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Walk the talk

TRAVEL

The road to Eldoret

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WALK THE TALK

WANGARI MUIKIA

Sitting by her colourful array of fruit by the roadside, Damaris gestured vigorously towards her sale stock of mangoes in peak season in Meru. They were 100 bob per kilogramme and I could barely keep my poker face considering the bargain. But I couldn't let on my satisfaction.

My jaw was set, my eyebrows were furrowed and my head was moving sadly from side to side. I was going to pay 80 bob for a kilogramme of juicy mangoes like the self-respecting Nairobiian that I was. I could almost hear myself now, boasting to my husband, my mum, the neighbours, the cat – anyone within earshot – about this deal. Together we would ooh and ahh over the horde, and then lament the exorbitant prices offered at the supermarket for the same load.

But I have never once haggled and bargained for the so-called bargains supermarkets offer. Yet here I was whittling Damaris down when I know full well that chances are, she is school-uniform buyer, meal-provider, house-renter, sanitary-towels buyer and general economic pillar of her household. That 20 bob coin change I was haggling over would probably fall

into the wrong pocket of my purse, roll out of my carelessly placed bag onto the car carpet, and settle between the nuts and bolts that secure my chair to the vehicle, never to be seen again – except perhaps if Clandestous, with his quick fingers finds it while washing my car.

I go to Meru often. I worked extensively with the county government there to help them enhance their public finance management practices and save money that can help them develop their county faster. Helping the county generate money to serve the Damaris and her fellow Amerucans. The irony is not lost on me.

Damaris has an agricultural advantage given that Meru is a virtual garden of Eden. The sector contributes over 80% to county household income. However, most of this farming has been gradually shifting from traditional cash and food crops to export focused horticultural production, which fetches relatively high prices in the market. Except for miraa of course. Miraa is the main agricultural cash crop in the region with business as hot as the engines of the Proboxes that fly the Meru-Nairobi highway to get their crop to their clients on time. And yes, I said

fly, not ply.

The diminishing market for traditional cash crops means that it might be easier for one to get string beans and radishes in Meru these days, than matoke bananas and nduma. Which is what subsistence farmers like Damaris grow because they don't have the specialised materials to enter the export-focused horticultural game. With less focus on the products Damaris sells, there is less focus on supporting the infrastructure Damaris needs to sell her product; like markets. The scarcity of market space to sell fruits and veggies, grown partly for subsistence and partly for sale, forms a significant barrier to expansion for Damaris. And even if she had a huge mango ranch, she would still have to deal with paying cess fees in multiple counties to sell her crop. Still, humble Damaris also has to deal with paying market fees in markets that do not have well-functioning toilets, or running water, or have clean and safe spaces where to sell her products. So she prefers to setup shop by the roadside.

Yet it is not through ill-will by the county government that she doesn't have these services. It is because of challenges in many areas -



but most significantly in public finance management. Many times they find that they are under-resourced, under-staffed, and working within a fluid organisational context because they have not planned how to deploy their finances in a way that addresses citizen priorities today and infrastructure development for the future. A county needs a multi-year vision, corresponding plans to achieve the vision, responsive budgets, realistic revenue forecasts, citizen engagement, and smart procurement and asset management amongst other key public finance management considerations. These will make the difference. What stops the counties achieving this? In some counties it's the politics, in others it's lack of technical capacity. Sometimes it's all the above. But oftentimes it is corruption.

A report from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission released in March this year, placed Meru as the

seventh most corrupt county in Kenya, between Tharaka Nithi and Laikipia in 5th and 7th place respectively. That these counties border each other would form the basis of an interesting study on regional corruption. It goes without saying – the lack of strong leadership at the national level and the county level, that not only fleshes out responsive policies around corruption, but also implements them without fear of favour, has created fertile ground for impunity to thrive. Corruption is a governance issue that has a significant negative impact on public finance management and any recommendations for improvement on the same. But Damaris still needs to sell her fruits, and we must help.

To ease Damaris' livelihood, we identified several solutions with Meru. One in particular was to formulate a market registration and entry system to allow users to prepay for space so that counties can get a larger and more

predictable cash infusion to provide for market facilities, while Damaris could pay for market space in advance when she has bumper sales (using a stamped card to indicate how many market days she had paid for, used, and how many were left). This is a workable solution that will have an immediate effect in the life of Damaris and for the county government.

So as I stood there, by the roadside, shaking my head at Damaris, I caught myself, awarded myself several 'you hypocrite' mental slaps, and forked over the 100 bob per kg for the mangoes. As it turned out, the self-respect I was looking for was not the 20 bob so called discount – the 100 bob killer bargain and the mental fist-bump to Damaris was.

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