

## **Communities know best, not charities:**

### **What I've learned after 15 years working in international development**

By Robin Wiszowaty  
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Throughout the majority of the last fifteen years, I've been living and working in rural East Africa, heading up WE Charity's sustainable development model in Kenya and Tanzania. My first trip to the continent was with a study abroad program, which is how I fell in love with Kenya. Intending to stay only for a brief exchange, I wound up living with a host family that became my extended family, in a mud-hut in the remote Maasailand. I walked for several kilometres each day to fetch wood and water, doing laundry by hand in a basin while keeping an eye on the family's youngest child, six-year-old Morio. Sharing in the daily challenges and triumphs of my new family and their community, I became fluent in Swahili. It was a far cry from my hometown of Chicago. In that time, I observed countless development projects started up by other organizations—some successful, but most failed.

I chose to work for WE Charity because of its complex, five-pillar development model and a commitment to best practices that I know from experience will create sustainable impact in our partner communities. I also see our team on the ground working right alongside those communities, striving for continuous improvement, always growing and learning together in order to do better. One of the most important aspects of the WE Villages model is partnership and community-led development.

But just as important is the partnership between WE and people like you, our donors and volunteers. That's why I want to share with you what I've learned over the years, and give a sneak peek into how WE works and how we strive to achieve the greatest impact with your generous support.

Let me back up a bit, and tell you more about what often goes wrong with development. In the early 2000s, I observed a project by another international organization, meant to bring clean water to the arid Kitui region of eastern Kenya. The organization swept into villages, and drilled boreholes all without consulting community members. They didn't ask how the community preferred to manage the resource, or how the community could afford the diesel costs to keep the pumps running. Unsurprisingly, the new water system was rarely used, and locals had little motivation to take over its maintenance once the organization packed up and left. Why would the community take over? The project gave them no sense of ownership.

Communities need to be leaders and decision makers in their own development. It's patronizing to assume that a non-profit would understand the unique needs of a region more than the people living in it. Or, for that matter, the challenges in addressing those needs. The role of the development organization is one of partner and enabler. That's why effective and responsible organizations like WE, while striving to respect the wishes of donors, always make it clear that funds will be used where they are needed most—where communities tell us they need it.

WE works in a village for, on average, 5-years, and there can be significant evolutions in community needs during that timeframe. Along the way, as our education, health, clean water, agriculture and financial opportunity pillars have the desired impact, needs will shift and grow. Take education, for instance. When we partner with village leaders and local governments to build a school, we plan the size of the campus and the number of classrooms based on current populations, as well as projected growth and demand. But sometimes that growth exceeds expectations. And sometimes, that growth is due to the success of WE's model itself.

WE Villages development pillars of clean water, food security, healthcare, and alternative income projects can significantly enhance the fifth pillar of education. For example, female attendance rates in schools will increase substantially in the years following the introduction of clean water and food security programs. As another example, establishing maternal health programs and clinics means more healthy children and lower rates of infant mortality, eventually leading to a higher-than-predicted population of school-age kids. In addition, WE Charity schools benefit from enhanced professional development training programs for teachers and other resources that result in our graduates achieving higher test scores than their peers in other schools. Kisaruni All Girls High School consistently ranks in the top five percent of all the high schools in Narok County. As news spreads, parents in surrounding areas start requesting to send their children to our schools. We are confronted with students we didn't account for at first.

But we can't ignore the growing need. Successful impact equals higher school populations. That in turn means expanding schools: building more classrooms, training and accommodating more teachers, and adding more sanitary facilities like toilets.

Ending poverty isn't simple or fast. Over the course of five years of capacity-building and sustainable development to empower a community to be fully self-sufficient we must continuously evolve our programs, expanding projects to meet the needs identified locally.

We're grateful that donors embrace this community-centric, needs-driven approach. In many cases, our original supporters will grow their investment in the partnership, contributing more to meet those changing needs. If there's no capacity to increase that investment among first donors, then with their explicit knowledge and approval we will engage new donors to build on their foundations, adding new classrooms, water projects, teacher training programs—whatever community leaders request.

This collaborative approach is a necessarily evolution from the old, unsustainable 'one and done' model of international development. It used to be that donors funded single projects, not social impact at large. They would fund a borehole or a school, but weren't committed to long-term, changing needs of the community.

I have seen with my own eyes that WE is making a big impact with these methods. On average, within approximately five years of launching a community partnership, WE is able to move on. By that time, the community has taken full ownership over their development, and is empowered to drive growth by their own hands. For example, WE first partnered with the Maasai village of Salabwek in 2007. Five years after our departure, Mission Measurement returned and conducted an independent study. The community was maintaining and growing the impact they had achieved in partnership with WE. The rate of girls attending high school had risen from 27 to 50 per cent; the number of children with access to healthy food rose from 66 to 80 per cent; and village households had experienced an 80 per cent increase in access to clean water. Those stats will continue to improve in the years ahead because Salabwek doesn't need WE anymore—and that's exactly what we want. Our goal at WE is to put ourselves out of business, to create a world where our programs aren't needed.

That's sustainable development. And it's only possible thanks to WE's unique development model, and through the generosity of all of our donors—from elementary school groups to big companies.

We're all partners in creating sustainable social change. But our partner communities lead us all.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. H. A.', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.