



Live from Kenya

by Bella Adhiambo Deputy Director of EP Kenya

BUILDING WALLS NOT BRIDGES

Work Permit Applications for Small NGOs in Kenya

A large number of Kenyans do not know where the Immigration offices in Nairobi are located and even if they do, have never had cause to go there. I fell under this category until early this year when EP had to make work permit applications for two of its board members. I think we are all tired of the track about bad governance, it is like a broken record- same tune over and over again. Let us just say, the Immigration offices at Nyayo house are a feature complete with characters from a shelf in the National Archives. Considering the complexities and queries that go with visa, permit and alien card applications I would expect a whole floor for customer care or reception. Sadly there was only one counter with no one behind it. Maybe they have it somewhere in that cramped room with no signboard or indicators.

Their drab offices and glum officers did not interest me much, what got my attention was the huge notice board just at the doorsteps with a list of all the work permit classes and their costs. Class A costs a whopping 100,000 shillings per year! Not much for the big names in the NGO world with colossal incomes, you know, the UNICEF, WFP, WWF, ICRAF etc. EP is relatively small and young in all aspects, with an annual budget that does not exceed 1.5 million- the fee for 2 Class A work permits reduces their annual budget by 20%, money that would have otherwise been invested into projects. To say that all NGOs, irrespective of their size and scope must apply for the same permit- Class A- and pay the same amount is unreasonable.

EP is building footbridges for the locals; providing solar lighting systems for free or at subsidized costs; building biogas digesters that are safe and economical; equipping them with technical skills in renewable energy systems and creating jobs for some of them. Most of these projects though small and low cost are tailored to fit the pockets of the beneficiaries as well as address their most basic needs for energy, water and infrastructure. EP has an annual budget of not more than 1.5 million, with some of the micro projects such as One Household- One Biogas Digester costing about Ksh100,000, what they are expected to pay for a work permit annually. Ideally we would fit into the Class K category since the applicants are honorary board members, who work for the project without pay, are in employment in their own

countries and invest their earnings or incomes into the project. If only our MPs could table and amend such bills in parliament, with the same speed as that they use when discussing their salaries- then we would have a system that encourages and promotes investment by NGOs into our country rather than scare them away.

One can only hope that promises by Immigration officials to table this issue for debate with the Ministry will bear fruit and that applications for the permits will take less than a year to process.

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