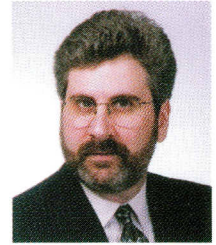


The Five Pillars of Fundraising Success from Somalia

BY MICHAEL J. ROSEN



WITH ITS RICH HISTORY, cultural diversity, and vast and varied landscapes, Africa is a continent I've always wanted to explore. Little did I know that one of my first encounters with the continent would come during a visit to Birmingham, England. While in the United Kingdom for the Institute of Fundraising Conference, I had the opportunity to attend a session led by Bill Bruty, MICFM, director of Fundraising Training, Ltd., in Cambridge, England, and Robinson Esalimba, deputy executive director of the

western world, we can see the grassroots character of philanthropy in Somalia. Yet, as Esalimba and Bruty paint a vivid picture of community life, they show us that the pillars that sustain charities in Somalia are just as relevant for philanthropy professionals anywhere in the world.

1 Maintain community goodwill. Esalimba reminds us that nonprofit organizations need to understand the communities in which they work, just as communities need to understand the

using the word 'family' in the largest sense," says Esalimba. "There is no sense giving at the mosque if you pass someone in a doorway who is in need and you do nothing.

"Most fundraising inside Somalia is based on appeals to family ties. People are quick to make a contribution if they feel that their community stands to benefit. The Islamic faith also places an obligation on members to help family and the less fortunate members of society. These are the big pitching points when working with the community."

- **External community.** The large Somali Diaspora community worldwide includes a significant Somali population in Minnesota, and many of these people are philanthropically generous. However, they tend to distrust non-governmental organizations (NGOs), whose services have in the past been delivered poorly or whose funds have been "taxed" away by the local authorities. Thus, many Diaspora donors who send money back to Somalia send it to the village they came from or to one of the five clans they are part of.

Appeals to the Minnesota and other Somali Diaspora communities make the traditional Islamic reference to philanthropy as an aspect of religious devotion. HARDO's external fundraising

Telling stories of both failed and successful projects paints a realistic picture for donors—and may inspire them further

Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organization (HARDO), headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, Africa. Founded in 1991, HARDO works toward sustainable peace in Somalia by supporting capacity-building in local communities, the empowerment of women, and protection of the environment. Bruty is a consultant working with HARDO officials in Africa.

During the conference presentation and in a subsequent interview, Bruty and Esalimba explained the five pillars of successful fundraising in Somalia. Because of the radically different environment they describe as compared with the

work of nonprofits. Those working to benefit Somalia must understand that two essential Somali communities exist and must be approached differently: the internal community, divided into five clan territories (some peaceful and some not), and the external Somali Diaspora.

- **Internal community.** Internal appeals most frequently ask for and lead to in-kind gifts and volunteer labor. The population of Somalia is largely Muslim and therefore committed to philanthropy as an expression of belief. "In Muslim culture, you are less than a true believer if you have and your family goes hungry,

among non-Somalis follows a more or less conventional style and tends not to mention Islamic or family obligations; Esalimba believes that making such points would actually work against fundraising efforts among non-Somalis.

2 Build trust in nonprofit projects. HARDO strives to overcome a general mistrust of nonprofit groups and, perhaps more difficult, to overcome inter-clan mistrust that exists internally and externally. Esalimba recounts an example: “In the year 2000, we managed to get the Somali Diaspora in the U.S. to contribute towards the construction of a bridge linking Bossaso, the commercial capital of Puntland, and other outlying villages. This would help greatly in easing trans-

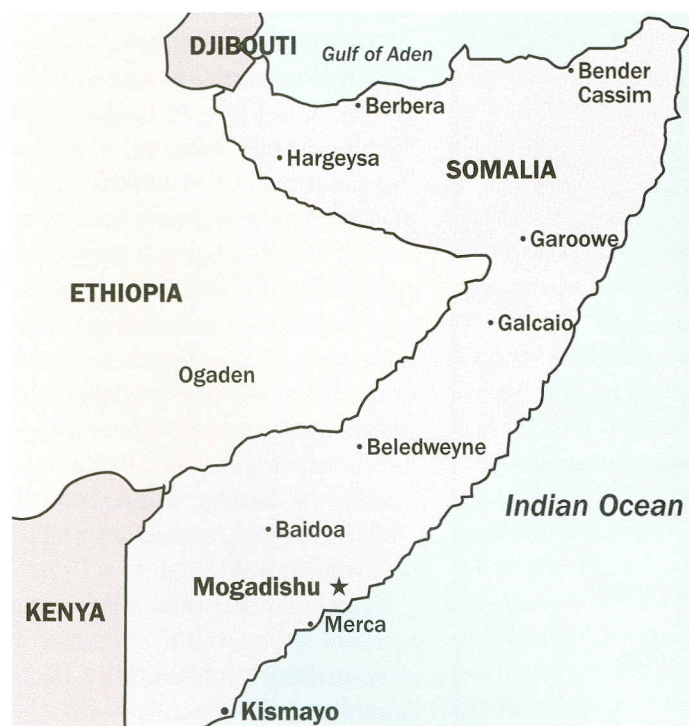
portation of goods from the villages to Bossaso. This in itself was a very positive contribution since the project would benefit Somalis across various clans.”

Esalimba advises, “Treat each donor as the only one you will ever have. Understand and meet their needs as well as yours. Think and work with them as partners.” He also believes organizations should keep the channels of communication open both ways, giving donors the opportunity to provide feedback and become personally invested in projects—which leads us to the third pillar.

3 Overcome preconceptions about NGOs. Because Somalia has been ravaged by war and drought for so many years, it is easy even for Somali villagers themselves—and for

donors—to accept the difficult circumstances there as normal and unchangeable. Part of Esalimba’s job is to communicate to prospective donors how his charity recognizes challenges, confronts realities, and overcomes obstacles. By telling stories of both failed and successful projects, he paints a realistic picture for donors who would fear giving to a business-as-usual organization. When he approaches donors in this spirit, Esalimba finds them more generous than he believes would be the case if he always put a positive spin on everything.

For example, after raising money to deliver bottled water to a drought-stricken village, Esalimba was confident that he would have a success story to tell. But on an overnight stop on the way, the



HARDO (the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organization) supports capacity-building in Somalia’s local communities through charitable projects.



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trucks were broken into by a thirsty baboon troop that destroyed the water shipment. Rather than hiding the truth, as many donors would expect an NGO working in Somalia to do,

Esalimba's organization went back and told the donors about the failed project. And rather than feeling alienated, the donors were inspired to give even more generously. The village used these addi-

tional donations to dig a new well, eliminating the need to truck water in.

4 Unleash inventiveness. Fundraisers cannot let themselves be sidetracked by difficulties. Most challenges have many potential solutions. If one approach fails, rethink the problem and work through to the right solution—always maintaining a positive attitude.

Esalimba recounts a project that took an inventive twist to a successful outcome. The village of El-Buh has been trying to plant trees and create a little park, but during the dry season there is little water for the greenery. Efforts to raise community funds to buy water for the trees have failed; most families cannot even afford water for their own basic needs. To succeed, it was necessary to alter the original approach.

"As a change of strategy, we exploited a practice among the Muslim faithful," says Esalimba. "The faithful are required to pray five times a day, and, before each prayer session, they are required to wash. We figured that if we appealed to the 'richer' families to help in purchasing cleansing water for the poorer families, there would be more water available in the village. Appealing to one Muslim to help another Muslim to practice his faith according to the Holy Book had a very strong and positive reaction.

"Then families were all encouraged not to pour out the water after washing but to collect it in a common pool—which we could use to water the trees and plants in the village. Since prayer is a lifetime thing, the trees will have



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water as long as people live in that village. Talk about sustainable projects!" says Esalimba.

This is the sort of creative thinking that leads Bruty to say, "The Somalis are better fundraisers than we are in the west. In Britain you might hear, 'I can't fundraise because our database isn't sorted.'" By contrast, the Somalis park their problems and get on with the job at hand.

5 Be passionate. Despite the fact that Somalia, surviving without a central government for years, is not a nation in the traditional sense of the word, Esalimba remains passionate about his work. The depth of the poverty and all its associated problems are hard for a Westerner to comprehend—you simply have no basis for comparison unless you've traveled to other developing countries and seen it for yourself. Even then, you're unlikely to encounter conditions resembling those in Somalia anywhere else.

When I asked Esalimba what inspired him to get up and go to work each day against such odds, he replied simply, "Making a change in someone's life. If you don't have passion, you have no business working for a nongovernmental organization."

Perhaps Esalimba does not feel a crushing sense of pressure because he accepts the fact that all of Somalia's problems can't be solved overnight. He does not believe that there should be a massive outside aid effort to change the situation—that has already been tried with terrible results for everyone—but instead that Somalis should learn to help themselves, using indigenous

Robinson Esalimba believes that Somalis themselves can achieve incremental results, using indigenous resources

resources. Incremental results will have a ripple effect and, over time, he believes, will create the momentum to bring Somalia out of the darkness.

To raise the money for incremental change, Esalimba tells people what their money has already accomplished and what new gifts can achieve. "People are bored with statistics on Somalia," he says. "They need to hear stories." Of the many inspiring stories Esalimba tells, I think one in particular reveals much about Somalia and crystallizes his presentation on the five pillars. He spoke again of the village of El-Buh, which was once located in the middle of a drought-ravaged part of the country, but is now green, clean, and prosperous by Somali standards—which was not always so.

To manage its waste problem, the village set up waste bins at every third dwelling. A group of villagers periodically takes the bins to a dump, where the waste is spread out to dry. The dried waste is carted to another dump, where it is burned and put into "sandbags" that are laid across vast areas of bare land to protect from topsoil erosion caused by floods. Little shrubs and trees are now emerging from the accumulated soil behind the sandbags, which have formed the beginnings of a green village in the middle of the desert. These changes have inspired neighboring villages to follow suit—an amazing ripple

effect, with no outside financial assistance (although some aid was eventually forthcoming, including \$1,500 from the U.S. Embassy).

What is most remarkable is that the people of El-Buh were mobilized into action by the sensible suggestion of a teenage girl named Hayat, who had the courage to speak up at a village meeting. The village elders, all male, listened and acted on her idea. If one girl can change her village, and one village can change a small region, no wonder Esalimba passionately believes that incremental change will improve people's lives. It didn't take a massive consensus, new rules, new edicts, or new systems. All it took was one person in the village leading the way.

My first African adventure may not have involved a safari or a balloon trip over the Serengeti, but it was an uplifting experience nevertheless, pointing to certain universal philanthropic truths that can be summarized with this simple thought: Development is not about technology; it's about the human touch. We can learn much from Somalia. **AP**

Michael J. Rosen, CFRE, an independent consultant, is a member of the board of the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy, AFP Greater Philadelphia Chapter, Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, and the Pennsbury Scholarship Foundation.

Note: For more information about HARDO, contact Robinson Esalimba at horn-rel@nbnet.co.ke. The HARDO website is currently undergoing enhancement.