



“We won’t modify a program just to meet a funder’s needs.”

A Conversation with Caroline Hennessy and Maxwell Kaliati (Yamba Malawi)

Carolyn Robinson

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Carolyn Robinson: Could you both please introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your work?

Maxwell Kaliati: I'm Maxwell Kaliati, interim executive director for Yamba Malawi, based in Malawi. Yamba is an NGO that started in 2006 working with women and children to end child poverty and integrate early child development using the UPG [Ultra-Poverty Graduation] approach.

Caroline Hennessy: Our founder is Melissa Kushner, who's part of a philanthropic real estate family in New York City. When she was younger, she did some work as an intern at the United Nations and spent some time in Malawi, where she was motivated to help children in particular. She started an organization called Goods for Good and solicited her friends and family to bring over materials that families and children could use. Eventually, it was mostly textiles for school uniforms so kids could go to school and not have to worry about that fee.

After years of doing that and whipping up a lot of support, motivation and funding in New York, she wanted to make more long-term change. The organization did some research and [decided to] follow the BRAC model [Base Realignment and Closure] from Bangladesh, the gold standard in Ultra-Poverty Graduation. It's a cash transfer program that also supports people in micro enterprises so they can develop sustainable income. Since Yamba Malawi focuses on children, we added early childhood development to it. Yamba Malawi is the only organization in the world that's doing UPG to make a difference for kids.

Many scientific studies show that Ultra-Poverty Graduation programs are the best way to lift people out of poverty, but they're not necessarily long-term, and the benefits don't necessarily trickle down to children. Around 2017, we added this element to focus more on children, to ultimately break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Then we launched the first Yamba Malawi Livelihoods & Childhoods Program in Kongoni, a three year program. The indicators were amazing, and show we're making a real difference for kids. We're now in a randomized control trial to provide scientific evidence that Ultra-Poverty Graduation programs need that childhood ingredient in order to make a long-term difference.

Carolyn Robinson: Could you share an example to illustrate the impact of your work, and explain how you know it's working?

Maxwell Kaliati: We have a problem [in Malawi] with early childhood deaths and nutrition. What we have seen [from our work] is that women are able to buy food for themselves and their children. One outcome is the reduction in malnutrition cases and stunted growth. Another change we've seen is that children who attend the CBCCs [community-based childcare centers] are learning to read, write, and speak. We also integrate indigenous knowledge into the local syllabus, which is unique to our program.

In child health, we're seeing a reduction in cases of malaria and diarrhea because of the integration we do, such as promoting water and sanitation behaviors. Adherence to immunization is sometimes [challenging] because of cultural behaviors or religious beliefs, but because of our intervention, we're seeing an increase in adoption of this practice. We've seen a linkage between the Ultra Poverty Graduation approach and changes in the behaviors of the children regarding education, protection, and health.

Caroline Hennessy: Because we have an early childhood element to our program, we realize that ultra poverty, or any kind of poverty, is an incredibly complicated problem, so we need a multi-pronged approach. Our program is holistic, and we're working to make these changes before the mindset of poverty is ingrained in children. We're working on child nutrition, better healthcare, basic needs like toys and blankets, and helping parents understand the importance of education, making sure they have the money to pay for school fees, school uniforms, and access to schools.

In some areas, our society doesn't support women and mothers the way Yamba Malawi supports them in households. To make sure everything we're providing stays with them [long enough] to [make a difference], we need to do a lot of work in the community. The indicators are very diverse. We just did a midterm study of the first cohort of our RCT, a 27-page report. Everything's looking very promising, but some areas are particularly promising. In Malawi, there's a big problem with stunting. Malawi's one of the poorest countries in the world, the poorest stable democracy.

The kids we're seeing in this first cohort are making higher than expected gains, i.e. higher than average in height and weight. It looks like our program is making a difference in brain development levels because of providing nutrition. Overall, we see great gains across the board. We're working with a lot of partners to make sure we are a clearing house for their needs. We're able to access psychosocial support, and we also do a lot of work with men to advocate for positive masculinity.

We do a lot of advocacy also with the government of Malawi, which is dedicated to reducing rural poverty. We're just finishing a three-year program with the government where we're helping them operate their cash transfer program. They've lifted up Yamba Malawi as the most efficient and effective partner and [they're] hoping to re-up with us for the next go-round.

Carolyn Robinson: Could you describe something you tried that didn't work, but you ultimately learned from it?

Maxwell Kaliati: We are looking for solutions on how best we can do things which didn't work, for example, on the issue of working with both women and men. We've been refining our model to make sure both men and women are involved. When we initially started working with both men and women, particularly in the area of supporting them with cash transfers, we learned some lessons. We noticed that the official program did not provide as much [cash transfers] as we wanted because men were making decisions on how to use the money.

In 2022, we changed our model to work with women only. In this program, we're also learning something new, because when you work with only women, again, there are some side effects. For example, some men deliberately want to frustrate and take away the benefits for the household. Now we're refining the model so both men and women are involved, but the majority of the beneficiaries are women. The cash grants go to women, but we have deliberately included some interventions targeting men. To solve the problems we faced at the household and community levels, [we're focusing on] awareness raising, gender direct sessions, and the household approach where men and women discuss their plans to share their responsibilities and assets. Also, Malawi is generally affected by [natural] shocks.

Last year we had a cyclone threat, and this year we have drought. These shocks affect our participants greatly because most of the gains we've made are eroded by these shocks or [the very big threat they pose]. We are also learning we need to include programs about climate change and disaster preparedness so people can bounce back quickly when these things happen.

Caroline Hennessy: Being more sensitive to gender and working solely with women from 2022 is a very big deal because before then, we found some areas in Malawi where multiple marriages [are common]. If we're working with the father of a household who marries again and has more children with another woman, the money we're providing in cash support is diluted, or the participants could migrate to South Africa and then we'd lose them. There were lots of reasons we needed to shift our focus to working directly with mothers.

Scientific studies show that supporting the mother supports the children more than supporting the father. We're setting up village savings and loans groups to handle the [natural] shocks. Financial literacy and management is a big deal. One of my colleagues described how impressed some participants [in a program] were the first time they walked into a bank, sat down, and [were offered] a glass of water. Suddenly they felt included in society. We're changing people's mindsets from having enough money to feed children for one day, to preparing a household to be able to support a family long-term, even through those [natural] shocks, including climate changes.

Malawi is a stable democracy, but it's in a part of the world that's vulnerable to those kinds of shocks, as well as pandemics that we're all vulnerable to. I've been with Yamba Malawi for about a year now, and I've been impressed by how much of a learning organization it is, and how transparent it is about focusing on these issues and figuring out the way forward in order to build a better program.

Carolyn Robinson: Maxwell, you are the interim executive director right now - how long have you been with Yamba Malawi?

Maxwell Kaliati: Two years.

Carolyn Robinson: Where do you get most of your funding, in general - from foundations, grants from the private sector, or governments?

Caroline Hennessy: It was about half and half until we started working with the pharmacy project, which is a government of Malawi project. Over the last couple of years, that became about a quarter of our income.

Carolyn Robinson: How much US funding made up your budget, and what is your strategy to handle this loss, both now and going forward?

Caroline Hennessy: It's a big catastrophe. We didn't have US federal aid in our budget for this year as far as income, but it was definitely a big part of our pipeline. We received money from the National Science Foundation a couple of years ago to support the

beginning of our randomized control trial. We had another ask in front of them for \$211,000. For us, that's a big amount, and it disappeared overnight.

We also had a \$1.5 million ask in front of USAID. Just having an ask in front of them is not a big deal, I want to put that in context. We had solicited them, and they came back impressed with the project but requesting more specific information. We spent several months crafting that [response], and working with partners making sure it was exactly the way it was supposed to be. It was being reviewed when the lights went out. There was also another project that was announced but hadn't yet been released that was meant to go public on the 3rd of February, which was a USAID program to support livelihoods work in Malawi, exactly what we're doing. We had high hopes for that one also. [Our hopes are] very much dashed.

Also, over the years Yamba Malawi grew to become more developed through the generosity of friends, family, and our founders' network. We were just on the verge of becoming one of the big dogs in the crowd. Our randomized control trial was that [kind of] gold standard element that gives you a seat at the table. Our whole funding model was switching from individuals only, to individuals and institutional foundations. We were working very closely with a number of foundations who were very excited to see the outcome of the RCT. Now that the USAID funding has disappeared, a lot of the foundations with whom we had warm relationships and high hopes for funding have come back to say, "We need to change the way we're doing business and [focus on] taking care of our current grantees," and so those opportunities also evaporated.

We're also soliciting the French version of USAID right now, and we just got a message from them saying they have a massive backlog because everybody else is looking towards them too. There are other organizations like that, for example in Japan, and the UK just announced they're reducing their foreign aid. All these countries are going to be looking at how much more they're going to need to support NATO. It's a ripple effect.

Carolyn Robinson: I imagine it's a little early to ask you how you're planning to get through this situation, besides what you've just outlined?

Caroline Hennessy: We've definitely gone back to our individual donors with urgent campaigns. Some of our multi-year major donor pledgers completed their pledge immediately. People are very sympathetic and also understand we've put a lot into this study. If we're not able to complete it, that's just a waste of resources and opportunity, so we're getting some support there. We're 100% struggling, and working alongside everyone else to try and think creatively.

Carolyn Robinson: Thinking about the support you've received, what has surprised you and turned out to be helpful to grow and operate sustainably?

Maxwell Kaliati: The approach we are using is a very good model. One of the key elements is economic empowerment, particularly for women, which is a very big thing in Africa since a lot of women are poor and illiterate. We support them with trainings, household coachings, and consumption support. Because of our core approaches, the results are very, very visible. Wherever we go, we work with communities at district levels, community levels, and also the government. We get support from all these key players. At the community level, we have community-based structures, ADC [area development committees], volunteers involved in our program, and district level stakeholders, which are government staff.

Many people appreciate the impact the project is making, because all stakeholders are involved and the results are very visible. You can go into a household where they couldn't afford to send their children to school, and when you go [back] there year after year, you see the results. People say, "I'm now able to send my child to school and buy our foods." In Malawi, because of the high poverty levels, some people live in grass-thatched houses, but [now] we see they have made very good houses roofed with iron sheets. Those changes are very visible. Our programs are very much liked by all stakeholders, the communities, community leaders, participants, and the government.

Caroline Hennessy: We brought one of these challenges to Rippleworks for support. We have a very holistic, very multi-pronged intervention which keeps growing because of our personal engagement with families. That's one ingredient that's special about us, and the other is that we have such a wide ranging program. We're doing very high frequency surveys, with very close partnership with families on the ground.

We have a pretty big staff, with a field facilitator working with at least 60 families at once, visiting those families every two weeks. We're working with families with children under five, but a lot of the families [also] have children over five. The field facilitator is almost a social worker or case worker in supporting families with their other needs so they can benefit most from the Yamba Malawi program, that is, from the income, the entrepreneurship, and the coaching. Those two pieces account for the special sauce we have with a program that can make a long-term difference. It also makes us expensive, and yet I don't think I've ever run into an instance where the program seems to have widely failed. It's been very well received. Another element is the importance of collaboration.

Before we go into a district, we work with the chiefs and local authorities. We have very close relationships and we support community-based organizations as well as CBCCs [community-based childcare centers]. These are like preschools that grew from the time of the HIV/AIDS crisis when orphans in a town were cared for by people in the village. Once upon a time, there were a lot of AIDS orphans.

There aren't really orphanages in Malawi, because an orphan is taken care of by family members and by other members of the community. [But] those CBCCs still exist and they've become community centers. We work with them because we want to reaffirm education and early childhood development. We help train those teachers, and they go on the government payroll when they're certified. We help them also with food by building backyard gardens to provide another source of nutrition. One indicator we use is whether a child has three square meals a day.

We're working with so many different partners, from very local to the government of Malawi, and we have been so appreciated by all those entities. That partnership is such an essential ingredient, and that has been a good surprise. I don't feel surprised though, because I know everybody I work with. [Their motivation] is coming from the heart, so it doesn't surprise me.

Carolyn Robinson: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders, and how can a funder cultivate trust?

Maxwell Kaliati: Trust is very important. We're always aiming to be transparent in what we do. We make sure to share our monthly, quarterly, annual and biannual reports to different stakeholders such as the government or other donors. We also share our studies, midterm or online evaluations, and financial reports, including audits. We conduct annual audits so donors and stakeholders understand what we are doing and how we're spending the money. That kind of transparency brings trust, in that what we said we're going to do is what we're doing.

During our scheduled board meetings, we discuss reports and share what's happening so everyone understands what's happening on the ground. That gives trust. Sometimes we arrange for government staff from the district or national level to have monitoring visits and see what we're doing. Sometimes we make deliberate efforts to work with the government in either planning or actively implementing an activity.

For example, recently we assisted the construction of a CPCC with support from the National Bank of Malawi. During the process of identifying a contractor and constructing the project, government officials at national and district levels went to see what we were doing and check to make sure we were following the required construction parameters. Sometimes trainings are facilitated by a government official, so they know the syllabus and curriculum we're using. This helps in terms of quality control and assurance, but also in terms of trust, so they know exactly what we are doing. We make sure we provide reports to them regularly.

Caroline Hennessy: We're very honest, straightforward, and committed to the organization's mission. We're not going to work with a foundation that's interested in

funding something a little bit different. We won't modify a program [just] to meet a funder's needs. We're very realistic, but we're 100% committed to the program that we continue to develop and refine. It starts in conversations with funders, learning about [mutual] priorities and alignment, to make good matches so we're 100% together on what we want to accomplish from day one.

Carolyn Robinson: Any advice to help a funder understand how to cultivate trust with you and other organizations?

Maxwell Kaliati: One of the first things is to encourage the funder to make sure they clearly understand the goals of the organization, and what they want to achieve short-term and long-term. When they understand this, they can openly discuss what can be achieved in the short-term, and develop milestones. When you have milestones and expected outcomes, the funder will easily know that what a partner plans to do is actually happening.

When you have clear milestones, for example, annual milestones and expected outcomes, it's easier for the funder to have trust because there's a document, apart from the agreement, about what is going to happen in three months or a year, and this is what they have done in three months or a year.

When you have no clear milestones and no proper follow-ups, there's a high chance of distrust. The donor might think a partner isn't doing what it was supposed to do, because there were no pre-agreements on what was expected. Even with unrestricted funds, there must be some agreement on what is expected to be achieved in a year. That way a donor will have trust.

Caroline Hennessy: It's a little awkward. There's a real power dynamic at play when an organization is working with a funder. The more authentic and personal communications are from a funding agency, the better, and the more that sets the groundwork for honest, transparent communications, either when meeting people or through various reporting requirements. I understand why so many foundations are invite-only, but [that can be] a brick wall that a lot of smaller organizations like Yamba Malawi have a very hard time overcoming.

Sometimes we'll meet foundations and they'll look at our numbers and say you don't qualify, because your household cost is too much, and our conversation ends there. I understand a thousand million people are asking for money, and it must be organizationally very challenging to deal with that. [The best] opportunities are where we can have a real conversation, i.e. share why the cost is high and our plan to make that better when we scale up, [with more of] an interpersonal give and take. It definitely builds trust when an organization has done due diligence and says we're in alignment

and we understand you're an organization with good management and stewardship, so we're going to give you a certain amount of resources to go do your thing.

There's a difference between organizations that say, we appreciate your work and we're giving you a general operating gift or a multi-year sustainable gift because we believe in the work that you're doing, and organizations that say, no, this [specifically] is what we're interested in, and we want to look more at a restricted area or co-lead the project with you. That [approach] makes things difficult, and it's going down the wrong path away from full trust and transparency. [It can make us ask if] this is taking too much time away from the actual mission we're doing?

Carolyn Robinson: Are any bold shifts in funding needed to strengthen the voices of the people closest to the problem that you're working on?

Maxwell Kaliati: Different funders use different approaches. For example, some funders in Malawi say they want to work with Malawi NGOs, because they think they're reaching out to people directly. In some cases, this works. Other funders try to support the formation of small community organizations. CBOs [community-based organizations] were formed as a result of trying to solve problems at the community level because of the high prevalence of HIV and AIDS. Despite giving money to bigger institutions, some funders decided to give money to local institutions at the grassroots level.

However, one challenge is the issue of capacity. For example, financial management is one issue people grapple with. You need to train them to make sure they're using finances properly. For governance issues, make sure people know their roles and responsibilities. It takes time. If you want to take that path, you need to build up people slowly, so they graduate into an organization. For example, the benefit Yamba has is that we have people in the US [working] along with us here in Malawi. We can get support from the US team with the different capacities they have.

Our accounting system uses QuickBooks, a good system which some local NGOs [here] do not have. To monitor the system, we use Salesforce, another good system. All this is because we are benefiting from the expertise of our US colleagues supporting us here in Malawi. [Funders] need to consider that capacity building can take a lot of time. For example, in Malawi, NGOs need to be registered, and sometimes that's a very tricky process.

In some cases, you find grantors who work with local partners to manage the fund, while the local partners do the implementation on the ground. That's another approach, when a bigger partner handles financial management and small partners do the actual implementation.

Caroline Hennessy: Maxwell is talking about the importance of local leadership, and how that can be challenging because sometimes those hyperlocal organizations need a lot of support with capacity-building, which is time-consuming and expensive. Yamba Malawi is working as a hyperlocal too, that is, our US staff and our 501C3 works with the local corporation.

In Malawi, villages come together to solve their problems. Maxwell mentioned community-based organizations who come together to focus on how to help with people dying from AIDS, and how community-based childcare centers with preschools can take care of children who've lost parents, because that's culturally the right way [to handle a problem]. Local people are going to deal with local problems. One of the great things about Yamba Malawi is that it's completely locally-led, and we have a Malawian-only program hiring policy. The program has grown up around the way to solve these problems in Malawi. It's very much informed by local culture. That's another ingredient that makes it meaningful to people participating in the program at every level who receive the teachers and field facilitators at CBCCs. Everyone's speaking the same cultural language and trying to lift people up out of poverty in a way that's not foreign to the people involved.

Our indigenous curriculum is a very special and unusual element [of our program] that lifts up and honors these traditions. I mention this because sometimes there could be a clash, if a foundation says, "Sorry, this is too expensive," without taking a look at what these kids are facing in rural Malawi, and how the community is coming together. That ingredient might not exist in other places, but it's something to take a look at, appreciate, and add to this capacity, because it's working.

Carolyn Robinson: Could you talk a little bit about how the Rippleworks capacity-building support impacted your work?

Caroline Hennessy: The amount of knowledge we were able to ascertain from this was amazing and incredible. It was a long, deep, intense, and consistent process, more than I ever expected or received in the past from a foundation as far as capacity-building. We started talking about trying to market our product in a way that's more palatable to funders because of the high cost of the holistic program. We were finishing this up just as USAID disappeared, [but] we had built an actual marketing and communications plan, which was perfect because just as we ended, we had to launch an urgent campaign. The timing was absolutely spot on.

Also, we're a small-but-mighty organization without a lot of other staff, and we had to lay off people after the USAID [disappearance], including somebody working in the US office who supported our marketing and communications. Rippleworks stepped right in with this great gift, and at the end of the day what we got is a plan for the next year at

least. It's so valuable. Also, it was great because I'm the Director of Development and Communications, and I've been a fundraiser for a long time, always doing development communications alongside that. Communications has always been an extra [part of my job]. This was like going to school to learn the fundamentals, and it gave me a lot more confidence going forward.

Carolyn Robinson: Any shortcomings in this model? Anything that you would like funders to understand that they should know about capacity-building in general?

Caroline Hennessy: I don't think there's anything that I didn't share [with Rippleworks] because we had a great rapport, and that was probably one of the reasons why it was such a useful expense of time. Sometimes I worry about the ability to fully execute this program [in time], but hopefully, when we're on the other side of the RCT and have the results, we'll have more appeal to funders, a leaner program, more funding, and more expanded staff, to fully execute that plan.

Carolyn Robinson: What are the three main things that Yamba Malawi needs to grow and sustain your work?

Maxwell Kaliati: One major problem is funding, because we have set our targets. We know where we want to be in 2028, but our current problem is how do we get there when we don't have the funds? We have aspirations but don't have the funds. With what has just happened [with USAID], that also makes the problem bigger. If there's anything we would want this time around, it's funding.

Caroline Hennessy: 100%. Money makes the mission happen, and that's why we're all here, so that's essential, especially because we've identified something that could change the whole landscape of international development work. What's happening in Malawi with children is the only RCT that's examining the effects of an ultra-poverty graduation program specifically for children. We have a special sauce and a great idea that's working. It has so much potential, and we have a plan to replicate and scale it, but we need that support to make it happen.

We're at an inflection point where we could get that influx of funding, like we had hoped and expected from USAID, to make the RCT even expand to give us an even larger sample size, to have an even more thorough gold standard for our work. Then the sky's the limit for Yamba Malawi, and also for development implementers and for people who are living in this curse of entrenched poverty. Maybe there's also this feeling of the potential to lose hope or lose faith.

We're married to this idea and we're moving it forward and we're going to make it happen, but it can be tough, especially with the recent things that have happened [in the

funding world]. You don't want to give up hope because there's so much more to do, but you lose staff, and [then] there's even more that needs to be accomplished. You need to take care of yourself, you need to protect your mental health, and you need to move this thing forward - but at the same time you can't lose time. Funding and that [type of] partnership is the most important thing to us right now.

Maxwell Kaliati: Just to add, if there is continued support in terms of capacity-building, it would be great on different topics. I enjoyed [the session], even though it was two hours. It [didn't feel like] two hours because of the subject matter we dealt with that time. [Rippleworks] should continue providing capacity-building in different areas that are common to most partners. They have the capacity to identify the most common problems and develop programs around these. That's another area in which we need support that would be very helpful.

Carolyn Robinson: Anything that you wanted to add or anything I didn't ask?

Caroline Hennessy: Just to say thank you for this time. It's always great to debrief and talk about an experience. That's what's special about Rippleworks. They really care about their grantees and are trying to help us through this with capacity and support.

Carolyn Robinson led Solutions Journalism Network's broadcast initiatives for many years. She is an experienced television producer/reporter for global news media such as CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera. As an international media development consultant, she has trained local journalists and directed media programs in two dozen countries around the world.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*