

Meeting Educational Challenges in Kenya

By Darlene Anderson



One of the most vivid memories I have from my trips to Kenya to work with the Canadian charity Suitcases for Africa, is the sight of hundreds of children walking along the roadside in the very early hours of the morning just after dawn. It is impressive to see them in their school uniforms. They flock along in groups both large and small. Their vibrant coloured uniforms light up the roadside despite the fact that many are too big, too small or barely held together at all due to their many tatters and repairs.

Invariably they smile and wave and shout out greetings as we pass by on our way to visit our projects. Our education, nutrition and healthcare projects are scattered around the rural communities surrounding Kakamega in the Western Province of Kenya.

For many rural children the day begins with a long walk of an hour or more to reach school. Some set off before dawn. Many set off with no breakfast in their belly and no school lunch packed to sustain them through the long day ahead. Most survive on one meal a day when they return home. These are the fortunate ones. They attend a school. There are more than one million children who are not in school in Kenya. While this is almost half of the number it was in 1999, it is still the ninth highest number of any country in the world.

The government of Kenya is currently showing a strong commitment to funding education but the task is enormous. In 2003 the Kenyan government introduced a free primary school policy. Despite some progress there are many, many challenges for Kenyan children trying to obtain an education. This is especially true in the rural areas where poverty levels are high. Children who live in these areas are much more likely to be out of school and young girls are especially excluded. Although the free school policy has been in effect for more than 10 years, in practice it is not free at all. In areas where poverty is high, families cannot afford the indirect costs that must be met for a child to attend. A mandatory school uniform is the first road block. With most households in these areas trying to live on less than \$1.50 a day, costs such as a school uniform, school supplies, and exam fees are prohibitive.

It is an easy choice to make when your options are food for your family today versus better prospects for your child in a future many years away. Some children in these situations remain out of school because they must tend to younger siblings while parents work at low paying manual jobs or as day labourers if and when that work is available.

It is a common sight for us to see such workers breaking stones into small gravel chips by the roadside using only a hammer. We often see workers hauling heavy buckets of sand up steep river banks to dry in the sun so that they can be sold for use in building bricks. Poverty is a very evident road block.

Two recent cases in our projects illustrate this dilemma very well. Suitcases for Africa funds vulnerable children to attend school through the support of our donors who sponsor them. Each sponsored child receives a school uniform, school supplies, exam fee coverage and a nutritious mid- day meal.

For a poor family, that is a huge incentive to allow their child to attend school. It means one less mouth to feed each day. Even so, parents may still have to be persuaded to forego the income that child might bring in to the family. In one such case we had a young boy who wanted to attend school so desperately he would run away from his job so that he could go to the school, listen in and try to learn. Anytime this was discovered, he would receive a beating but still his desire to go to school was not deterred.

Being sponsored changed this boy's situation and his family agreed that he could attend school after learning the benefit this would bring to all of them in future. Another child who was doing well and who loved school was removed at age 9 so that he could join his father working in a mine. The sponsorship program allowed him to return to school. Educational sponsorship programs do change lives. It is estimated that an educated Kenyan child will lift 10 of his relatives up with him. If that child is a girl, she will also help to lift her community.

With the introduction of the free education policy in Kenya in 2003, there was a very real problem created by the huge influx in school attendance by very young children. The system was unprepared for the overload it caused.

The infrastructure was not in place to receive them. The schools were overcrowded, and so they remain. It is a common occurrence to have 70-90 children in a classroom with one teacher. The school building is often crumbling, unsafe and unsanitary. Learning under a tree does not work well in the rainy season.

Many children sit on the dirt floor as desks and benches are lacking. Roofs blow off in wind storms and are not replaced. Mud brick walls collapse in rainy season. There are no funds for repairs. Dangerous, old, worn-out wooden latrines are overfilled and unsanitary. These latrines can be deadly when they collapse. In addition to all of this, there are few, if any, books or supplies. Students share very few text books and those they do are often coverless and falling apart. We have seen that one pencil being shared by four children is not unusual.

Despite all of these challenges the children want to be there. They are mostly very attentive and well behaved. They look forward to school and are grateful for the opportunity to learn. Whenever we visit schools here at home, it is an eye-opener for Canadian children when they see our photos and listen to our stories.

We always bring huge suitcases filled with school supplies and library books with us whenever we visit a school in Kenya. There is so much excitement when the children see the books. It is the kind of excitement reserved for rock stars or sports heroes here at home. They immediately sit down on the ground and delve into them. It is a great pleasure for us to meet this challenge by providing the books and supplies, one school at a time.

Hunger and illness go hand in hand and these two evils have a huge impact on a child's ability to attend school. They also affect his ability to focus and learn once he is there. Hunger stalks rural communities in Sub Saharan Africa relentlessly and Kenya is no exception.

We try to set up feeding programs for school children wherever we can, depending upon our available resources. One nutritious meal taken mid-day will make a huge change in a child's life and his ability to thrive in school.

It is an enormous challenge to meet. We had a very tragic case in point last year. Over the last three years Suitcases for Africa has been supporting a small primary school located in Emalindi. Approximately five hundred children attend Mwirembe St. Paul Primary School. Many of the families served by this school live in extreme poverty. Upon learning of this situation and seeing it first hand, Suitcases for Africa funded the installation of a community well and several new sanitary latrines on the school grounds.

This helped to address some of the water-borne and parasitic illnesses, which undermined the health of these students, however, funding the daily feeding program for the children that was clearly needed here was beyond our budget.

We were very saddened in 2013 when we learned that a young girl named Loice, a 13 year old student at the school, had died tragically in a series of events brought about by her hunger. Loice left school one afternoon to return to her home. Along the way, driven by her hunger she decided to search for fruit in the forest. Even though she knew it was still un-ripened she hoped it would fill her. Loice came across a dead bird on the forest floor. She immediately hurried home and secretly cooked and ate the bird before her family returned at the end of the day. Tragically when the family returned they found her gravely ill. Despite the efforts of all the staff at the hospital Loice passed away. It was determined later that the bird she had consumed that day had died from the bite of a poisonous snake. The poison also took Loice's life. In reality HUNGER took her life. Suitcases for Africa has since funded a banana tree plantation at the school in memory of Loice. The first planting of 100 tree shoots in 2013 is now nearing maturity and a crop of bananas will soon feed the students. A second planting of 100 more trees was undertaken in July 2014. When the second crop of plants bear fruit in one year's time they will be sold and the funds will purchase other local food items such as beans and maize for these children. Beans and maize will be added along with the bananas to form a nutritious meal.

The banana plantation was planted by, and continues to be weeded, fertilized and maintained by the staff and students at the school under the guidance of an agricultural consultant and our administrator. We are hopeful this self-sustaining project will benefit the children over the years to come and perhaps become a model for other school communities to help them feed their students. It is a challenge that must be met if this generation of young children are to be kept healthy, in school and excelling enough to have a brighter future. It is apparent that combatting all of these educational challenges will require support on many fronts.

We have been encouraged and excited by the possibilities that await these children thanks to the many Canadians who are helping to fund these efforts with their ideas and donations. Yes, it is an enormous task, but it can be addressed child by child, school by school, challenge by challenge. The alternative is unacceptable! Education is perhaps the best tool available to help to change our world for the better. The various challenges recounted in this article must be met in the short term for positive change to be possible in the long term. Nelson Mandela summed up what every human being, wherever they may be, wishes for themselves, their children and their community. Let's accept the challenge in whatever way is available to us.

"There are four basic and primary things that the mass of people in a society wish for: to live in a safe environment, to be able to work and provide for themselves, to have access to good public health and to have sound educational opportunities for their children" - Nelson Mandela

Darlene Anderson is a preschool teacher with 35 years of experience. She is a founding member and the current President of Suitcases for Africa. To learn more about this registered charity please visit www.suitcasesforafrica.com



Walter is a child in our Educational Sponsorship Program. He is seen receiving his school uniform, text books and school supplies. He will also receive a nutritional meal for lunch each school day.



An early childhood class with their new uniforms funded by SFA.



This is a happy photo of students who received SFA funding for new desks and chairs. They worked seated on the floor before. The uniforms were also funded by SFA

Students are seen tending to the school banana tree plantation which will help to provide future school meals for themselves.





Attending school is greatly appreciated by impoverished children in rural Kenya