

Empowering Mombasa's Agents of Peace

Background:

The greatest destroyer of peace in Kenya is an epidemic. It touches every home. Its potential haunts every marriage. And its invariable victory over its victims weakens the harmony and stability of the nation. In 2006, 1.3 million Kenyans were infected with AIDS, and over 140,000 Kenyans have already died because of the virus. The AIDS epidemic has created epidemics of its own: there now exists a generation of children without parents, parents without spouses, adults without livelihoods, and marriages without trust. So many Kenyans find it hard to plan for the future, because they cannot know with certainty that they will have one.

During the summer of 2005, I worked in Mombasa, Kenya for the non-profit organization Pathfinder International, visiting the homes of those infected with AIDS. I saw communities in turmoil and families in despair. AIDS had expelled all peace from the area. I met HIV-positive daughters who were disowned by their parents, positive wives who were beaten and abandoned by their husbands, and positive orphans who were ignored by their neighbors.

But in the face of AIDS' devastation, a group of people emerged to reestablish harmony in ravaged communities. These individuals, known as Community Health Workers (CHWs), administer care on a voluntary basis to those infected with AIDS. Pathfinder International trained them, providing these volunteers with detailed knowledge about AIDS, counseling, and testing. With over 22,000 reported AIDS cases in Mombasa, people were eager to counter the virus, and many came forward to receive training and volunteer their time. Their job is one of the most heartbreaking imaginable, but they enter the homes of their HIV-positive "clients" with positive spirits and sincere commitment.

While the Kenyan government has provided free testing centers for its citizens, the bulk of grassroots efforts to counsel and treat people have fallen on the unpaid CHWs, who spend well over twenty-five hours each week making home visits, as each CHW has ten or more clients for whom he or she provides care. Although the CHWs are not paid and are almost always poor themselves, they are so often moved by the need of their clients that they pay out-of-pocket for their food, medicine, or transportation. CHWs are the people who reach those who are too sick to emerge from bed. They provide massages for unused muscles, friendship and motivation to the ignored, and help to place orphans in other homes after their clients' deaths.

Proposed Project:

Pathfinder International, which trained the CHWs in Mombasa, ended its five-year project in 2006. Pathfinder's legacy certainly remains: CHWs are mobilized and eager to contribute more. I would like to continue where Pathfinder left off by extending and improving the CHW program.

I hope to return to Mombasa in order to reestablish the CHW system with some key differences. For instance, I want to ensure that CHWs have an allowance each month for transportation, so that they are not paying out-of-pocket to reach their clients' homes. Additionally, I would like to establish a fund to which CHWs can apply for help in order to fulfill their clients' basic needs, such as food or transportation to the hospital. This funding would be granted only after CHWs sign a pledge certifying the need for the money and after a supervising official visits the client to confirm the problem and indicated need.

Additionally, I would like to reinstate trainings in order to strengthen and expand the Community Health Worker system. There are currently 75 active CHWs in Mombasa, but I would like to enlarge the program by 50 participants, so that the CHWs' work can reach more people with a total of 125 volunteers. This training is at the core of this project's mission, for it ensures that the knowledge of those who have already been trained is refreshed and that those who have not received training can begin to provide care for those suffering with AIDS.

Method for Execution:

Were this project to receive the support of 100 Projects for Peace, I would go to Mombasa this summer to set it up. I would start by organizing beginner and refresher training workshops for the CHWs. I have already recruited a CHW and community leader, Cecilia Mwaluda, as well as two former employees of Pathfinder International, who are still in Mombasa, to lead the trainings. I could also help lead the trainings myself, as I speak proficient Swahili. Next I would draft a form that would be distributed to CHWs, which would allow them to describe the needs of their clients and the estimated cost of fulfilling those needs. When completed, these forms would be brought to a community office in the center of Mombasa, called the Kisauni Community Implementing Committee, where Cecilia Mwaluda and I would look over the submissions and make visits to the relevant homes to ensure the accuracy of the reports. Funds would then be distributed accordingly.

Sustainability:

My volunteer experience with Pathfinder International in 2005 inspired me to work further on AIDS issues. I have interned with the United Nations Development Fund for Women in New York, the United Nations Development Program in South Africa, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria in Geneva. Through these internship experiences I have studied viable project ideas, methods for implementation, and accountability. I believe strongly that this project is not only necessary but entirely achievable.

Additionally, Cecilia Mwaluda will help oversee this project's efficiency and sustainability when I have left Mombasa. I organized for Cecilia to come to Yale this past winter, where she spoke about the AIDS epidemic and her volunteer work for audiences at Yale Law School and at Berkeley College. While she was at Yale, the student group Yale AIDS Watch put on a benefit concert to raise money for Kenyan AIDS patients, and, once back in Mombasa, Cecilia supervised and disbursed the funds with transparency and care. She is eager to collaborate on this project and will be a trusted partner in its implementation and sustainability. (Please see her attached letter.)

Cecilia has already been in touch with the Ministry of Health, which has expressed interest in establishing a permanent CHW system. Were this project to prove successful, as I believe it will, it is likely that the Ministry of Health will contribute to its continuation, and it may well become part of the government platform of providing AIDS counseling and testing to Kenyans. I also believe that if this project is launched and the Ministry of Health takes it on, other governments in sub-Saharan Africa may turn to this paradigm as an effective method for combating AIDS.

Legacy in Mombasa:

It is inherent in the CHW's job to bring peace into every home he or she visits. CHWs patiently counsel the despondent, negotiate disputes between spouses, attempt to resolve debilitating illnesses, and soothe children who are worried about their parents' health. By strengthening and expanding the CHW system, more homes can be reached and home visits can have a more lasting impact. If 100 Projects for Peace is willing to support some of the few remaining agents for peace in Mombasa's devastated communities, harmony, health, and happiness will all be felt more widely.