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# The Struggles of the Rural Poor in Kenya

By Darlene Anderson

Geographically Kenya is a country of great beauty and diversity of landscape. Tourism is a large source of income bringing in thousands of visitors annually who fall in love with the stunning views of the Masai Mara and the bountiful wildlife. They climb Mt. Kenya, trek through the Kakamega Rainforest in search of a stunning array of bird species or enjoy the beautiful beaches on the coast. Something they do not expect however is to fall in love with the people and leave on their return home with a part of their heart forever changed by their African experience. If you speak with anyone who has been to the continent, many will say that their visit moved them to their very core in some inexplicable way.

Despite all of the beauty of this land, few visitors venture off the tourist routes for a closer look at and experience of the local daily life. If they did, they would see the equally moving struggle of the vast majority of Kenya's citizens. Sometimes the tourist guides make a quick stop at a look-out point over Nairobi where they can get a safely removed clinical view of Kibera in the distance. Kibera is the largest slum in Africa and one of the largest slums in the world. It is located in a low lying geographical depression at close proximity to the heart of the teeming city of Nairobi. It is estimated to be the makeshift home to close to a million people in a space of just over one square kilometer. This is where those seeking work and a future often end up after leaving their rural villages in search of a job or at least a chance to get onto the first rung on the ladder of life. They come full of hope and ideas and end up as the urban poor. Some find menial jobs by day in the city and return each night to live in the Kibera slum.

Some climb up out of the slum each day to beg in the ever present traffic jams in the city core. Many are young women with babies slung on their backs. Some are

fledgling entrepreneurs selling puppies, newspapers, clothes or food among the gridlock of the city traffic. Most tourists experience at least a short stay in a Nairobi hotel during the course of their visit to Kenya. During this time most have experienced the beggars from Kibera tapping upon the windows of the car in which they sit locked in the traffic. They are unable to escape both the painful sight of their struggles and the helpless feeling this stirs in their own hearts.

Why do the people flock here to the city? Surely the tales have reached home to the villages? The tales of hardship and disillusionment in the city must make it a less inviting prospect. The disappointment of learning that the city is not the hoped-for land of promise still does not stop them from flocking there. They come to Nairobi in search of hope because the plight of the rural poor is even greater. It drives them to the city slums. It is hard to imagine. As someone who has been working in the rural regions of Western Kenya, I have seen it first-hand. I work with a young Canadian Charity called Suitcases for Africa (SFA). I have seen the lack of resources, the lack of the basic necessities of life and the lack of hope in the future felt by so many.

We work in the rural communities to try to bring in access to the basics of life: clean water, sanitation, food, education and medical care. Resources we take for granted in Canada are beyond the reach of the majority in some of these scattered remote areas.

The eyes of the world were for a time focused on Kenya and Somalia this year as an unprecedented humanitarian crisis of drought and famine unfolded in the Horn of Africa. Reports began to come in to us from our team on the ground in Kenya in early February of 2011. They were alarming. Crops had failed, food was rationed by the government and starvation in the villages was real. People were eating one meal every four days and scrounging for un-ripened fruit or whatever could be found to survive. As we began to raise funds and truck in emergency food to those in our community projects who were worst affected, we wondered why there was no global awareness of what was happening, no news reports, and no action taking place. By the time the satellite dishes set up and the news came out to the world it was an overwhelming emergency. Twelve million people faced

starvation. Daadab Refugee camp on the Kenya/Somalia border was built to hold 90,000 refugees. It was overwhelmed by 400,000 with an estimated 113,000 arriving daily after long treks seeking food and water. They sat silently at the gates as Kenya struggled to cope with the situation. International Aid and Development organisations geared up for one of the largest efforts to save lives in recent history. The world looked on in horror.

The truth is that life is very hard and tenuous in the rural areas on a daily basis. The drought and famine magnified it on a larger scale and got the world's attention. The region of Western Kenya is already a place of great hardship.

According to the United Nations 2010 statistics, Sub Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of hunger worldwide with one in three malnourished and hungry at all times. The rural areas have very little infrastructure and little or no access to the resources that sustain a healthy productive life. There is little in the way of employment so most exist on one dollar a day as unskilled labourers or by subsistence farming on small plots of land.

The resources mentioned earlier are greatly lacking and so a circle of grinding poverty begins. With no access to clean water and insufficient food for proper nutrition people fall ill easily and often. With no access to medical care or treatment they continue to weaken. The chronically hungry and sick do not have the energy they need to attend school or lead active lives and they fall farther down the ladder. Hungry mothers often give birth to weak babies who are at risk for death and disability. The many resulting disabled children are then placed in overcrowded and underfunded institutions. It is a downward spiral of cascading crises. Often those children who do manage to go to school find themselves in crumbling buildings with 70-90 students per class, no access to books or school supplies and no access to water and sanitation. Learning can hardly take place under such conditions and yet obtaining an education is the main opportunity to short-circuit this cycle of despair.

It is a huge challenge to stop the cycle but it can be done. We have witnessed it turn around and in a remarkably short space of time once the resources are put in place. This is done in a community by community approach. It is not a matter of

charity, social justice demands that we make the resources available to all and not just the lucky few who were born in countries rich in wealth and resources.

Over the last five years we have been working on the ground in rural Kenya to intervene in resource-starved areas to help communities to get up on their feet and then move on to becoming self-sustaining.

Buoyed by better health due to clean water, sanitation and nutrition they can then be assisted to gain access to better education and access to different types of self-sustaining projects. These are resources with which they can build a life and a future. This is certainly not an overnight resolution by any means, but it is a foundation upon which to build. The cycle is broken, hope becomes profound and they can move forward on their own.

SFA often begins in a community with a feeding program for orphans and vulnerable children and their caregivers in order to boost nutrition. Anti-parasitic medications are also administered as part of these programs. These medications aid in coping with the health issues brought on by unclean water sources. With help from our supporters we also bring in a clean water project. Sometimes it is a community based well which can serve about 500 people. Sometimes it is in the form of a water harvesting system. The harvesting system uses the roof top collection of rainwater which is then stored in large tanks for water. These work very well at a school for example. At one school we supported this past year, the children had been drinking filthy contaminated water drawn from a local stream that was also a place where cattle bathed. A new well installed on the school grounds now serves healthy clean water. It is the greatest resource of all. Water is Life!

Sanitation is a huge problem in rural areas. The government has been working on eliminating the use of the open ground once common in rural areas. They have promoted the use of latrines. Although a step up from the past, it remains very hazardous at best. This summer we began work on a very poor rural school in Mwirembe where 500 students were using 4 latrine cubicles (holes). The broken-down overfilled latrines were meant to serve 25 students per cubicle, however an astounding 125 students per cubicle was the actual ratio in effect. Illness

proliferated. In fact on the very day we arrived one of the rickety structures had collapsed and the teachers had to cobble it back together before we got there. This is just one more job in the reality of a day's work for the teacher. We have been quick to install new latrines at other schools or orphan homes in such dire condition in the past and so work began immediately to rectify the situation once more. The new latrines are built with much higher standards. They are constructed in concrete, with ventilation and fly traps and very deep holes that will last for 15 years. Hand-washing is being promoted also once water is made more accessible. Though these are seemingly small measures, they are crucial to health and safety.

In the western world education is a resource many take for granted and children groan when told it is time to go to school. Students in Kenya view school as a gift if they can get there. Primary school is said to be free in Kenya but it is not. If you are surviving with your children on one dollar a day you cannot afford the necessary school uniform, supplies and exam fees for them to attend. Children may also be needed to fetch water or firewood or to work to bring in money for food.

All of these problems are interconnected and helping in one area improves the others. Finally, we are working hard to help communities to develop self-sustaining projects so that they can survive and provide for their own needs. These have included community poultry raising projects, a women's sewing cooperative, and more recently, cow-raising for groups of 4 widows to operate.

At a recent McGill Conference on Global Food Security held in Montreal, we were very encouraged to hear that the supporting of small plot farming is extremely important to this end of becoming self-sufficient. We have become involved in farming projects also, well guided by our team on the ground in Kenya. We are funding rural households to once again farm their own small lands using drought resistant crops, good seed and organic fertilizers. It is important for future food production that farming is done locally and that the people remain connected to food production. Large farming practices in developing countries have often been detrimental to the traditional rural communities. They strip the soil and require

long distance transport over poor roads and at great fuel costs. They also remove people from the process of growing their food.

As the year 2011 closed, we looked back with strong emotions on the difficult struggles we witnessed in this year of the great famine. However, we know and admire the great courage and strength of the people we assist. We have witnessed their ability to cope with great dignity as they work to improve life for their families and their futures. It is the least we can do to bring them hope that they are not alone, that the world sees and will respond. There is a great distance to go but each step brings us closer to a world where social justice and equal access to the basic needs of life are available to all. Sharing our abundance of resources is a good place to start.

*Suitcases for Africa is a registered Canadian Charity. ( Charitable no:846826451) Their mission is to assist orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya through Education, Nutrition and Healthcare. For more stories, photos and information please go to [www.suitcasesforafrica.com](http://www.suitcasesforafrica.com) They will do presentations for schools, churches and organisations or companies who would like to get involved or to support a project. Please contact us at [suitcasesforafrica@yahoo.ca](mailto:suitcasesforafrica@yahoo.ca)*

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Photos for the article are attached below

## Access to Clean Water Photos



In this photo boys are hauling drinking water from a polluted river source where cattle also bathe. This community of Mwirembe, Kenya had no access to clean water.



Primary School children, usually girls, must haul river water each morning for use during the day. They miss class time and the water is not safe to drink.



A new community well serves 500 people with clean water. This was a well installed by SFA at Sacred Shrine community, in Kakamba, Kenya.



## Access to Proper Sanitation



In this photo broken and dangerously over-used latrines at a primary school in Emalindi are hazardous to student's health and safety.



Higher standard latrines are made with concrete .They have better air circulation, fly traps and deep holes that last for 15 years. Better health results with the promotion of hand washing using the water made available to further that goal.



Better access to good nutrition and self-sufficiency result when communities are given support for small scale farming on their lands. In these photos families plant and tend drought resistant soybean crops.



Access to education is sadly missing for many in rural communities due to extreme poverty. Crowded, crumbling buildings lack desks, school supplies, and books. This is one of the better rooms in one primary school in Mwirembe, Kenya



Children learning under a tree does not work in the rainy season!