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2009 Advocacy Project Peace Fellow with
The Undugu Society of Kenya
Final Report

Introduction

As an Advocacy Project Fellow, I worked this summer in Nairobi with the Undugu Society of Kenya. This local children and youth NGO seeks to advocate for the social and economic rights of young people. With the support of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation, I was not only able to work with them on their youth self-advocacy program, but was able to bring additional technological resources that enhanced their Digital Storytelling Project. My work and these resources contributed to the growing youth and civil society networks in Nairobi.

Background and Need

The Undugu Society of Kenya (USK) was founded to create a support system for the homeless children and youth of Nairobi. What began as informal schooling and vocational training has evolved into an organization that now seeks to empower children, youth, and their communities.



Over the last decade, Undugu has shifted its focus from being strictly a service provider to becoming more of an advocacy organization. It was during this transition that they formed a

relationship with the Advocacy Project and that the AP fellow and JJCF recipient Jenifer Rosinsky started the Digital Storytelling Project. This project provides training in computer skills, photography, and radio recording for youth who live in Nairobi's slums. Though youth are often accused in the local media of being the source of disruption and violence, these young people in DSP seek to tell a different story; that of youth in poor communities who, despite the obstacles, are seeking constructive pathways towards civic participation and community empowerment.

75% of Kenyans are under the age of 30 and this group makes up the majority of the unemployed and the majority of those living below the poverty line. This makes them easy targets during periods of unrest when they can be manipulated for political and violent purposes. This group is denied education, vocational training, employment opportunities, and is largely excluded from the political process. They suffer from poor sanitation conditions with limited access to clean water. Their needs are two-fold. First there are their material needs which include food, shelter, and basic sanitation. These materials needs are compounded by the social needs of the youth which include civic participation and greater social legitimacy.



This is all the more important given the current social, economic, and political climate of Kenya. In 2008, post-election violence exploded in Kenya, over 1,000 people were killed, and more than 300,000 were displaced. The youth in Nairobi, particularly those in the slum areas, were both the primary perpetrators and victims of the violence. What is less emphasized is that their violent behavior was sponsored and guided by politicians on both sides. In this critical time in the nation's development, organizations that are focused on youth empowerment must also question how they may help youth advocate for reform by creative rather than destructive means. One the methods of doing this is by using an advocacy model that is largely guided by the goals and interests of the youth who are participating.

Youth Self Advocacy

When dealing with youth, it is important to let them speak for themselves rather than assume what issues are of greatest concern to them. To this end, in 2008, the AP Fellow Kristina Rosinsky worked with DSP students to identify the social issues that most greatly affected their lives. The three issues identified by students were the environment, police harassment, and drug abuse. The social justice issues embedded in each of these issues relate to safety and a fair standard of living; government corruption and rule of law; and education and opportunity. It was therefore important to keep these issues at the forefront of the Digital Storytelling Project.



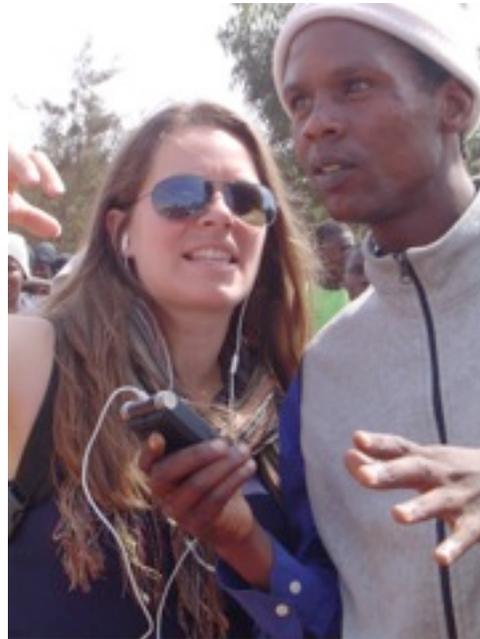
The first year of DSP served a variety of purposes. First, it provided computer skills and vocational training to approximately 20 students in the Nairobi area. Second, it gave the young people a platform on which to advocate for their rights. Lastly, it provided Undugu with a new tool in support of their advocacy goals. While DSP was an innovative program that created excitement both in USK and with international partners, there were certain elements of the program that needed to be revised in order for it to become more effective and sustainable.

First, there was the challenge of access to computers. One of the biggest costs to the project was renting time and space in an internet café and providing transportation to students every week. The laptop computers that were funded by the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation proved a vital solution to this cost, allowing us to set up an editing lab at Undugu where internet access was free. And given USK's central location, students were provided with bus fare at a much lower rate.



The second challenge that needed to be addressed was that though the project was very meaningful to the participating students, it was not well-known in the local communities. While the internet is a medium that can increase the international visibility of youth in Nairobi, it is also important to use a medium that is more accessible to people within Kenya. Only about 3% of the nation has regular access to the internet. Radio, on the other hand, is a pervasive form of

communication and is often utilized towards development projects. The two digital audio recorders funded through JJCF gave DSP the capacity to expand into a different medium. To this end, while in Nairobi we began to create partnerships between DSP and community radio stations in two of the slum areas where DSP students were living. Members of the radio station agreed to train members of DSP in community radio and air some of their stories.



The third challenge was that we needed to link DSP students to other community based organizations (CBOs) in their communities. We felt that this would give the youth a greater sense of connectivity, support, and social-capital. By focusing our efforts on two slums, introducing young people within those slums to one another, and making contact with interested CBOs in the area, we sought to create a support network for the young people involved.

DSPs contribution to wider social change in Kenya

Kenya is at a pivotal point in its history. It must balance issues of political access, governmental transparency, and the inclusion of all its citizenry. Youth must be an essential part of this process. When they are excluded and their needs underrepresented the risk of unrest and destabilization increases.



The Digital Storytelling Project is part of a wider effort in Kenya to hold the government accountable while modeling constructive methods of protest and problem-solving. What is needed is not more organizations or initiatives, but a way of building trust between these organizations and creating a wider network between existing groups. Getting youth to recognize and utilize the resources that are already available to them is perhaps that best thing that NGOs in the region can do.



The Digital Storytelling project can play a vital part of this process. By utilizing the internet as well as the new radio partnerships, DSP can increase the visibility of initiatives in the community that are beginning to address the needs of the local youth. This will also serve to put

organizations in touch with each other with hopes that they can pool their energies and resources to better advance social justice issues in Kenyan society as a whole.

