

African Leaders Speak.

Africa Rising was founded on a belief in African Answers- the idea that Africans working at the grassroots carry the best answers to the problems facing their communities. There are a wealth of resources and insights within indigenous, grassroots African organizations waiting to be shared. At the first annual Africa Rising networking meeting which took place July, 2009 in Nairobi Kenya, African leaders spoke. And Africa Rising was there to listen.

The leaders spoke to one another about their organizations and built connections that will allow them to work together to avoid role duplication, re-inventing the wheel and repeating mistakes. The number of connections that naturally arose within the group from a one day gathering affirmed Africa Rising's role in helping form connections within the network of grassroots organizations. Another goal of Africa Rising is to help extend the networks of our organizations to individuals and organizations outside of East Africa. Because of our unique position in both the US and East Africa, Africa Rising is able to form connections between Westerners and Africans. We call them Global Partnerships.

To protect all the parties, we will not mention names here, but describe themes from the nearly 50 unique stories shared by twelve organizations in attendance. In listening and learning to African Leaders Speak it is possible for everyone's cross-cultural relationships to be more positive and rewarding.

Whose agenda? Often, guests from the West have come to help African communities with an agenda guided by their pre-conceived ideas of the African people and their needs. While full of good intentions, these individuals and organizations have little respect for relationships on the ground and come across as paternalistic. Misconceptions of Africans and their needs have brought frustrations in relationships. Relying on host's leadership and a learner's attitude were singled out as ingredients for healthy relationships.

How Africa Rising helps: Africa Rising affirms outsider's desire to help. Only by being in relationship and constant communication with our partner organizations can we identify the specific ways outsiders can appropriately and effectively engage with the organizations. We help outsiders get to know the organizations and only then can an authentic exchange occur. These relationships are based on reality and not stereotypes or false expectations from either side. To learn more about the ethics of cross-cultural relationships [see here...](#)

Learning safaris: This was a new term that came up to describe short term trips made by Westerners to visit African organizations or communities. It is contrasted with terms such as Service Trip or Mission Trip often used by Westerners to describe their travels to Africa. The leaders stressed the need to recognize the contributions and benefits that African organizations

make to these visits. Hosting costs time and money while students get credentials from their experiences. Working in a community also provides a rich African experience that a tourist would not have.

How Africa Rising helps: All of our partners are open to receiving short-term visitors. They are excited to share the work they are doing and support the transformational power of these visits in Westerners' lives. However, Africa Rising does not connect Westerners with our partner organizations unless they come with a posture of learning and an understanding that the African organizations will likely give much more than they receive from a daylong or even a weeklong visit. We offer services to prepare Westerners for their visit and help set expectations for both sides.

Doing Research: African victims of trauma were singled out as a sensitive group that many scholars seek to interact with. The individuals usually have to re-live their traumatic past for researchers who collect data and leave these wounds exposed. The long-term welfare of participants should always be a core priority. Ethical guidelines were mentioned as a pro-active way to safeguard research relationships.

How Africa Rising helps: We provide scrutiny to research requests and work directly with the leaders in the community to determine if there will be a benefit to the receiving population not just to the researcher. We do not sanction research with victims of trauma unless they have been engaged in and still have access to counseling and healing programs led by trained Africans.

The money dance: African leaders acknowledged their contribution to negative partnerships. Donor relationships are like a dance; each partner knows their move and we have all mastered our part in it. African leaders have learned how to show the needy look, hopelessness, helplessness and desperation in order to get noticed by the right Western partners. Sometimes progress and growth are overlooked in favor of sustaining an image of perpetual poverty in order to secure funding.

How Africa Rising helps: By coaching our partner organizations on positive ways of presenting themselves to potential donors. We affirm with both parties that outcomes, evaluation, and financial transparency are the measure of a good organization to invest in rather than those that know how to do the money dance.

The savior mentality: The savior mentality can come from many directions: The African middle-class urban elite often think of themselves as the solution to the people in the villages and slums just the same way some Westerners may perceive Africans. We think, "They know nothing back in my village – I will go and show them!" The rural and urban poor know what

their needs are and possible solutions. They need participation in implementing their own solutions, not salvation from the outside.

How Africa Rising helps: We increase awareness about the resourcefulness of Africans facing great challenges.

Organizational maturity: This is an alternative term to what is popularly known today as sustainability. The Africa leaders believe the term sustainable is an overused word, which is rarely an accurate description of the practices it intends to describe. In essence, sustainability suggests a point in time when an organization will be completely self-sufficient. Once they are self-sufficient they can accomplish their mission then leave the community they serve as their services will no longer be required. But is that the case? Communities have multi-layered needs, when one is met, another surfaces. We wonder then is sustainability a practical concept. How about the word maturity instead? Each organization can work their way to maturity just like an individual can.

How Africa Rising helps: Our hope for our partner organizations is not that they will reach a point where they do not need support from anyone outside their insular organization. The network of Africa Rising exists because we all need one another to learn, grow, and mature. The goal is mature organizations that effectively carry out their mission and adapt and change as their communities change. Our advice, resources, and partnerships all help move organizations towards the goals they have for themselves.

The session did not conclude on a negative note. Instead, the leaders wanted to affirm some positive results they have seen from the participation of outsiders. The phrase used by the group was "*the gift of the outsider,*" a concept borrowed from Father Emmanuel Katongole of Duke Divinity School to describe Westerners who support lives and development in Africa. African leaders identified benefits they have seen from the input and participation of outsiders. These benefits include educated Africans who might otherwise not have gone to school; special needs children being taught; increased incomes as a result of Income Generating Activities and micro-finance initiatives; African organizations adopting better practices in caring for their workers; prolonged lives for people living with AIDS who access healthcare; women and children who now have water without walking long distances; funds changing hands to meet genuine needs; life-long friendships that have grown between Africans and Westerners; stereotypes that are broken as understanding grows across cultures. Africa Rising has seen people travel across oceans both ways to meet with people who share a common vision. The African leaders will continue to shape and tell *the African story* and invite those who want to contribute to their success to become a part of their story. Africans are rising to their continent's challenges- everyday Africans, with hope and joy. We can follow their lead, we can be their partners.