

Oak Park group's Kenya project faces USAID fund-freeze chaos

WGEP had been using a federal grant to help children in rural Kenya, until the money disappeared overnight

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What began for the Oak Park-based Women's Global Education Project as a transformational opportunity to follow through on its mission, has turned into a staggering financial and logistical challenge after a White House pen stroke.

A blanket freeze to U.S. Agency for International Development grant spending has put humanitarian efforts around the world in limbo, according to Amy Maglio, WGEP founder and executive director.

"The consequences of this are just devastating," Maglio said. "It's not good for the world to lose its leader in the humanitarian space."

WGEP, founded 21 years ago in Maglio's Oak Park home and now running from a Marion Street office, works with grassroots organizations in rural parts of Kenya and Senegal to administer programs that help children learn to read, girls stay in school and communities develop resources to oppose gender-based violence. The group has helped more than 50,000 children attend school across the two countries over the years.

The group earned a \$2 million USAID grant to support one of its most ambitious projects to date: the construction of a modern library in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. The library was designed to support adult and child literacy initiatives across the region, provide materials to over 60 rural schools and serve as the permanent base of operations for Tharaka Women's Welfare Programme, an anti-female genital mutilation organization that WGEP has

spent more than a decade helping grow.

"The idea was to bring in this library to be the focal point for education and literacy in this community," Maglio said.

The USAID grant offered WGEP \$400,000 in federal reimbursements a year from 2023 to 2027, which they used to construct the "Our Sisters Read" library, which opened in October 2024. The library, complete with a full computer center, is the only one of its kind in all of Kenya.

The remaining years of USAID funding were meant to help the library support its ambitious programs, and pay for Wi-Fi, computer program licenses, solar power and salaries for WGEP's local staff.

On Monday, Jan. 26, WGEP received a stop work order from USAID, as U.S. President Donald Trump's administration initiated a blanket freeze on USAID grant spending.

Amy Maglio said the letter came as a total shock. She said she couldn't have imagined such an abrupt and wide-reaching federal decision, until she had to live with its consequences.

WGEP has been left with unreimbursed expenses dating back to December 2024, including final payments to contractors who helped build the library and staff salaries. Since receiving the letter, WGEP has received no guidance on when they will be reimbursed for expenses incurred before the stop work order, or if they'll be reimbursed at all.

USAID's Kenya Mission Director David Gosney was on-hand for the grand opening of the "Our Sisters Read" library, as the event made national news in the country.

"This library opens doors for children and young people to dive into digital technology and ICT, helping them build necessary skills to explore well-paid, future careers," Gosney told the Nairobi newspaper The Star at the event. "The United States values its partnership with the Kenyan government and people."

In the weeks following the stop-work-order, WGEP hasn't heard from USAID's Kenya office at all, receiving no answers to



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Children in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya practice reading exercises at one of the rural schools supported by Oak Park literacy organization Women's Global Education Project. The group has been challenged by a USAID funding cut affecting its work in the region.

its many questions, Maglio said.

As a result of the rescinded grant, WGEP was forced to lay off nearly its entire staff in Kenya, and hopes that the library will be able to support all of its planned programs are currently dim. The goal now is fighting to keep the campus up and running.

"Women's Global does not want to have to close the doors of our newly built and equipped library and computer center -- it provides access to books and technology to over 10,000 community members and is the only one of its kind in the whole county," Maglio said. "Without WGEP's USAID funded program a generation of students will be illiterate, are likely to drop out of school, girls will undergo FGM, become mothers in their early teens and the cycle of poverty continues."

The details of the USAID funding cut have been tied up in Federal court, as U.S. Judge Amir Ali ordered the Trump administration to lift the freeze on Feb. 13, and pay the roughly \$2 billion in outstanding reimbursements for grant spending that had happened to that point. Trump administration officials in a Monday court filing said the freeze was over and that it had reopened \$50 billion in grant money to around 500 organizations after an "individualized review" of every USAID award.

International development insider news outlet Devex, cast doubt on those figures in a report on Monday, reporting that in total, USAID had funded 11,000 programs with \$63 billion in 2023.

The only federal communication WGEP has received since the stop work order was the result of its individualized review, which told the organization its funding would not be reinstated as its mission no longer aligned with administration priorities.

"We thought maybe there was a possibility since this is literacy and it's not that politically charged, maybe we would be one that could keep going, but no," Maglio said. "There was no real review."

WGEP hopes to close some of the gap created by the lost grant with philanthropic gifts, and will be holding a fundraising event at the Dalcy event center in, Chicago May 19. Maglio hopes that Oak Parkers can see that life changing international development work is being done in their own community, and can find the inspiration to support it.

"They should know that there's an organization right here in Oak Park that is helping women and girls around the world with gender equality and education," she said.