

The Volunteer Spirit in Western Province

In Kenya, PATH has pioneered innovative and sustainable community-based behavior change approaches. Examples of the lasting impact of PATH's innovation can be found in the successful activities of the AMKENI project. AMKENI, a USAID/Kenya-funded integrated family planning, reproductive health, and child survival project, was implemented in Western and Coast provinces from 2001 to 2006 by a team of organizations led by EngenderHealth. As a member of this team, PATH led community interventions. One of the defining aspects of PATH's behavior change communication approach was its reliance on community volunteers to plan, implement, and monitor activities. The community agency program in Western Province worked with 907 village-based Animators; volunteers who worked month after month without financial compensation. AMKENI's success owes much to volunteer's continued commitment and motivation.



Photo: PATH, C.Y. Gopinath

Owen Sitati, Sr. Lead Animator, Bungoma

Field staff and Animators list the following reasons why this unique volunteer spirit continued throughout AMKENI:

Clear and consistent guidelines: AMKENI used the following guidelines to help volunteers modify their expectations and make realistic commitments: 1) AMKENI did not give handouts or money, but gave information and skills to help communities help themselves; 2) health problems and solutions belonged to the community; and 3) participation was voluntary; individuals, groups, or entire villages each decided to commit to the process. AMKENI staff and partners reinforced these messages throughout the project, helping community members understand the benefits and limits of participation.

The community owned the process and the results: Starting from the decision to be involved in the program, community members and villages were the owners of the community agency process. AMKENI encouraged, assisted, and supported – but the communities owned AMKENI.

Appointed by and responsible to the village: Community members selected Animators using stringent criteria, including issues of integrity, literacy levels, ability to communicate and mix with community members, and time to volunteer. If volunteers were unable to perform a task, village members took the necessary action - not AMKENI.

On-going, on-site support: Animators and other community members reported that having AMKENI staff/partners on the ground all the time helped keep them motivated. Team members could provide support or help trouble-shoot whenever necessary, which limited volunteers dropping out when they felt overwhelmed or discouraged. Animators also relied on each other for support; attending one another's activities and sharing the workload.

Sharing new information, building new skills: Animators and other community members received constant updates from PATH, providing them with new knowledge, tools, skills, and experiences that were applicable beyond AMKENI. Community members reported this continuous learning was a strong motivating factor.

Community recognition: Animators have become recognized community resource people as a result of their new skills and leadership role. They are also viewed as community role models. This recognition generates a level of motivation and commitment far beyond any that AMKENI could provide.

Beyond facilitation to leadership: With the skills and recognition they gained, many Animators now have leadership roles, serving on church boards, schools, health facilities, and development committees.

Steps to ensure sustainability

Animators ensured the volunteer spirit will continue by forming WEST-COBV, the Western Team of Community-Based Volunteers. This new organization was created to consolidate the work of four years implementing the community/women's agency program. A team of 907 Animators, led by 38 Lead Animators, resolved to form a community based organization (CBO) that would strengthen and sustain the structures created during AMKENI. Now registered as a CBO based in Kakamega, WEST-COBV's goal is to enhance the capacity of the community to mobilize and utilize resources to sustainably improve their livelihood.

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

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