

SYLFF LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES FINAL REPORT

Leading the Leaders: A Forum for Local Youth Leaders in Maara Constituency, Kenya

Project Highlights

The Leading the Leaders Forum convened at the Transit Motel in Chogoria from the 8th to 11th of December, 2013 provided an opportunity for youth leaders from various self-help and community based organizations in Maara constituency to learn from experts, to deliberate and to engage with each other on matters that are pertinent to their groups' missions. Most of the groups have been formed with an aim of providing a means of economic empowerment that is in turn expected to improve the living standards of the members in the community.

The forum which had initially been proposed to bring at least 30 members from 6 self-help groups and community based organizations reconstituted due to demand and brought together at least 32 members from 16 self-help groups and community based organizations (each of the 16 group/organization was represented by 2 leaders.) It was impressive to note that some of the leaders present were members in more than one group which in retrospect means that the knowledge and skills obtained by these leaders will benefit more community members than those of the 16 groups represented at the forum. The key goals of the forum were:

- a) To empower youth and women leaders of socially-engaged organizations/groups in Maara Constituency by providing expertise training on various areas that directly affected their groups/organizations such as project planning.
- b) To facilitate the identification and sharing of common values among participating members as well as groups/organizations and encourage communal integration.

In order to achieve the stated goals, the event was organized to consist of plenary and group sessions themed around five key issues and a book review session as follows:

- a) Personal Growth and Development
- b) Entrepreneurship
- c) Project Planning and Development (including proposal writing for project funding)
- d) Leadership and Governance
- e) Networking and Outreach
- f) A book review session (The Speed of Trust by Dr. S. Covey)

The group sessions that mainly addressed issues within the "skills" and "people" themes as planned, facilitated learning and sharing of expertise related to several available approaches to priority-setting processes within the groups/organizational contexts. Many leaders confessed that lack of set priorities and strategies had led to under-production and lack of goal attainment within their groups. They appreciated the project planning and proposal writing sessions as they were integral parts in realizing successful projects which were core to their overall goals.

The leaders present were grateful for the book review session as it reminded them of the importance of making reference to texts as they continued with the daily management of their groups. The text that mainly focuses on 'trust' addresses various waves of trust ranging from self-trust that is credibility through organizational trust and all the way to societal trust that encompasses reputation. The leaders present were able to identify with all these waves of trust and promised to work to continue maintaining the levels of trust that had been bequeathed to them by the members as well as build and restore trust in areas where they felt they had fallen short.

At the end of the forum, the leaders agreed to form a community based group comprising of the 32 leaders present and elect coordinators who would in future follow-up on all matters discussed during the 3 day event. They agreed that they would meet again on 18th December 2013 to carry out the elections of the coordinators. They also agreed unanimously that they would dispatch the knowledge and skills learned at the forum to their various groups.

The Youth: Key Stakeholders in Sustainable Development

A recent survey indicates that about 65 percent of the total population of Africans are below the age of 35 years, and over 35 percent are between the ages of 15 and 35 years. The Kenya government statistics show a similar trend in which the youth comprise of almost 60 percent of the country's population. But though 80 percent of these youths are literate, unemployment continues to plague them with a staggering 70 percent being on record as jobless. Maara constituency, an administrative and electoral unit in Tharaka-Nithi County, is a reflection of these unfortunate dynamics in the country's composition. With a population of approximately 107,125 people, it is estimated that at least 75.1% have been to primary school while only 10.4% have transited into secondary school. This leaves a large population in the constituency with minimal specialized knowledge and skills and thus high levels of unemployment. The largest population in this constituency largely depends on subsistence farming with small farms producing cash crops such as coffee and tea and more than 50% live below the poverty line.

Sustainable development in most of the constituencies in Kenya including Maara, cannot be adequately addressed without including the young people who are important stakeholders in the process of development. Young people in this constituency represent not only a large but also a unique segment of society – they are dynamic and innovative but they are also lacking the concrete skills and tools necessary to implement their ideas. It was also noted that these young people are highly mobile with many leaving their homes for larger towns to seek employment and higher education. The effective engagement of this group in the constituency requires a balance between providing guidance and support on the one hand and encouraging youth-led development and implementation that creates opportunities in the community on the other.

Convening the Forum

The Leading the Leaders Forum engaged 16 youth groups in an innovative and enterprising two day forum in which expert consultants provided training on various areas of expertise including entrepreneurship and project planning skills among others. The forum sought to impress on the youth leaders the need to realize their potential and what they can offer to the society. The forum further sought to empower youth leaders in Maara constituency to take action to participate in developing sustainable livelihoods and development and by doing so also encourage locally-based development of new skills and opportunities.

At the forum, the youth leaders not only shared information about ongoing and planned activities ranging from biogas projects to horticultural projects and dairy products

processing plant plans but also they were able to shape their visions to be more enterprising e.g. the bee keepers envisioned the opening up of a honey processing plant in the area whereas the horticulturalists envisioned the pooling together of resources to form a united front of international exports among others. All this was backed up by training on strategic planning, goal setting, proposal development, implementation of projects plans and even monitoring and evaluation of projects they had initiated or would initiate in future.

The forum also created a good platform to promote cultural understanding, interact with one another in debates and other side-events and encourage the youth leaders to work together communally. The participants from each of the youth group/organization present were able to leave the forum and return to their youth groups with the skills to formulate strategies, develop project proposals and implement their own projects successfully in the community. A quick survey indicated that for the majority of the participants, the experience was positive and provided the attendees with a rare opportunity to acquire a wide variety of skills that will assist in their realization of ideas in a tangible manner.

As the convener of the forum, I believe that through the initiative to create a consultative group for the attendees, a solid foundation has been built and there is now a platform where young people from the areas represented can have access to a source of information and tools that can assist them in implementing grassroots projects. There is now a network to further increase awareness and to magnify the scale of group projects to create bigger impacts.

The challenge arising from the forum now is to find more on-the ground partners that can provide the required support needed by some of the youth leaders with lesser experiences in project leadership and implementation. It was also noted that although a majority of the leaders were familiar with the internet as a great tool for information sourcing, a number of them still required training on basic computing skills and also connectivity in Maara constituency is a major challenge. In an area where majority of the stakeholders are cumbered with lack of information, skills and technology, the forum aimed at providing the youth leaders with information that would assist them to strategically plan and implement sustainable projects, develop partnerships as well as create networks in order to obtain assistance (both in kind and financial) and expertise. It was a great roadmap that provided guidance and facilitated an understanding of the role and community impact of the projects initiated and coordinated by the various groups and organizations in the constituency.