Bishop Kasuku Kalolo, a retired teacher from Nyando, takes pride in his service as a community leader and a member of the Luo Council of Elders. To him, this is not just an assignment, but a privilege, an opportunity to give back to his community.

As part of a strategy to reach the most conservative and remote of communities with vital, life-saving information, KELIN and other stakeholders initiated a programme that uses existing social structures to disseminate knowledge. This was achieved by building the capacity of the community leaders such as the elders who play an instrumental role in the decision-making process of the local communities. To make the programme a success, the joint effort of all stakeholders and the good will from the leaders was required.

Elder Kasuku understands this very well. As a member of the Luo Council of Elders, which is one of the identified social structures by KELIN, he has been at the centre of this process for some time. The Luo Council of Elders is an existing social structure in the Luo community that was traditionally used to solve problems, share information and educate the younger generation. With the help of various stakeholders, KELIN trained the elders on sexual and reproductive health and what the law says on issues of sexual violence such as rape and defilement and on women land and property rights, particularly on inheritance matters.

Prior to KELIN’s engagement with the community, damaging traditional and cultural beliefs guided the community members in their decision making. For instance, the belief held by the community that HIV was caused by witchcraft led to a high HIV prevalence. Many young widows were blamed for bringing the disease to their husbands and were being disinherited because of these cultural beliefs.

Elder Kasuku observes how information brought by KELIN changed their mind-set and how they subsequently handled issues as a community. “It resulted in a change of perception and thinking among the elders,” he says. The community leaders now appreciated the gravity of the issues and the fact that ignorance was killing their people. This awakening stirred a desire in Elder Kasuku to share the information with members of his community and the results have been positive ever since. For instance, compared to the past, cases of defilement, rape and wife disinheritance are now handled lawfully as opposed to traditionally, which was mostly out of court.
“We integrated our traditional beliefs with the education we got from KELIN and strived to find the balance so that we serve the community effectively without antagonising our people,” Elder Kasuku adds. According to him, the greatest achievement has been the total change of perception and an overhaul of practice by community members in matters concerning wife inheritance. Although they first encountered resistance from the community members, gradually, they understood. Through efforts of this nature, the widows have inherited what is rightfully theirs and the orphans have found a home.

Additionally, KELIN reintroduced the inter-generational dialogues, a mechanism that was once in existence in the Luo culture. These dialogues have been instrumental in increasing awareness among the AGWY and improving their decision making. The structure has made it possible for girls to consult elders on pertinent issues. One of the biggest milestones of the dialogues is complementing former structures led by grandmothers that educated adolescents and young women in the traditional society known as Siwinthe. The inter-generational dialogues are now used to educate AGYW on issues of sexual and reproductive health, contraceptives, self-care and demystifying existing myths around reproductive health.

Elder Kasuku is grateful for the joint effort of various stakeholders who came together to facilitate their community growth. Even with the absence of KELIN, he believes that the goodwill from the community will sustain the practice through the available structures. He affirms that community dialogues will serve as platforms for education, be it in churches, funerals or barazas (council meetings).

“The most important lesson I have learned is that people should be treated equally without prejudice of any kind, including gender. I want this kind of education to continue as it will help change the traditional mind-set of those who will take up this role after we are long gone,” reflects Elder Kasuku.