

Fellowship Report (2004)

Fellow: Nadifa Osman

Mandera is a district in North Eastern Province of Kenya with a population of 400,000 (census report - 1999 and the region's MPs). The region is largely inhabited by Somali community. The district is located at the far tip of northern Kenya, a point where border lines of Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia merge. Geographically, it is isolated from the rest of the country, with no accessible roads. Its harsh climatic conditions, lack of rains and poor water resources denied agricultural activities the rest of the country enjoys. These and many other factors rendered the region economically and socially disadvantaged in comparison to the larger eastern Africa.

The communities are suffering harsh realities of long standing droughts and famine. Government resources are mismanaged and bureaucratic ineptitude is causing the entire situation to go unattended. Whether it is by default or design, the region is neglected by its own government and by extension the rest of the world.

On education for instance, schools in the region have been unable to qualify students to proceed to universities. Of all the 6 major universities in Kenya with almost a student capacity of 100,000, there were only 25 students from North Eastern Province. Among the 25 students, none of them were in the sciences. There were only 2 girls among the 25 students. This has been the case for the last four decades. Most parents are poor and uneducated. Education has not made much sense to these communities since almost none of the high school graduate can proceed for college or university education.

As for Health, there is only one poorly equipped and poorly staffed hospital in Mandera District. In my recent trip to Mandera, they revealed that the highest cause of maternal and infant mortality is Septicemia. When I interviewed the only doctor (Documentary coming) in the entire hospital system of the district, he proclaimed that this is a forgotten region and it direly needs the world's attention. He further indicated that even though there are high birth rates in the region, population growth is insignificant because of high infant mortality.

Last summer (2004), I made a trip to Mandera in the company of other six people, two of which were security escorts, the wife of the Member of Parliament representing that district who accommodated our effort, a student-guide who graduated from the Mandera High school, our driver and my colleague Mary Conway. I was participating in deliberations at meetings hosted by a local NGO known as Generation for Change and Growth, inc. (GCG) in which we strategized how to most influentially impact the community as well as linking us with contacts. I spent two weeks specifically on planning and identifying the best strategies for reaching out to the community, educating and creating the momentum for awareness. Even though I was advised of the risk associated with road trip, I insisted to travel by road because I felt it would be the best means of bearing witness to the environment and the poor standard of living suffered by the people in the region. Our trip started with the assumption that people's lives were

relatively comfortable and that we would be able to go ahead and demonstrate oven cookers to local communities along the way. But the reality was far from our imagination. Every small town and city had roadblocks and the roads were uneven, jagged and rough and the sun beamed down relentlessly, making the atmosphere unnervingly hot and bright. The journey to Mandera was hindered by the fact that there were no signs and it was thereby considerably difficult to maintain a sense of direction. We relied almost entirely on the judgment of our student guide and the driver, who questioned each other on numerous occasions, debating where to go. Our first day was the official meeting with the introduction of the team members. It was our first chance to meet one another, besides Mary Conway, with whom I had come with from the US.

I spent couple of weeks in Nairobi, Planning on the logistics and composing the team to carry out our mission, meeting with members of GCG Mandera and identifying key contacts and communicating with them. This way, we were able to efficiently execute our plans. GCG suggested the student guide who would prove instrumental in our efforts.

We traveled throughout the region (Mandera East); Como, Lafey, Arabia, Fino and Mandera; identifying the existing women groups and meeting with them, so as to assess what areas were in most dire need of our assistance as opposed to us dictating their needs to them. Upon identifying specific action items, we began mobilizing and organizing based upon the action plans. The main items were reproductive health and addressing the issues of female circumcision, the rampant spread of HIV, incidents of rape, gender roles, environmental degradation as well as micro-economics and the need for income generating skills as well as a general training along the lines of child-care and simply education in general. I was told that up until middle school, schooling is free of cost, however, this is not the case for high-school. Most parents cannot afford to pay the high-school fees, so the children miss out on an education and can be found simply wandering about the market place. This is to ignore the fact that there are few schools and the lucky few surrounding areas have to send their kids on a sizable trek simply to attend one. The young girls are widely ignored and thus there is a considerable discrepancy in girls advancing to empowering positions in society. There was also gripping drought, causing people to await aid rations and truck carrying water tanks, which would travel down the main road once a day, having people travel from their respective distances (one person claimed to have voyaged for seven hours to get something to drink). We also held a meeting with the chiefs and councilors explaining our presence on their territory and our intention to assist GCG to improve the quality of life of the region. We made sure to receive the approval from these authorities before we began our work. They also helped us identify key women groups who would facilitate our subsequent weeks of training and workshops.

We went to Arabia, a village outside the city of Mandera, and met with two distinguished grass-root women groups namely, Arabia Women's Group and woman co-op's who are very active and involved in the area. We held a meeting with them and their constituencies dividing them up into groups and beginning with a demonstration of the solar ovens, after which, we had a lively discussion on the action items. First we met with the elder women to gain from their experience and wisdom. Then, we met with the

younger women and last, the girls. We divided them up into these three groups due to the fact that it became apparent that there was a cultural hierarchy of age, in which they would speak. The groups were informal, as formalities in the focus-group setting would be incompatible with the culture of the region. They all highlighted the dilemma of the maternity issues, in which the women would die from excess loss of blood during child-birth; they shared their strong opinions of circumcision of girls, where they believed it was a must for girls to be circumcised. The child-birth complications were brought about by the fact that what few hospital facilities existed (which were in Mandera and not in the outer areas, thus mandating those in need of services to embark on a considerable voyage) were relatively inadequate and under funded, with no nurses and traditional midwives, thereby lacking any real capacity to function as a hospital. The issue of circumcision was a matter discussed at length, in which upon hearing their views, asked for justification. They first alluded to a religious dimension, suggesting that Islam mandated it for the practice to be undergone by male and female. I thereby requested where in particular in the Qu'ran it said such, as this was the ultimate and unparalleled word of Allah in Islam to be followed. Being that this was not the case, they were hard pressed to cite where it was delineated that women had to undertake this process. I further inquired and they then alluded to a traditional dimension, simply suggesting that this was what their mother did to them and their mother's mother did to their mother and that if it was bad, would not have been put into practice in the first place. In this case, I suggested numerous research produced by different NGOs concerned with the matter, that studied the history of African, and more particularly, Somali, tradition and found that it was completely foreign. This being the case, it was simply a habit at this point, and one with no real positive impact and thus bearing no reason to exist and cause such pain and anguish to the young girls who can't defend themselves and stand for their rights. We discussed the affair with the religious leaders so that they might clear up and add credence to the fact that the practice has no root in Islam, they said that they had not put the women up to this, but rather, that the women had come to them seeking to practice circumcision. We then met with the younger girls and asked for their perspectives, and they said that they had no choice, as is mandated by culture; they would follow the will of their parents. Having taken it upon ourselves, we shared with them respectful tactics of persuasion that might influence their parents to shy away from the practice without violating their culture. When we wrapped up the matter, we came away with a confidence that they'd be able to stand for their rights and demand not to be circumcised in the most polite possible manner.

The delegation made a trip to Lafey, a small village also in the area surrounding Mandera. The village had one well and a borehole for all the livestock to drink. We met with a very focal women's group that had already made a co-operative named Juwa Women Group. They shared their experience with us about the funding they had received from European NGOs, in which they were able to solicit a subsidized loan of 80,000 Kenyan Shillings (K. Sh.). These funds were disbursed to them under the auspices of creating income-generating activities. Upon making investments with the money, they maximized their gains that they turned their original amount to K Sh. 220,000 and put it into an account. The unfortunate part was that they did not have a woman with the qualifications and know-how to attend to the accounting and thus relied upon men. All of

a sudden, their account was closed and their money was sent to Nairobi and had no idea what the reason behind any of this was. They were then faced with the complication of the fact that it became rather difficult to rally fifty women living in rough circumstances together in a consolidated and united force. They then made the wise move of dividing the group into five smaller groups of ten women and undertook measures to reclaim their money. The problem that resulted out of this is that the money was thereby spread too thin and was not a really significant amount anymore. They asked for self-sufficiency training from the men, with funding and whatever information they'd need to be completely independent with all the entrepreneurial skills to prosper on their own. They also needed general language skills, as their English capabilities were no greater than an elementary school level. All of the women seemed to be ridiculously burdened, as most had either one child tied to their back and two held by the hands. Upon inquiring about the role of the father, we found that it was very minimal. We also met a number of women with midwife training in reproductive health from an international NGO (which they couldn't remember the name) and when we asked them what they gained from the experience, they told us it was a complete waste of time, as they had already known how to deliver babies, but were only lacking facilities and proper utilities. This was the only thing they lacked and the main thing they asked us to solicit for them. They gave us the opportunity to hear the testimonials of women who gave birth and the complications they experienced, and in many cases, circumcision played a part in the mishaps. Shockingly enough, and all of this being the case, a woman told us that she had taken her daughter in twice to be circumcised because she felt it had not been done correctly the first time. We demonstrated the solar cookers and at this point, launched the same discussion as we had in Arabia and made the same points with seemingly the same result, and people questioning the validity of the practice in general. They were also very impressed and intrigued by the solar cookers and felt it would highly benefit their quality of life as a whole.

We then went to Como, another suburb of Mandera settled by internal refugees from Sealo that relocated here during the conflict with the Boran peoples. The area's population is about 3,700 as I was told, consisting mainly of women and children with very few men, as the men had mostly been killed along with their livestock and their farms burned when they were chased from their land during the conflict. They have no farms, livestock or wells, but rather depend solely on aid. As a matter of fact, the area is desolate and dry as well as isolated, so the standard of life is visibly and considerably poor, even more so than the rest of the regions. You could see the starvation in many a face. There was no social structure or infrastructure and when I had asked to speak to the women of the village, but before I knew it, the entire village had gathered before me and began to question my intentions and what it was that I had wanted. I informed them that I was here to demonstrate the solar cookers as an alternative method to the problematic system that they had currently in practice and discuss and deliberate the women's issues. They were perplexed and asked what the need for a demonstration of cookers was when they had nothing to eat but the measly aid grains disbursed amongst them. They said that if anything, they'd need something to grind the grains with, not a cooker. Furthermore, they informed me that even the aid specified for them barely even reaches them, as it normally gets lost on the way there or runs out, as they are off in an isolated area. They

showed me a grim sight that moved me even more so than what they had told me, but to utter tears. I bore witness to a grave site which contained two thousand children that had died from starvation. They then went on to show me many 20 year olds who, out of malnutrition and gripping starvation, could not leave their beds and were essentially awaiting their deaths. They asked to inform the international community know of their situation as the Kenyan Government itself had ignored and hidden the magnitude of their suffering more so, but the suffering in the region in general.

The main issue that everyone was concerned about was mainly maternity, thus upon returning to Mandera, we interviewed the doctor of the Maternity Ward at the district level Mandera Regional Hospital. He first and foremost informed me that the main barriers for the maternity complications were a lack of adequate staff, cultural barriers (of circumcision) and a dire lack of equipment. Because of the poor economic situation, it became very difficult to recruit someone to stay here. He also informed me that they don't just serve the region alone, but rather, refugee populations from Ethiopia and Somalia, being that Mandera is a border city between three nations (Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia). In Mandera, we also met with the most touching women's group, known as Caravan for Nomadic Survival, who noted the environmental catastrophes that would jeopardize survival of the nomadic peoples in the area, with such small things as the litter of the plastic bags from the market being left around. In this drought and famine period, the livestock haven't been able to find any sustenance thus turning to the plastic bags for nourishment. This kills the livestock within a matter of hours, and nomadic peoples survive solely off of these animals, and this thereby endangers the nomads. Having received no funding, they took it upon themselves to pick up these trash items and recycle them into works of art and practical items such as hand bags and containers, which they sell in turn (samples of which I have brought back with me). They asked that the circumstances of the region be brought to light amongst the international community and that help be provided in whatever capacity possible. We also had a meeting with the Co-Founder and Executive Director of an NGO by the name of Habiba International, which concerns itself with training people on not engaging in female circumcision. They had just embarked on their first round of training in the smaller villages upon us coming from them, so their timing could not have been better. Upon asking her of her motivations for creating the organization, she said that one day, when she was out of the city for a conference, her friend took her own eight year old daughter to be circumcised and thereby developed complications as a result. She took matters into her own hands and began teaching of the negatives of the practice and despite original resistance, she feels as though she is finally breaking ground. Mandera Women for Peace and Development was another organization based in Mandera town. They are involved in peacemaking crop and clan conflicts, which were apparently rather common, micro-economic credits for poor women led households, advocating for girl child education. The most focal function that they have is attending to incidents of rape. According to them, rape is highly common due to the lack of security enjoyed by the people in this border-town and although they have no counseling capacity for the victims, they concentrate on damage control and apprehension of the perpetrator. They were mainly in need of training on how to counsel their victims but were fine otherwise. The final women's group I had met with was a co-operative that had raised funds amongst themselves by cooking and baking for the city

events, known as Mander Women Group. This concluded my expedition.

This whole trip had quite the impact on me personally, as a human being. It made me recognize, first and foremost, the blessings that I live with which I had taken for granted. I have been humbled and my hardships have become minuscule. Having borne witness to pain and suffering of the people that I saw on my trip, hunted me down for several days. My sole began to sink in sadness, but it was my hope that we are one. I also recognize that I have been blessed with the capacity to act and correct the suffering I witnessed and thereby plan to dedicate myself wholeheartedly to doing so.