members before collaboratively deciding on program sectors and specific interventions.

Standard project timelines and top-down course corrections can frustrate local partners and communities, often serving to perpetuate or worsen power dynamics already present in development. By bucking the trend in aid toward project-based funding, Nuru was able to invest long-term in communities and ensure long-term sustainability.

Countries experiencing closing political space can be difficult places for NGOs to operate. Project sector can matter a great deal for funding and government relationships, with economic development making for a considerably more welcoming environment than, for example, human rights advocacy.

Teams interested in long-term project success should, from the very beginning, plan for sustainability with the communities involved. From its inception, Nuru incorporated sustainability into its planning, building a scaffold of international staff around local leadership, holding technical trainings, building capabilities through its Leadership Program, and maintaining consistent messaging about the forthcoming transition in order to build capacity and psychologically prepare local staff for ownership.

Provide room to fail and learn. Nuru International's experience mentoring Nuru Kenya staff in preparation for the 2015 turnover shows the value of this approach. Nuru Kenya staff were allowed the freedom to experiment without fear of sanction, which built leadership and staff capacity, as well as encouraging a culture of innovation.

Two-way accountability flows can improve relationships between donors and implementers, local partners, and the communities in which they work. Donors should ask themselves the following questions: Are we being receptive to feedback? Are we giving room to be held accountable? Are we receptive to feedback not just from implementers, but from the communities in which the implementers work?

Learning to let go is crucial. Sharing, and then surrendering, ownership to local partners and communities involves donors being willing to follow through on sustainability plans and truly test the ability of local organizations to succeed once they transition.

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Stopping As Success: Transitioning to locally led development.

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