

Michelle Ell MBA, BA (POLITICAL SCIENCE)

Executive Leader | International Development | Passionate Advocate for Children & Families

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PROFILE

Strategic and empathetic leader with 20+ years of experience managing complex international development programs in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda). Recognized for pioneering new strategies to strengthen systems and capacity for delivering care to vulnerable children and families. A trusted partner to government, civil society, and donors with expertise in nonprofit leadership, resource mobilization, and policy influence. I am known for inspiring teams to adapt according to new learning, priorities, and opportunities to maximize impact. Passionate about advancing thought leadership, producing publications and presentations to catalyze transformational change at scale.

KEY SKILLS & EXPERTISE

- Strategic Leadership & Adaptive Management
- Organizational Growth & Development
- Stakeholder Engagement & Coordination
- Capacity Building & Systems Strengthening
- Community Health & Social Protection
- Nonprofit start-up & Governance
- Government Relations & Policy Influence
- Resource Mobilization
- Strategic Communications & Reporting
- Monitoring, Evaluation, & Learning

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Kenya: Leading the design and implementation of an innovative capacity strengthening strategy with 3 county governments, resulting in expanded and improved services in 56 high priority wards.

Uganda: Convening 18 universities, with the National Council for Higher Education and UNICEF, to initiate a national review of the training and certification process for social work in Uganda - resulting in harmonized standards for the profession which were adopted into law.

Rwanda: Coordinating 14 partners to launch, scale, and continuously adapt services to address the health, education & social welfare needs of over 50,000 marginalized households, enabling 84% of households to graduate out of program support within five years.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE & KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Team Leader/Chief Technical Advisor, Kenya

NIRAS Finland: 2021 - 2025

- Provided strategic direction and managerial oversight on a complex bilateral program focused on gender-based violence, reporting to a high-level Steering Committee, ensuring alignment with policy priorities, contractual commitments and governance framework.
- Recruited and managed staff, short-term experts and local partners to implement a €6 million multi-sectoral program with government and 100+ civil society groups in 3 counties.
- Developed policy recommendations to secure the enrollment of over 3,000 officers from the children's, police, health, justice, and gender departments in certified trainings, and disseminate over 30,000 guidelines and policies to improve services in 56 wards.
- Facilitated high-level meetings, and reflective sessions to align priorities, promote innovation, and share lessons/learning.
- Established program wide norms and practices to integrate grassroots perspectives, and support local advocacy - partnering with women, men, and elders to reach 100,000+ people.
- Oversaw multiple studies, producing 12 high-quality briefs and reports, to refine strategy and program priorities, scale promising interventions, and advance thought leadership.
- Conducted SWOT and regular risk assessments to identify and mitigate critical issues- including social, economic, and political dynamics affecting safety, security, and operational efficiency.

Program Director, Uganda

Catholic Relief Services: 2016 - 2020

- Managed two (2) **USAID-funded activities** with a budget of \$11+ million focused on child protection systems in 16 districts.
- Partnered with government to enhance the capacity of the social service workforce - conducting studies, convening Technical Experts/Committees, harmonizing training standards across 18 universities which were adopted by Parliament.
- Grants oversight and administration to 3 organizations - building administrative systems and capacity for quality implementation, compliance and transparency.
- Developed multiple knowledge products and policy briefs to influence government strategy and systems for case management/service delivery.
- Successfully mobilized \$750,000 in additional funding to achieve nationwide coverage of key interventions - including support to the Child Helpline and other ICT solutions.
- Established a vibrant, inclusive and engaged work culture, evidenced by employee engagement scores of 91% - among the highest in the agency.

Deputy Chief of Party, Kenya

Plan International: 2015 - 2016

- Directed the **start-up of a \$41 million USAID/PEPFAR-funded project**, including recruitment and establishment of field operations to meet the needs of orphans and vulnerable children.
- Facilitated joint work planning processes with government, partners, and the donor to respond to local priorities, build trust, and create an enabling environment for innovation & learning.
- Developed operational guidelines (adapting global best practice to the local context) to scale services 80,000+ beneficiaries across six counties.
- Supervised capacity building for 19 grantees, aligning technical assistance with changing needs.

Deputy Chief of Party, Rwanda

Global Communities: 2015

- Supported all aspects of **\$37 million program** start-up for a USAID/PEPFAR flagship program: focused on health and social welfare for children and families affected by HIV.
- Collaborated with external evaluators to prepare for a USAID-led randomized control trial, measuring the impact and cost-effectiveness of the program model for enhancing resiliency.
- Mentored four technical teams and local staff members to adapt/develop new service delivery guidelines in response to new data/evidence, and changing donor priorities.
- Facilitated strategic collaboration across partners, assisting teams in developing systems, approaches, and tools (work plans, trackers, M&E Tools) to align with global best practice.

EARLY CAREER

Coordinator/Team Leader: Health & Social Services Global Communities: Rwanda: 2009 - 2015
Senior Project Officer, Johns Hopkins Centre for Communication Programs: Uganda: 2005 - 2009
Program Officer Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief: Canada & Uganda: 2001-2004
Director, Youth Leadership Kids Can Free the Children: 2000-2001

EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

- Master of Business Administration (MBA), Athabasca University, Canada, 2014.
- Graduate Diploma in Management, Athabasca University, Canada, 2011.
- Bachelor of Arts (Political Science), University of Lethbridge, Canada, 1999.
- Certificate in AI: Implications for Business Strategy, MIT Sloan, USA, 2024.
- Certificate in Environmental Leadership, Yale University, USA, 2021.
- Certificate in Conflict Resolution, Cornell University, USA, 2018.

OTHER SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

Resource Mobilization

- Co-creating new programs & technical writer on the following winning proposals:
 - Keeping Children Healthy and Safe (USAID) – \$19 million: Uganda, 2020
 - Improved Services for Vulnerable Populations (USAID) \$37 million: Rwanda, 2014
 - Social Services for Vulnerable Populations (USAID) \$50 million: Rwanda, 2009
- Developed a variety of strategic communication materials, presenting innovations backed up with experience & sound management to secure funding for a new €6 million program.
- Building relationships with diverse stakeholders – aligning priorities, goals, and shared values to identify present and future areas of collaboration.
- Organizing multiple school-based fund-raisers with children and youth in Rwanda and Kenya to participate in social justice initiatives or fund school upgrades – raising over \$US 10,000.

Strategic Communications (Webinars & Conference Presentations)

- Engaging hearts and minds for transformational change: Going beyond institutional knowledge and strategies, Catholic Relief Services, 2020.
- Potential for Transformational Change at Scale: Use of Android Tablets as a Tool for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce. ICT4D Conference, Uganda, 2019.
- Opportunities, Gaps & Prospects for Social Work Education & Training in Uganda: The case for national minimum standards. International Federations of Social Workers Conference, Uganda, 2019.
- Strengthening Referrals and Linkages for Child and Adolescent Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Case Study from the Child Helpline. National Learning Conference. Uganda, 2018.

IT Skills/Remote Work

- Advanced IT Skills: Office 365 (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Teams, Forms), Zoom & Other Video Conferencing Platforms, Graphic & Web Design: Canva, Wix; and AI: ChatGPT.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

- Successfully leading diverse teams in multiple countries, promoting cultural awareness, accommodations, and inclusive and collaborative decision-making.
- Designed and oversaw multiple community-centered initiatives to integrate the ideas and experiences of marginalized groups in the design and budget of new programs.

Languages

- English: Fluent
- French: Medium Proficiency