

Three Mistakes Nonprofits Make and How One Fixed Them



[Hope Arising](#) is a nonprofit organization founded dedicated to delivering clean water to rural villagers in poverty-stricken Dera, Ethiopia. Founded in 2007, the organization has used outward mindset approaches to develop unique and effective solutions to three common challenges faced by many nonprofits.

Chantal Carr, co-founder of Hope Arising, shared her stories and lessons with us.

[Watch the Hope Arising case study](#)

Mistake #1: Letting the Tail Wag the Dog

In many organizations, money drives programming decisions: “the tail wags the dog,” said Carr. In such cases, well-intentioned organizations can miss the mark on being truly helpful to the communities they serve, because they serve the wrong need.

For example, Carr recalled working in a region where “an NGO came through and gave out malaria nets in the area, which was great, because there was a lot of malaria. The problem was

that the people were starving, and they ended up using these insecticide-soaked nets to go fishing because they were so hungry.”

The lesson? “You cannot help people without meeting the hierarchy of needs,” Carr said. It is critical for organizations to first understand the needs of those they serve, then adjust their efforts to meet those needs.

This lesson informed Hope Arising’s entire mission. “When we started working in Ethiopia, we thought we were going to help orphans,” Carr said. But “when we got there, it was unbelievable—they hadn’t had water for five years. It was a desperate situation; the government was trucking in water to keep them alive.”

“So we said to ourselves, ‘I guess we’ll do water?!’”

This flexibility has been critical to the organization’s continued success, as they’ve expanded programming from water to infrastructure projects, educational support, micro-enterprise, healthcare and education training, AIDS awareness and prevention, and more. Expanded programming has always followed the need on the ground. “We’ve been able to be flexible in our program. You do what the people need, not what your program’s ideal is in your mind.”

Mistake #2: Measuring Output Rather than Impact

Measuring output is much easier than measuring impact. But if organizations only track output metrics, they won’t know whether they are achieving their intended goals.

Some years after founding Hope Arising, Chantal Carr realized they, like many organizations, had fallen into this trap. So the team began looking for a way to measure impact. As they brainstormed ideas, one team member asked, “What impact do the

people want? What are they hoping clean water will do for them?" She added, "If we had answers to these kinds of questions, maybe we could figure out what we should be measuring."

With these questions in mind, the team started talking to villagers across the region. In hut after hut they heard the same thing: "When our kids are sick from dirty water, they miss school. If kids don't go to school, the traveling schoolteachers don't get paid and move on to other villages. But if our kids don't get educated, they'll never escape this poverty. We need clean water so our kids can go to school."

The Hope Arising realized they'd found their impact metric: the number of days children were in school. Measuring this would show their impact on what mattered most to the recipients of their services, and they could easily get this data from local governments.

Mistake #3: Building Unsustainable Programs

Some nonprofits and charities struggle to develop programs that do not depend on continuous injections of outside funding. One of Hope Arising's most successful programs in terms of sustainability is a program that provides microloans to women in the Dera community. How did they do it?

Their approach is intensive, but effective. "There are very hands-on, weekly trainings so that the women can be successful, rather than, 'Okay here's your money, go start your business.'" said Carr. "Instead it's, 'Okay here's your money, and this is what starting a business looks like, these are the principles, here's how you do it, here's your support group to do it in, and come back next week and we'll see if you did it.'"

“Once these women have access to knowledge, they just explode. They have potential, willingness, they are smart—they just haven’t had access to the resources and knowledge. And once they have their businesses, they’re the ones paying for their kids to go to school, they’re the ones budgeting and saving money, they’re the ones getting themselves to the health clinic. They aren’t reliant on us. In fact, the money that they pay their loan back with goes to start a new group, to support a new woman. Everyone who finishes the program becomes mentors to the newcomers.”

“That’s where dignity, sustainability, lasting, long-term impact comes,” Carr said excitedly. “In knowing we could walk away tomorrow and they would keep going.”