

Volunteering and Civic Responsibility in Vihiga County,

Western Kenya. December 2010

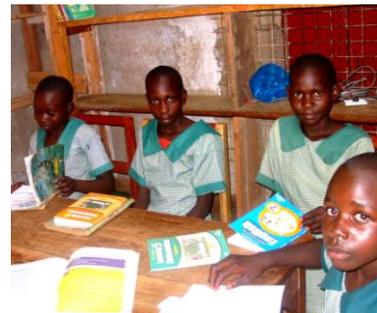
VIHIGA COUNTY

Vihiga County is in rural Western Kenya near Lake Victoria and Uganda. It is densely populated, land is scarce and poverty is very evident. Much of the area has been deforested with resulting loss of water in a country with some of the lowest forest cover in Africa.

The area has been severely affected by HIV/Aids and there are many orphans, widows and grandparents bringing up grand children with few resources.

Reaching out Changing Lives (ROCL) Kenya and Women4Resources, Wales

The partnership is focussing on MDG 3, gender equality and women's empowerment. The targets being women's economic empowerment through small businesses , the retention of girls at school and encouraging women to access the political system.



There are no public libraries so three community run libraries have been established near poorly resourced schools to support girls who are vulnerable to dropping out of school due to family poverty.

The library also supports women's economic and social empowerment through small business activity.

The volunteers are teachers giving up time during school holidays, widows doing multiple jobs, ex school pupils, small business women and unemployed young women.

The 3 community libraries, Kisangula (Elen),Mbale and Cheptulu in Vihiga County.

The main aims are to offer educational and social support to girls who are in danger of dropping out of school because of poverty.

Good relationships are established with nearby schools , the Head teacher, of Kigama Primary, commented " library use has resulted in a reading culture being established in the school".

The volunteers, alongside the schools, also identify orphan girls for sponsorship of £10 a month who are at risk. Each child is also given seeds and helped to plant food so that the family can feed itself and have surplus to sell at the market.

Boys are also encouraged to use the library whenever possible.

When money permits a daily newspaper is provided which tends to bring in men readers with the hope of getting more men engaged in supporting the libraries.

The community run library also encourage self help amongst the women using small micro finance "merry go round system "

Many women are so poor that they are not able to use the regular loan system of micro credit as paying large interest rates are not possible particularly those with little or no resources bringing up children and grandchildren.

Books fall into three categories, educational books supporting the school curriculum, general information and novels.

Values

1. Self reliance and Enterprise
2. Self Help
3. Volunteering
4. Giving back to the Community
5. Civic Responsibility

1. Self Reliance and Enterprise

The running of the libraries is based on individual and group responsibility within a framework of good governance. All libraries are registered NGO's and affiliated to ROCL where they have representation.

Individuals are expected to pay a small fee to use the libraries and to join a merry go round system of micro finance to benefit the library and themselves.

Alice, volunteer, community leader and small businesswomen.

Alice is a widow with 3 unemployed sons in Nairobi so she is determined her 2 younger children will stay at school, and have a better life.

She used to travel to Uganda to buy materials at a cheaper price and made enough profit to open a Shop selling grain in bulk.

She is also a volunteer community leader involved in health education in her local area working closely with the local chief and district administrator. Alice is a member of ROCL and supports her community library.

2. Self Help

Each library is run by a committee of volunteers and operates under the principle of self help. At each meeting of the women's group each member however poor is asked to put a small amount of money on the table.

Working on a system of "merry go round" each member will be able to have access to the money when her turn comes.

All the women have used the money to invest in their business or their family e.g. one woman bought a cow.

The group also benefits the library as investment money goes to there as well to promote sustainability.

One library has been able to purchase of chairs for hire for weddings, funerals and other events and already has paid back the initial investment.

Marion

Marion is an experienced nurse who has worked in London and Wales and now runs a small clinic .When her return came to have money she bought drugs and mosquito nets which she is able to give out for free in needy cases and drugs at a reduced cost.

3. Volunteering

Each library is run by volunteers many of whom are widows. All libraries are registered self help groups and adhere to good governance. Each library has an unemployed young woman volunteer librarian who keeps the library open 6 days a week. She is supported by other volunteers.

Pamela, Helen and Elizabeth

Pamela is a local Head teacher and member of ROCL as well as being on the Elen Library committee.

She like many volunteers has personally donated books to the library. Helen is an ex Head teacher who also ran a shop .She closed her shop and gave space to start the Elen Community Library where she is an active volunteer.

Elizabeth is a committee member and also cares for her husband who has had multiple strokes.

4. Giving back to the Community

ROCL is run by a group of women all from Vihiga many still live and work in the area whilst some have moved to Nairobi for work.

They however all are active in their community and have a commitment to give back to others so that they may benefit like they did from education.

Edith

Is a senior teacher of English and started the community library in her area in order to ensure girls at risk of dropping out of school could be supported.

She provided many books herself as well as getting grants.

She runs an Alumni group of ex pupils from her school that are all committed to giving something back by supporting the girls.

5. Civic Responsibility

The Constitution of Kenya is changing in 2011 as the Deputy Prime Minister told us one third of all government seats at all levels must be held by women.

ROCL has started raising civic awareness by example. One of the volunteers unsuccessfully ran for parliament but her experience has proved invaluable. The Memorandum of Understanding signed by Vihiga County will also enable a firmer partnership to be established with the local community groups. This will raise confidence; promote better understanding of political process and government responsibility.

Thanks

Must go to ROCL especially to Susan Jumba and Nancy Lidubwi for their support of myself and Councillor Kirchner during our visit.

To all the library volunteers and to Vihiga County officials and councillors for their enthusiasm and commitment.

To the girls in the library and our sponsored girls who spoke to us, welcomed us into their homes and showed us with pride their reading skills.

To the many schools we visited for sharing their commitment to girl's education.

A special thank you to Councillor Kirchner for spending so much time with us and giving political insight into women and government on her self funded visit.

Jennifer Twelvetrees , December 2010.