

CHAPTER 4

Kilimanjaro Initiative: Working with Youth in Nairobi

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Mount Kilimanjaro provides an interesting symbol for climate change in East Africa because the loss of snow at its peak provides stark evidence that the climate is changing and water is becoming scarcer. The organization I work for, the Kilimanjaro Initiative (KI), links youth in Kibera – Nairobi’s largest slum – with river protection and leadership development, using Mount Kilimanjaro as our focus. And our work also addresses climate change -- though it started as a way of fostering alternatives to youth violence.

KI was founded by a victim of gun violence in Nairobi named Tim Challen. His shooting, and survival, prompted him to deeply consider what it is that can bring a young person to shoot someone else, and led him to seek solutions to youth violence through community-based organizing and leadership development programs in Kibera, Nairobi. Some facts about Kibera: one million people live in an area of 5 square km; there is only one primary school; there are very few communal spaces where children and youth can play, and these public spaces are often nearly deserted because they are used for criminal activity. In Nairobi as a whole, there are about 110 informal settlements where basic services are lacking, and the wide gulf between rich and poor seems nearly unbridgeable.

KI is founded on the basic principle of listening to youth, ensuring youth are the driving force, and making sure all stakeholders are involved in discussions. Every year KI brings youth and other stakeholders together to discuss why youth get involved in criminal activity, and to develop alternatives to violence for and with young people. Local knowledge and local power make things run. Where you want a community to develop, look to youth because they have energy and willpower to move things forward! KI supports youth as advocates for constructing change. But particular youth groups have to show KI how they will engage the community before KI will engage with them.

KI uses sports as a way to raise global awareness on urban safety, and to support youth as advocates for constructing change. Every year, we take 10 youth from around the world for a two-week leadership training, and then the youth climb Mount Kilimanjaro, raising funds from donors as they do so. In previous years, our climbs have included youth from South Africa, Brazil, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania. In 2011, the KI Leadership Training theme was “Green Economy, Sustainable Development, and Greater Urban Safety,” and we added a long-distance bicycle ride to our climb. Our funding comes from other big NGOs, personal donations, and global membership fees.

We also organize sports events in the slums: cycling, football matches and other sports competitions. We are developing more sports fields in Nairobi and other low-income areas in East Africa, and we are also developing community centres -- giving local people a place for meetings and communal planning. We always ensure that youth are the driving force in this process. We use a sports-

community model where local/village community committees spearhead everything, help to identify problems, and come up with realistic possible solutions. The sports field committee helps to coordinate activities, mobilize communities around projects and activities, and organize the necessary work. KI is trying to upgrade or create new sports fields, and build up groups of youth around the sports fields to maintain the fields.

Related to climate change, there are issues with flooding of our first Kibera slum sports field because of its proximity to the Nairobi dam, so we are trying to build a proper drainage system around the field so that water can drain. KI talked to the community and those groups of youth that could be prone to crime -- young people who were previously engaging in criminal activities -- and because of our joint initiatives they are now reformed and doing constructive community work. These youth did the manual work and they dug the drainage ditch around the field. So, the sports field, which everyone uses, is the result of their hard work.

The water behind the Nairobi dam is polluted from industrial effluent, raw sewage from blocked, broken and overloaded sewers and from Kibera slum, and all types of garbage. Polluted waste from the surrounding settlements has contributed to silting-up behind the dam, and it is now full of water hyacinth and other plants so that it appears more like a marsh. Heavy rainfall during storms, which are increasing in irregularity and intensity due to climate change, causes serious flooding throughout the catchment and around the dam. Since there is no clear outlet, the water spills back into the surrounding areas, where people may have built structures during the dry season. In the absence of early warning systems in

the surrounding poor communities, the flooding causes displacement, property loss and sometimes, even death for local residents. The incidence of vector and water-borne diseases also increases during floods.

The more sports fields we can build near the river where it floods, the fewer people's houses will get inundated or washed away. We are working with the city government to resettle people from flood-prone areas so that we can create and manage more public spaces for recreation.

Many of the young people in Kibera are there due to climate change, since people all over Kenya are leaving their farms because of droughts, so there is lots of rural-urban migration and most migrants are moving into the informal settlements where they can survive while looking for greener pastures. We bring awareness to the youth about climate change and how it affects them; local problems require local solutions. We include awareness of these events and the environment in our work, and we use radio stations to disseminate information.

The KI model involves KI itself, communities, academia, and students. We are already working with planning students from the University of Nairobi, and have also collaborated on water and sanitation research through the University of Denver and the Rotary Club of Denver, which provided the funding for building model community toilets.

So, Kibera youth are now working for rivers in many ways and with many partners, through the Kilimanjaro Initiative.

[INSERT PHOTOS HERE – p. 40]