

Widows' Empowerment Program: The Case of Ramula-Wajane Self-Help Group - Kenya

Peter M. Mutia
2499-90100, Machakos, Kenya
Email: petermutia@yahoo.co.uk
Phone: +254710353825

Context

Kenya is one of the countries in East Africa, with a total population of 46 million people. According to Brookings (2016), Kenya's economy is the largest in the East African region and is much more dynamic than those of other member countries. However, abject poverty is still a problem. According to Karanja (2015), Kenya is ranked sixth among top ten countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with large populations living in extreme poverty. This problem will not be solved unless radical measures are taken to rescue the 18 million people under the poverty line. Among these vulnerable groups of people are orphans and widows.

While bereavement is a social fact in any culture, the reactions and practices relating to this vary from culture to culture. Widows constitute a large proportion of the adult female population in African communities (Wafula, 2014). In the ideal conditions, when a woman loses her husband, she is inherited by a close relative of the deceased and taken care of together with her children. This has, however, changed due to a multitude of reasons; consequently, widows suffer economic deprivation after the death of their husbands, which lead to their engaging in different activities just to survive. Also, after the death of a father, many orphans are forced to stop schooling and engage in different activities like working as house-helpers, doing menial jobs or even petty crime. *Wajane International Foundation Inc. (WiFi)* defines an orphan as a child who has lost either one or both parents. *Wajane International Foundation* seeks to provide a path for economic empowerment for the widows and education for the orphans as a means of mitigating the effects of the passing of the father in the family.

WiFi supports orphans by facilitating their education and widows by giving them the means to acquire the necessary skills and helping them access markets for their products, using the Big-Brother model of development. Under this approach, the widows are educated and guided to take charge of their development and growth initiatives and access to markets for their products. This is achieved through training in handicrafts and entrepreneurship, using locally available materials and local trainers who understand not only the culture, but who are able to communicate in a language the widows can understand.

Overview of Project

Ramula-Usire Widows empowerment is a program which was initiated to mitigate the effects of poverty brought about by lack of income occasioned by the loss of income and general livelihoods because of the death of male spouses, who are the main bread winners in local families. The project activities are centered on handicrafts and environmental conservation as a way of creating an income and use the Big-Brother approach, which seeks to disconnect the beneficiaries from the dependence on donors. This is achieved through training and involvement of the beneficiaries right from the beginning of the project and letting them take charge by instilling a belief in themselves and the fact that they can do it and all they need is an enabling environment and support with what they need to achieve their goals; mainly

skills in handicrafts, entrepreneurship and marketing, and support with the necessary resources needed to achieve these objectives.

This approach seeks to address the problem of abject poverty and abuse brought about by widowhood. This is because in most cases, once a woman loses her husband through death, the battles of property inheritance leave her disadvantaged and in many cases she loses everything, leaving her to take care of her children, in most cases with no education or an income. The available evidence has proved that, given the skills, the widows are able to rise above all these challenges and sustainably take care of their families without having to fall into the trap of prostitution or other such vices to survive. The projects include:



Forest Tree Nursery

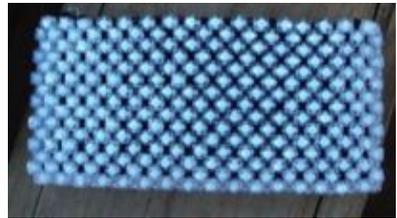
Under this project, the widows grow forest and fruit tree nurseries seedlings, which they sell to schools and individual farmers in their community at a small profit. Not only is there a ready market, but they have not been able to satisfy the local demand. This is mainly because with no electricity and the price of cooking gas being unaffordable to most villagers, firewood is the fuel of choice. Unfortunately, due to expanding populations and dwindling land sizes, the forest cover had continuously been depleted, necessitating a need for families to have their own woodlots from where they can get fuel.



Unfortunately, the biggest challenge for this project is the lack of water which means for the months of the year when there is no water in the water pans, the project stalls until the rains come.

Beadwork

The widows make use of colorful beads and fishing lines to make handbags, purses and tablemats, which they sell to the community. For this to happen, the widows are trained and retrained in beadwork.



Carpet Making



Capacity Building

For all these activities to be successful, the widows are equipped with business skills in order to ensure they are successful in their ventures and treat their activities as businesses which should be run professionally. Areas trained include: entrepreneurship, product branding and marketing and basic financial management.



These skills and the training in business and financial management equip the widows with the skills necessary to effectively take charge of their lives and families' livelihoods.

Benefits and Changes

There has been a noted change of attitude in the community. This is because people now seem to realize that the loss of a spouse does not have to be the end of life. In other words, there is life after the death of a loved one, and with or without a high education, one can still use locally available resources to change their circumstances. It has also resulted in a change of attitude where widows are more respected and viewed as an asset rather than a liability as was true in the past.

Quotes

Mrs. Sarah Ondego.

A key member of the community and who was also key in the formation of this group. As a community leader, she is one person who has witnessed a big change in the community. In one interview, Mrs. Ondego said:

“I am amazed by the change of attitude and self-belief evident in the widows. While before they had the ‘I-am-a-widow-and-thus-helpless’ attitude, now they have a can-do attitude, which has transformed their begging and fatalistic view to life to one of ‘If-you-show-me-what-to do, I will do it.’ This is a big transformation!”

Prof. Calvin Le Roy Snyder:

Imagine changing from a mother who didn't know where the next meal for her children was coming from to a woman who is part of a group who opened their own bank account! And this in less than a year! *“When I heard about the progress of the widows, I was flabbergasted. This is God's provision for His children!”* exclaimed Snyder.

Key Lessons about Community Development

1. First, working with rural communities entails first seeking to understand their worldview and culture. For this project to succeed, an understanding of the local culture had to be taken into consideration. This explains why the people do what they do the way they do it.
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3. Secondly, the beneficiaries (widows) were involved right from the planning, initiation and management of the project. They took charge of it; and to them, it was theirs, not a project brought by a stranger from outside. This has ensured success and longevity.

Conclusion

Aid in itself has never worked anywhere in the world. It goes without saying that when money is given out, there are more people who are only too willing to receive and spend it. Unfortunately, the donor community is not only dwindling in number, the amount of money they are willing to give is also going down. So it is essential to come up with approaches to make sure that every dollar given goes a long way in changing the lives of the beneficiaries

References

- Brookings (2016). *Africa's Powerhouse* (Online). Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/africas-powerhouse/>
- Karanja, S.(2015). *Kenya Ranked Sixth on Extreme Poverty Index* (online). Available: <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/1056-1056-u6geog/index.html>