

A growing 'miracle' in a 'forgotten valley' in Kenya

In the West Eldoret District of Kenya, the *Action for Life Africa* team spent three days seeing a remarkable initiative, and met those involved in a small community in the Sosiana Valley, down an insignificant turn-off from the fume-choked highway that snakes across rural Kenya.



Our *matatu* (van) took us along the bumpy dirt road as far as it could navigate. We set off on foot across hard stony ground down a narrow path into the valley. When asked its name, we were told '*Chepkaitit*', or 'Rift Valley' in local Kalenjin language – but of course it is just one of thousands of valleys that form the great Rift Valley of Africa. Repeatedly those we met referred to it as 'the forgotten valley'.

Our guide, Kipkorir Andrew, paused to give some background under the shade of a tree: 'In this forgotten valley the only certificates ever seen are birth and marriage certificates. Most people here were drunkards, thieves, drug abusers. The local MP (a powerful Minister in the Kenyan government) lives just 20 minutes away. But he has never come to our valley. There's no electricity wires, no trucks running by.'



Twenty minutes later we were surrounded by long stretches of green, neatly cultivated vegetable gardens. Women and men are working in teams, digging, harvesting. We saw the beginning of a growing green miracle.

As the first and only child of the valley's 200 families to enter university (doing an economics degree at Kenyatta University), Andrew decided to use his 'celebrity status' to stir the valley into change. He was inspired by three young people from Initiatives of Change who spent a few days in the valley in 2005. He fell in love with the name, so happily applies it to all their projects. 'We have been using the name "Initiatives for Change" to restore our society,' he says proudly (though he has since registered various initiatives in different names, using the local Kalenjin language). From the IofC website, he adopted his broad working agenda:

- Peace and trustbuilding,
- transforming society and culture,
- Building economy and sustainability
- Training and capacity building



His movement started with the women whose desperate need for food for their many children drove them to brewing alcohol. Youth and men were their customers, because it was cheap. By noon, you would find many of them lying, drunk, Andrew

explains. In a classroom, some of these women sang and danced, as they presented us with decorated calabash (gourds, used for storing milk). 'Our women are at the forgotten end of this forgotten valley,' says one of them, hinting at the gender violence they suffered. 'But now you will see what we will women will do for the men. When you go back, please remember us.'



'We are all widows or single mothers, facing rejection. We were brewing beer just to put food on the table for our children. We started a group called "initiate the change", raising poultry. We are growing small trees' (seedlings in a nursery). 'Now we want to buy a cow to sell milk to the school. '

The men who bought their produce generated high levels of domestic violence. 'When people are idle, society is not at peace. Without work we cannot stop drug abusers – they cannot control their emotions so they cause much gender violence. If we just talk about peace but do not give them economic power through work, what will they have for dinner?' asks Andrew.

'We have the resources. Look at these lands,' he continues, sweeping his arms round the valley. 'We have to stop the culture of begging in Africa. We are not beggars. We can fight poverty, not beg. It is better to work than to write a proposal. When men are at work, they stop begging, or cattle rustling.' As he introduces our Action for Life group to local people, he warns them, 'This is not a donor agency.'



Under Andrew's leadership, the men started digging irrigation channels from a jungle covered swamp at the top of the valley, creating a large fertile base to the valley where dozens of plots now provide work and produce. The locals work in teams of 10 or more, sharing the work and the income. There have been failures and disputes, mainly over water. But one senses life and energy – and pride. His initiatives have drawn antagonism from local jealous political interests, but he steadily persists. 'Our children are now at

school – unlike before,' says one man, meeting us under a tree. 'We need a pump to distribute water. We have a few challenges: no-one is employed by government or any company, so we cannot get any capital. And we lack the skills.' An agricultural officer advised growing climbing beans; but the market price failed and they lost a season's produce. So now they stick mainly to one crop: kales. Andrew feels he cannot push them to diversify. Yet, at least.

A major shift happened after the post-election violence of 2007 which tore through Eldoret and the surrounding area. 'I was embarrassed that at that time, village people walked 50 kms to join the looting, carrying back TV sets and even doors and windows,' said Andrew. 'We sat down to talk over what we should do. They decided on some specific goals and projects:

- To have a literate society (to have one child from every family going through school by 2012)
- To build economic independence through sustainable food production and youth employment
- To limit gender violence and addiction in the valley.

In fact 10 projects started up. Roadside businesses on the highway were run by high-school graduates from the region. Damaged by the violence, they formed a group which, roughly translated, means 'Love one another' (an unlikely name looking at these practical tough men). They aim to employ local youths and now want to build a school on land that has been donated by one of them.

Another group, 'Dream Achievers', formed with 20 youth, 12 of whom are orphans. They started a small shop and other projects: 10 go to school, while 10 do the work.

Another youth group, mentored by a school teacher, have started passion-fruit growing. Nearby, a flourishing cooperative venture is being run by 40 farming families, producing passion-fruit plants in a greenhouse, mushrooms and improved dairying. Around 1200 litres goes from their region a day, and they now are contracting to establish a chilling unit, to preserve the milk.



The local primary school was like some other rural schools we've seen: bare concrete buildings, no glass in the windows, rough wooden benches... and the repeated cry of lack of water. We comment on no gutters on the roofs. Money is needed for teachers, and new classrooms (several of which are being built). The teacher chairing our session seems weary (after 20 years of struggle there). By the end of our time, he stops reciting their problems and smiles warmly, saying he has accepted our message of change. But Andrew assures us these teachers are the backbone of changes that have come in the valley.

Our visit was able to expand the understanding of change to include moral and spiritual empowerment alongside economic empowerment, to invite inner listening and deep reflection to accompany the many prayers of a very religious people. Andrew was excited to get a call from one of the parents who had heard our presentation. 'I listened to my inner voice this morning,' the parent said. 'God told me very clearly to get a digging tool for the family. It was amazing.' Andrew is encouraged: people don't have to be instructed what to do, they can find it within themselves, he reflects.

Before leaving, we talk with some high-school graduates – and sit in silence listening for God's leading for the future. Titus Betts (whose Kalenjin family hosted us on the Eastern side of Eldoret, quietly shares his vision: *'In this silence, I was seeing my country liberated and contributing to a liberated world. It was a future where we will have clean leadership, given by youth who can shoulder their responsibility – people who are liberated so they can know their rights, make their own decisions and find their own power. This young generation will be transformed as they find the way to think deeply for themselves what is right, and how to make a liberated Kenya.'*

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