

KARIMU

INTERNATIONAL HELP FOUNDATION



Dear Karimu donors and supporters,

I want to spend some time talking about the most difficult challenge faced by Karimu (and for that matter almost all NGOs) in order to achieve impactful and sustainable results. We all know well that human beings do not like change. We grow used to certain behavioral norms that become ingrained in our daily lives. We expect everyone to behave in the same way and, at times, even criticize those who do not. I like to say that these behaviors become “part of our DNA” and are difficult to change. We resist any changes to what is for us “the norm”.

People in other parts of the world have completely different behaviors to the point that some that are completely normal (and even expected) in their culture or country can be disrespectful to us.

When we execute our projects in Tanzania, the success of these projects is completely dependent on behavioral changes. Our income projects are introducing new crops to farmers who have been planting maize for generations. We introduce important concepts like planning and savings to communities that have spent their whole life worrying about how they survive today.

To change their behavior takes time. It requires patience and persistence. It demands “carrots and sticks” to encourage the new behavior with the “carrots” and discourage the old one with the “sticks”. It forces us to take heart-breaking decisions at times.

The most critical behavioral change that we need to achieve is related to maintenance. Without it, you cannot achieve sustainability.

Most people in all areas that Karimu works have grown up living in mud houses with straw roofs. These houses don't last very long. They are usually destroyed during the rainy season and rebuilt at the start of the dry season. Given that this happens every year, they have not developed the behavior of preventive maintenance. Why should they if the house will dissolve in the next rain?



Karimu's constructions are made to last not one year, but generations, and to last preventive maintenance must be done properly and issues discovered and addressed in a timely fashion. For us, this is obvious, but only because we grew up seeing our parents, older brothers and sisters, friends and relatives fix things all the time. This is our “expected behavior”. We have seen with our own eyes that preventive maintenance pays off. If we were to move to Tanzania to live in mud houses, I am sure we would continue to try to maintain our houses even if they are destroyed every year by the rains.

When we start our work in a new area, our transformations in that area have two dimensions: one that represents our pillars (or program areas) and one that represents the behavioral changes that need to take place. In the program area dimension, we start with sanitation bringing clean water to everyone as lack of clean water would make it impossible to achieve higher levels of health, education, and even income. We then move to education and health while executing income and financial services in parallel.

On the behavioral dimension we go through 3 phases. Initially, we teach the community the importance of maintenance, how it needs to be done, recorded, monitored, and evaluated. Our Tanzanian staff executes all the related processes together with the community representatives. In this phase, we are in the driver seat and they are learning.



We move to the second phase when we believe they have learned. We put them in the driver seat and play the role of mentor pointing only to mistakes or areas for improvement. Once they are “driving” well, we start distancing ourselves slowly until the new behavior has become routine or, as I like to say, becomes “part of their DNA”.



As I mentioned above, this behavioral change requires time and this is THE reason why we cannot execute too fast in any given area. Obviously, we are also restricted by funds, but, even if we had an unlimited amount of funding, our projects must move at the same speed as the changes in behavior are happening. And these changes take between 3 to 5 years.

We have clearly seen that in Ayalagaya. The fastest schools, for example, needed 3 years to change and maintain their facilities very well without any intervention.

Leadership and key influencers play the most critical role in this transition given that they exercise tremendous influence over the community. If they quickly become role models of the new behavior, everyone else will quickly follow and, slowly, you see the rejection of the old behavior by everyone.

Obviously, we are seeing a repeat of this transition in Arri. We completed the water project several months ago, but we remain in phase 1: in the driver seat to maintain the project. To encourage behavioral change, we spend time with the water committee teaching them what to do and explaining the benefits, etc. We promise “carrots”, e.g., a computer and a printer to track payments and print invoices. However, we also use the “stick”, exercising pressure, for example, by announcing to the whole community that we won’t start a new construction project in Arri until the committee is in the driver’s seat. It is not enough to announce once. For the message to sink in, it needs to be repeated multiple times. For this reason, we remind, for example, teachers and parents at every opportunity that their children won’t be learning in a gorgeous school environment until the water committee works well. It breaks my heart visiting the Arri schools and seeing the children learning in dark rooms, with dirty floors, no doors or windows, full of wasps, etc. However, I must leverage those sticks, because we know well that the teachers and parents will exert pressure on the Arri leaders who, in turn, will pressure the water committee to learn quickly. As I mentioned before, the transition will happen, because the benefits brought by our projects are just enormous, but it will take time, patience, and persistence.

Finally, it is important to understand that this transition does not happen smoothly from one phase to another in a straight line. Sometimes people start to change, but then go back to the old ways or you have groups that move quickly while others within the same community move slower. We can see that still in Ayalagaya. There, we are working with the nurses of Dareda Kati Health Center to take the vital signs every single time patients arrive at the clinic. They were doing this well, but with the huge expansion of the center and the arrival of many new staff, the transformation moved backwards. For this reason, we use the diagnosis done by the doctors of certain diseases that cannot be discovered without vital signs to educate them on the importance of taking them (the carrot) and we put a stop on some projects that are strongly desired by the nurses at the center until vital signs are being taken regularly for at least 3 months (the stick). Similarly, we have put the last project at Ayalagaya Secondary and High School on hold because they are being slow in addressing maintenance issues. They are fixing them, but, as we know, delays can make the issue bigger, increasing the cost and effort to fix it. They are still learning, but with time they will definitely learn that delays cause even more problems.

Does that mean that we are failing? Certainly not. This is absolutely normal. It takes time for people to change, but they all do as they see the benefits. I am, therefore, confident that they will change their behavior just as it happened at Bacho primary school, Gajal primary school, Gajal dispensary, Haysam primary school, the water project in Ayalagaya, ...

However, we need to stay focused, have patience, and persistence. We need to be willing to take heart-breaking decisions, not allowing our strong desire to help give too many carrots and not enough sticks.

Most NGOs don't have this patience and have a hard time making heart-breaking decisions. And many don't have the funds to stay in an area the necessary 3 to 5 years. And this is why Karimu succeeds. We stay in an area until the behavioral change has occurred so we can depart leaving all projects sustainable.

I hope you enjoyed this short explanation.

Thanks for reading it.

Nelson Mattos
Karimu Chief Operating Officer



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