

## **CHDA Island Youth Development Programme**

Peter Dennis Okwaro

Centre for Heritage Development in Africa, Mombasa, Kenya

### **Introduction**

Young people, all around the world face a wide array of social, cultural and economic challenges. Top among these are increasingly high levels of unemployment and/or underemployment. While this happens in both industrialized and the developing world, the case is particularly serious in the developing countries. Young women and men in these countries share the common concerns of diminishing or totally unavailable job opportunities, which deny them the possibility of living decent lives.

The Centre for Heritage Development in Africa (CHDA), recognizing these concerns, has initiated a youth development programme that strives to empower youths to actively get involved in development processes around them, to have a say in, and influence the development of the path to their destiny – a path that, it is hoped, will enable the concerned youths to better their lives and live decent, or at least more dignified lives.

We believe that youth development must be about providing the youth with a decent life and a better future. It is about gender equality, equal recognition, and about enabling youth, especially young women, to make choices and to take control of their lives. Youth development is about young people's ability to compete in the market place, to keep up with technological advancement and to remain healthy. It is about their fair share of society's collective wealth and about not being discriminated against; it means having a voice in the society/community.

Securing decent lives for young women and men – in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity – is an essential precondition to make use of their talents, their abilities and their energies. And youths have these in plenty.

Young people everywhere...

- have aspirations and want to participate fully in the lives of their societies;
- are key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation;
- should live under conditions that encourage their imagination, ideals, energy and vision to flourish to the benefit of their societies;
- are confronted by a paradox: to seek to be integrated into the existing society or to serve as a force to transform it;
- are also a social and demographic group vulnerable to an uncertain future, even though they represent society's greatest hope.

This paper presents the story of CHDA and Island youths, which, although still a budding story, has brought a new life to CHDA and to youths both individually and collectively in, so far, three islands in Kenya.

### **Mombasa Old Town Youths**

In the year 2006, even before I was seconded to CHDA, I had an opportunity to get a four-month internship at CHDA. During those days, I spent most of my evenings watching football, played by the youth from the old town, next to Fort Jesus Museum. The matches were attended by a considerable number of spectators.

one they were afraid of. This was surprising to me, because the place was full of people I considered community elders. Have they given up on their youths? This was the question that came to my mind. Are they not supposed to be the mentors and guides for the young members of the community? Why are the youths not even bothered by their presence?

During this period of internship, I lived in the Mombasa Old Town. Some of the things I noted as I walked around the Old Town, or just as I looked out my window:

- Young people, especially young men could be seen in groups, idling in any available space within the Old Town. I came later to discover such spaces are called “Maskani.” What is Maskani? They are places where the youth take their first step towards getting addicted.
- At night, I could come across many youths in a state of intoxication. Whatever they had taken, I could not tell.
- I saw many youths, even in the day, who were in such a state that they could not lift or even just swing their arms as they walked along the narrow streets of the town, saliva flowing freely down their mouths.

I started talking to some people about these observations and what I learned shocked me. The story was that many of the youths in Old Town Mombasa were hooked on drugs, including marijuana, heroin, cocaine, etc.

### **Challenges Facing the Kenyan Youth**

Vital Statistics:

- The population of Kenya is estimated at 35million persons
- 75% of these are below 30 years and
- 38% of the population is youth aged 15-35 years
- 76% of the youth are unemployed (57% are females)

### **Challenges**

As you may have noticed from the above statistics, unemployment is the most critical challenge to Kenyan youth. Many of the youths complete high school at the age of 18 years. While there are many opportunities beyond this level, they are generally inaccessible to many of the youths. Public institutions of higher learning, which are relatively affordable, are few and cannot accommodate a large section of high school graduates. Private institutions of higher learning on the other hand are not only few, but are also quite expensive and therefore economically inaccessible to most of the youths. Many of these youth therefore remain out of school and idle after graduating from high school. A large number of such young people then start to consider themselves marginalized, alienated, social outcasts, a condition that is significant and potentially dangerous.

In Mombasa Old Town, as in most African cities, this irony is an undeniable, self-evident fact. Few civil society representatives or even members of the community show any interest in taking up issues and concerns of the youth. Significantly, female youth tend to be more seriously affected by this situation, being most ignored and marginalized, particularly due to cultural and religious reasons.

Few of these urban youth have any chance of accessing any youth development programmes that may exist. One reason for this is that they do not know about these development programmes at all. They have no access to information about them. But

even for those who do, budgets for ministries of youth tend to be small and therefore inadequate to cater for the youth population in a country that has such a large number of youth. At the same time, education ministries primarily invest in formal education, leaving out vocational training that could provide these youth with significant vocational life skills. In other words, what most urban youth seek access to – capital and targeted non-formal education – is often not what most governments, non-government and international investors are prepared to provide.

As a result, many youth remain idle and get lured into antisocial and risk taking behaviours that have the potential of leading to HIV and AIDS, drug abuse, prostitution and crime.

The tragedy that engulfs these urban youth is that while their energy, creativity, and resilience are not adequately recognized by society, government, civil society, and international actors, their many assets may be well recognized by those who seek to manipulate them. Drug operators, for example and others seeking to exploit urban youth labour all appreciate at least some of what youth potential can readily provide. All too often, they work on urban youth with few competitors.

In other words, social, economic, and perhaps even political alienation, together with the dangers of HIV/AIDS, prostitution and trafficking, form an explosive cocktail for youth living in many African urban environments. Mombasa Old Town is no exception.

### **The CHDA Island Youth Programme**

Originally, the idea was simply mooted to try and find out what the youth think about heritage and the role of heritage in the socio-economic development of society. Because we had some interns at the office who were themselves young people, we sent them out with guidelines to interview youth in the surroundings on these issues. The results were so interesting they inspired CHDA to work further with the youth, with a view to:

1. Improve their understanding of heritage and its role in socio-economic development.
2. Equip them with means to take advantage of available socio-economic opportunities.
3. Improve their human security and dignity.

### **The Approach**

We started by organizing a meeting with the youth, which brought together members from seven different youth groups within the Mombasa Old Town. This was an ice-breaking meeting, to introduce ourselves. It is during this initial meeting that we discovered that, in fact, the youth of Mombasa Old Town were organized into many different youth groups, under different names, but with quite common objectives – principally, to improve their livelihoods and their environment. We asked that they choose a few representatives from each group whom we would continue to work with. Finally, we had twenty youth representing seven different youth groups.

First, it was essential to gain the trust of the target youths. Since young urban youth are often viewed by many as a social menace and a threat to mainstream society, we thought that sincere and consistent efforts must be invested in overcoming their sense of alienation and social distance. “Trust” here therefore refers to the significance of building relationships with members of the Old Town youth groups and those who work with them. This we are doing through positive engagement: establishing both a

focused interest in the lives of the youth and making determined efforts to make the engagement fully participatory, and then following through.

To enable us develop programmes with them requires an understanding of their social situation. This we are endeavouring to do through the meetings we hold with them on selected Saturdays. These meetings enable us to listen to and empathize and interact with the young people – establishing the necessary bonds of trust with them.

Among some of the challenges that the youth have identified in our brainstorming sessions were:

- drug abuse by many youth in Mombasa Old Town – from marijuana through cocaine and heroin;
- HIV and AIDS and its effects on society;
- early marriages, especially among young women;
- unemployment and underemployment;
- environmental pollution, especially of the marine environment, although they also noted that there is no proper solid-waste management system in the Old Town, leading to poor waste disposal and an untidy environment;
- risk of disasters due to congestion and narrow streets that may not allow rescue teams access to disaster sites;
- ignorance among members of the Old Town community;
- poor leadership.

The other important result from the initial brainstorming meetings is that they enable us understand the availability of the target youths, and especially the female youths for the intended programmes. We appreciate that in all contexts, significant obligations on the time of female youth will limit their ability to participate in programmes. A large section of the Old Town residents are Muslim by faith and existing obligations often combine with cultural and religious restrictions to create significant challenges to female youth involvement in programming and general interaction.

These meetings therefore provide an opportunity to explore how to reach and include everybody, especially the female youth. They enabled us to learn about their workdays, protection needs, and cultural/religious constraints. They also enable us to learn what the youth are seeking in a programme and when they might be able to attend. The times that female youth are able to attend a programme activity may be different, and far more restricted, than for their male youth counterparts.

Based on these identified challenges, we are working with the youth to develop a strategic plan for the next five years addressing some of these challenges.

### **Creating a Forum for Exchange with Other Youths**

The meetings that are held with the youths provide a very useful forum to exchange life experiences and discuss ideas about themselves, about their communities, about the environment in which they live and about socio-economic development and heritage, including their own role and participation in these processes.

The discussions that took place in the first few meetings between the youth on issues and challenges they face were so enlightening and so educative that it was decided that we widen their scope to create a larger pool of ideas. We therefore, through the Curator of the Museum in Lamu Island we created another link between the youth in Mombasa Old Town and the youth on Lamu Island. Through Skype conferences, the

two groups engage in discussions around their life experiences and the challenges they face, and try to explore possible approaches to addressing these. The last Skype meeting we held was just after the holy month of Ramadhan and the Id-UI-Fitr celebrations that mark the end of the holy month. The discussion was about “how Ramadhan and Id-UI-Fitr contributes to social and cultural development of society.” Very fruitful discussions were held and the participating members spoke about the foods that were served; the visitors that they received, the social functions attended, e.t.c

During the first Skype meeting with the Lamu Youth, the Curator of the Abasuba Community Peace Museum, a community museum on Mfangano Island in Lake Victoria, was in Lamu for a heritage training workshop and was so impressed with the linkage and the discussions that took place he requested that we involve the youths and volunteers in his museum. This has started to take shape. The problem with connecting with the Mfangano Island youths is technological. They do not have access to adequate ICT to have a direct Skype conference. So, we started with our youth blog on the CHDA website, where we encourage them to post their contributions. Meanwhile, we are exploring the possibility of assisting them to access the internet to strengthen the link in the future.

Currently, through the Director of CHDA, Mrs. Deirdre Prins-Solani, a number of youth from Robben Island, South Africa, have already expressed an interest to join the link and forum. We are working on this possibility too.

### **Conclusion and Way Forward**

CHDA, being based in the Mombasa Old Town, sees a responsibility to help organize, together with the youth and other development partners, programmes that will empower local youths, preparing them for growth into responsible adults in the community.

One can define “youth development” as:

*the ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to (1) meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and (2) to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives (Pittman, 1993, p. 8).*

This definition means that youth development is a process that all young people go through on the way to adulthood. It implies a process or journey that automatically involves all of the people around a youth. It means that a young person will not be able to build essential skills and competencies and be able to feel safe, cared for, valued, useful, and spiritually grounded unless their family and community provide them with the supports and opportunities they need along the way.

Youth development, then, is a combination of all of the people, places, supports, opportunities and services that most of us inherently understand that young people need to be happy, healthy and successful.

CHDA, through this programme, is working toward positive results in the lives of involved youth. These results include but move above and beyond the academic skills and competencies that are the focus of most schools. We anticipate that, in the future of this programme, we shall be able to give the youth of Mombasa Old Town the following:

Aspects of Identity:

1. sense of safety and security

Areas of ability:

1. physical health

- |  |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 2. high self-worth and self-esteem         | 2. mental health              |
| 3. feeling of mastery and future           | 3. intellectual health        |
| 4. belonging and membership                | 4. employability              |
| 5. perception of responsibility & autonomy | 5. civic & social involvement |
| 6. sense of self-awareness                 |                               |

We envision a number of factors needed in youths' lives, which may contribute to reaching these positive developmental results and which may therefore form a foundation for healthy development of young people. These fall into the following categories:

- support
- empowerment
- constructive use of time
- commitment to learning
- positive values
- social competencies and
- positive identity

In the coming months/years of engagement with these youth, we plan to develop programmes for and with them, which shall aim at providing the following:

- **Supports:** Motivational, emotional and strategic supports to succeed in life. The supports shall take different forms, but shall be affirming, respectful, and ongoing. To make these supports more powerful, we shall involve a variety of people, such as community leaders, close relatives, youth workers, volunteers, employers, health providers, and peers who are involved in the lives of young people.
- **Opportunities:** Chances for young people to learn how to act in the world around them, to explore, express, belong, and influence. Opportunities give young people the chance to test ideas and behaviours and to experiment with different roles. It is important to stress that young people, just like adults, learn best through active participation and that learning occurs in all types of settings and situations.
- **Quality services:** Services in such areas as informal education, health and employment, which exhibit: (1) relevant instruction and information; (2) challenging opportunities to express oneself, to contribute, to take on new roles; and be part of a group; and (3) supportive adults and peers who provide respect, high standards and expectations, guidance and affirmation to young people.

Our engagement with the youth of Mombasa Old Town is based on the understanding that the concept of youth development is not as sophisticated and complicated as many people would like to think. It is simply about people, programmes, institutions and systems that provide all youth – "troubled" or not – with the supports and opportunities they need to empower themselves such as:

- an adult who volunteers time to mentor or tutor a young person;
- a museum/heritage institution or other organization that partners with a youth CBO to keep its doors open until 10 p.m. or open its facility on a Saturday morning and to provide the youth with a safe, supervised place to exchange life experiences;

- a leadership development programme that offers members of different youth groups neutral territory where they can relate to one another as individuals and build skills;
- a local authority that engages youth in the policy making process through youth councils and youth positions in government departments;
- a religious institution that provides youth access to computers and the necessary training;
- a local business which employs youth in meaningful and relevant work.

Our challenge in the coming months, therefore, is to engage other stakeholders and interested partners to make such supports and opportunities the rule rather than the exception for all youths that currently enthusiastically engage with CHDA in this Island Youth Programme.

### **What have we done so far?**

1. We meet on selected Saturdays and discuss with the youth issues such as constructive use of their time and other resources, the dangers of drugs, HIV/AIDS, etc.
2. We give some of them who have special skills the ability to share with the rest through presentations and discussions. This does not only develop new knowledge and skills, but also gives the presenters a feeling of self worth.
3. We provide role models by using our interns, who are youth, to lead discussions and make presentations on selected topics. The youth are impressed by the presentations of the interns and get ambitions to be like them.
4. We provide the youth with access to the CHDA computer workstations and train them on how to seek information on the internet – available opportunities for funding, business, etc. We also talk to them about the positive and negative aspects of the internet.
5. We provide the youth with opportunities to express themselves and relate with people they see as successful. During the closing ceremony for a three-month training at CHDA, attended by very senior people in government, the heritage sector and the local authority, we gave a representative of the youth group an opportunity to make a presentation about their engagement with CHDA.

### **References**

1. Githu, Alice. “Urban Slums Youth Economic and Social Empowerment Project-Kenya” (2007): [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCY/Resources/395766-1193926575472/4344875-1195077302081/Githu\\_PotentialEvaluation.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCY/Resources/395766-1193926575472/4344875-1195077302081/Githu_PotentialEvaluation.pdf).
2. Hope, K. R., Sr. “Urbanization and Urban Growth in Africa.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1998): 345–58.
3. Centre for Youth Development and Policy Research: <http://cyd.aed.org/whatis.html>

4. <http://www.planetware.com/mombasa/the-old-town-ken-cst-oldt.htm>
5. Ogbu, O. & Ikiara, G. "The crisis of urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa." *African Urban Quarterly* vol. 11, no. 2/3 (1995): 170–79.
6. Sommers, M. "Creating Programmes for Africa's Urban Youth: The Challenge of Marginalization." *Journal of International Cooperation in Education* (CICE Hiroshima University), vol. 10, no. 1 (2007): 19–31.
7. Sommers, M. *Youth and Conflict: A Brief Review of Available Literature*. Washington, DC: Education Development Centre and USAID, 2006.