

## My time in Kisii, Kenya

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*Machongo Secondary School pupils going on break. In the near end of the photograph Skuma Wiki (Kale) is grown by the school and served for lunch.*

This summer I spent two and a half months working in a rural village in western Kenya. I took on the position of Project Worker with Education Partnerships Africa (EPA), through which I invested fundraised money into an under-funded secondary school, Machongo Secondary School in Ikoba. I also took this opportunity to travel around Kenya and Tanzania for one month.

This report is my account of my arrival at Machongo and Ikoba and of a few of the many people I met which made the two months an incredibly insightful and enjoyable experience.



## Who I volunteered with - Education Partnerships Africa

EPA is a charity operated by university student volunteers which seeks to improve secondary education in East Africa. It is a small charity, in its 25th year, but well established in the region of Kenya in which I would be working - Kisii. Under EPA's model, secondary schools in particular regions of Kenya and Uganda apply to become part of their programme. Each summer EPA sends two Project Workers to participating school which attempt to improve through its six objectives: facilitating learning, supporting student welfare and rights, improving health, realising post-secondary opportunities and strengthening school organisation. Most schools take part in the programme for two consecutive summers.

Following a friend's recommendation, I looked into EPA and its work and felt it was an organisation I was very comfortable working for. I having good experience in working for a range of organisations and immersing myself in them. Additionally, having practicing project management, this encouraged me to want to put this into good use for a reason other than my own CV improvement. However, I was also dubious of the principles and the impacts of organisations operating in Africa. I was fully aware of the beneficial experience I would gain from taking part. But I wanted to ensure the focus was on the impact of the work I would be doing at the school and ensuring this was a positive long term impact. I wanted to avoid a weak one-off solution provided for the sake of giving volunteers a positive experience, a common feature of 'voluntourism' programmes.



### Meeting the other Project Workers

Even before my work in Kisii commenced, friendships began to be kindled in the UK. Numerous training sessions gave me an opportunity to get to know the people who would be having the same experience as me for two months. Something we all shared was the motivation and inquisitiveness to work for EPA and meet new people, as well as the curiosity and sense for adventure to immerse ourselves into rural Kenyan culture and successfully deliver our projects. My project partner, Carlos, has been a good friend of mine for eight years. Having lived and worked with him in the



*Top: my project partner, Carlos, in Kisii Town.*

*Bottom: Education Partnerships Africa (EPA) Project Workers in the Central House in Kisii, Kenya. I am the from the right and my project partner (Carlos) is fourth from the right. This was taken following a group exercise to critique each of our project.*

past meant that we were very comfortable working with each other as we knew our dynamic would ensure the successful delivery of our projects.

### **Our arrival at Machongo school**

Carlos and I were allocated to work in Machongo PAG Secondary School. This was the second year EPA was working with this school and documentation from last year demonstrated that the Project Workers not only successfully implemented many projects but integrated themselves into the school and wider community very well. The way school teachers, students and neighbours in the community referred to them and their work was a true testament to this.

The first people we met were the school Principal, Richard, and the Deputy Principal, Henry. Both were extremely warming to us which we greatly appreciated as we initially felt unsettled arriving at Machongo - we did not know what to expect. Great enthusiasm and a strong sense of hospitality was shown on their part, and this was done in the typical Kenyan form through food and drink.

This was to become a common theme during our two months at Machongo school; ensuring your guests are completely satisfied is an important part of Kenyan hospitality through demonstrating respect and kindness in eating.



Although we were prepared for this, copious amounts of food were presented to us throughout the two months, some of which we were not used to. This was very humbling, but often more than we could accept and so had to graciously decline. There were occasions where those offering didn't understand our decline - foods offered to us were often those which were expensive to Kenyans (e.g. bread, biscuits, chicken) or foods which were such an important staple that no one would deny (e.g. fizzy drinks, chai tea). We usually used humour to laugh at ourselves for our inability to accept all that was given to us, and this was often received well.



*Top: Enjoying chai tea and mndazi (deep fried maize dough) during a meeting in the Principal's office. Left to right: Carlos, Francis (the electrician who installed the solar panel lighting system in the science laboratory), Richard the Principal of Machongo School, the Chairman of the school Board of Management and Julia our Project Coordinator. Bottom: The picturesque entrance to Machongo school.*



## **Richard, the Principal: a charming ambassador**

Richard, the school principal, is a man of enthusiasm, charm and charisma that I have never seen before. As the school's leader, he had an incredible way of welcoming and addressing the people around which induced high spirit and great positivity. Carlos and I often felt that he was a great ambassador for the school, as he spent a lot of his time meeting and greeting people, forming new relationships, encouraging morale amongst staff and students and forming the school's strategic vision and ensuring this was worked towards by everyone in the school. He was highly respected amongst students, and this could be seen in the good humour they shared with them as well as the strict obedience they had towards him.

I found Richard's tone of voice and mannerisms particularly enchanting. His good spirit could be heard throughout the school, in his always loud and excited voice. His laugh was also very contagious, and gave everyone a spark of positivity. Students responded to this well, in particular his way of cheering on and encouraging them. Following any form of achievement, Richard would loudly cheer: "Aaaand because of thaaat!!", followed by a clap by everyone around, and again "Aaaand because of thaaat!!" - CLAP. This was his signature cheer, everyone knew to clap. It brought a smile to everyone's face as they saw his determination to keep the school motivated.

Richard's positivity was not only a factor which made our time at Machongo much more enjoyable but it was also crucial to the success of our projects. Our objective was to work in partnership with Machongo school to invest the money we had fundraised. Having the school's leader on board, continuously motivated and determined to improve the school, meant that we could very easily come together to form solutions for the school.

Richard came to become a very close friend of ours. Following from the initial excitement that followed our arrival, we grew closer together. His motivation continued, but we also began to share



*Health and Recreation day. We organised a day in which a panel of healthcare professional answered anonymous questions from students. A Talent Show and Awards Ceremony for exam results followed. From left to right: myself, Carlos my project partner, Julia our Project Coordinator, a student, Richard the school principal, a student, Mr Fred the English teacher.*



*Lunch at Richard's family home. Richard invited us to his home for lunch where we ate potatoes, chapati (similar to a pancake) and rice). He has four children who were all very excited to meet us and ask us questions about life in the UK and tell us about their future plans.*



*Richard showing me the chicks in his home.*

both the positive and negative aspects of our lives with each other. We both had an interest in discussing differences between us, and justifying these - an exercise which allowed us to better understand each other's cultures. Naturally, this led us to form a bond with Richard of honesty and good humour.

### **Henry, the Deputy Principal: a committed key player**

Similarly, the attitude of Henry, the Deputy Principal, was also significant in the success of our projects in the school. Henry was an incredibly hard working individual, who continuously went beyond his duties to make sure the school was smoothly operating. This meant he was very busy, but when we did get to spend time with him we found he was a key source of information for what was and wasn't working in the school. He had recently joined the school, and was therefore very committed to fixing all he saw wrong with the school.

The working relationship we formed with Henry became very pleasant, it could almost be described as symbiotic. He had the key operational role in the school and was therefore in the best position to identify what wasn't working in the school and why. We were there to invest money to improve the school. The partnership we formed ensured we were dealing with the real issues affecting the school, not simply what we saw was a problem from our skewed outsider's perspective.

At the end of our first day, Henry took us to our accommodation, as we were to stay in the same compound as him. As he often stayed at school till very late and left for work very early, we rarely saw him in the compound. However, when we stayed till late or needed to go to Machongo early, we would make the journey together. These became opportunities for us to reconcile together to recap the day's work and get Henry's view on the projects we were implementing, from a personal perspective rather than simply a professional one.



*Henry, the Deputy Principal and my project partner, Carlos at dinner in the compound.*



## Machongo's Students: full of questions

The students too were also extremely welcoming and very soon we began to feel comfortable in the place we'd be calling home for the following two months. Even though they were expecting our arrival and had already received two UK Project Workers the previous year, our arrival caused plenty excitement in the school. Judging by conversations we had later on with students, this was mainly due to the novelty of receiving a foreign white visitor. We soon became accustomed to the word 'Mzungu' - a colloquial term for white foreigner.

The school days for children in Kenya is very long, even more so for boarding students. They would wake up at 6am for revision sessions and study through till 10pm with few breaks. As expected, we were very much the subject of fascination for students, and most questions started with "In your country do you....?".



*Top: Machongo's students and myself as I collected questions for the Health and Recreation day we organised.*

*Bottom: My project partner, Carlos, myself and students in the completed science laboratory - one of our main projects.*





*Carlos riding on the seesaw in the playground of Machongo Primary School, the neighbouring school.*

Getting the students to feel comfortable talking to us was very important so that we could ensure we were accurately identifying what the most important issues were in the school and how we could go about helping solving these. We came to realise that the main barrier preventing students talking to us was our language. Very impressively, Kenyans are mostly tri-lingual - speaking Swahili (the co-official language of Kenya, the lingua franca), English (the other co-official language), and what is referred to as 'mother tongue'. The latter is the language of each tribe or ethnic group, and so in this case it was the language of the Kisii people, ekeGusii. Therefore, when we arrived speaking English very fluently in a very different accent, understandably it was difficult for us to be understood.

Language was a barrier not only faced by students, but by staff and our neighbours at Ikoba village. I grew to overcome this by altering my form of speaking, mainly by speaking very slowly. However, towards the end of the two months I came to realise that I had adopted form of speaking similar to that of Kenyans when they spoke English. I noticed this transformation in my use of vocabulary expressions.

Throughout our time, we became increasingly close to the students, being able to learn more about the barriers they faced in their education and reasons for these. We used any spare time we had at school to talk to them.



## Arriving at Ikoba village: pointing, laughing, discussing

As with arriving at Machongo, finding out who we'd be living with and in what conditions was also exciting as well as daunting. The school had arranged for us to stay in a compound in the nearby small village of Ikoba. It has six units, each unit for a family with two rooms. The compound had shared showers and toilets - the latter referred to as long drops as these are holes in the ground.

Carlos and me were given two units, one each. However we decided to live in the same one as this would make things easier in terms of sharing resources and cooking together as well as make the transition to living in Kenya much easier if we had each other. The surrounding units were inhabited by three families and Henry, the Deputy Principal. Each family consisted of a mother and three to four children whilst the fathers were working elsewhere in Kenya and Tanzania.

As with Machongo, our entry into Ikoba and the compound also caused excitement among the locals. This could be seen in murmurs, excited conversations, pointing and sniggering amongst the children. We came to understand that for many people, particularly children, this was the first time they had seen and greeted a person who is white. From talking to previous year's Project Workers, we were well prepared for this.

*Top: clothes drying next to the one of the two water tanks in the compound. If it didn't rain for several days these would then need to collect water from the fresh water spring.*

*Middle: Carlos in our living room where we stored and cooked food.*





The colour of our skin wasn't the only novelty, rather the overarching indicator of the cultural differences Carlos and I had from the locals due to our background. The clothes we wore, the texture of our hair, our English accent were some of our few features which were new to them; whereas for us, having been brought up in London we have been used to seeing a variety of these features. I soon learnt that becoming accustomed to this one way dynamic, in which we were the new item of the environment which continuously retained its novel status, would be crucial in ensuring I correctly understood how I would interact with people and build relationships with them.

Our accommodation consisted of two small rooms. The living room had a gas canister to cook and the bedroom had two beds. Although we were briefed on what to expect, the fruition of the small elements which would change the way we lived was a loud wake-up and welcome to Kenya. As I settled into our accommodation, to the backdrop of children's curiosity and laughter at the new mzungus in Ikoba, I felt very out of place and out of my depth. The prospect of integrating into Ikoba's community and delivering projects, following on from the success of last year's Project Workers, was a daunting one.



### **Food and eating: a showcase of cultural differences**

The initial period of the two months at Ikoba and Machongo school were the most interesting as it was the time in which we saw the starkest cultural differences. Food and its related activities are a useful facet of rural Kenyan culture that showcases very clearly these differences. Most importantly, I must stress that the cultural differences we saw were not simply of those compared between our lives in the UK and rural Kenyan culture, rather Kisii culture. Kisii is not only the county of Kenya we were living and working in, but also home to the Kisii people, the AbaGusii - one of many tribes and ethnic group in Kenya.

As newcomers to the school and the village, we were invited to numerous dinners. Richard, the school principal, was very eager for us to meet his family.

We also became good friends with Douglas and Dinah who we met through Julia, our Project Coordinator who had the same role as us (Project Worker) the previous summer. In our first few weeks, our neighbours brought us food for us to learn about the Kisii cuisine. I soon learnt of the place food



*Top: a typical lunch at Machongo school of ugali, skuma wiki and avocado.*

*Bottom: Dinner at Douglas and Dinah's home.*

*From left to right: Dinah, Douglas, Carlos and myself. Douglas and Dinah own a hotel, a term for a tavern serving food and nonalcoholic beverages. Douglas also owns a tailor's shop next door and makes clothes for the people of Ikoba.*



*Once food is cooked, each person's plate is laid on the floor next to the pots and pans food and this is distributed amongst everyone.*

and eating had in Kenyan culture. Sharing meals with locals were the key moments which we solidified friendships and began to understand real differences in culture.

Meal times allowed me to see how households worked. The father, mother, sons and daughters had different roles with little interchange between these. Cooking was largely done by the mother with help from the daughters, in a form which to me seemed very ritualistic. There were particular methods and processes followed, and when we offered to help this highlighted the rigidity I observed in cooking and eating. First and foremost, the idea that we, male Mzungus were taking part in cooking was not fitting with customs. The way vegetables are peeled and sliced, the large quantities of salt used, how any scraps are simply thrown on the floor - these are examples of the simple differences in cooking. When we helped our hosts cook, laughter and amusement resulted as a reaction to the way we did things.

The food we ate at Machongo school was almost always the same, and unless we cooked for ourselves for dinner, we'd be eating the same food again in the evening. The food eaten was dense, calorific and in large quantities, with what I would consider as a lot of added salt. After all, people in Kisii walk long distances to get to work and school, and the idea of snacking outside mealtimes is uncommon. A typical meal consisted of ugali (similar to polenta, but made from maize corn), skuma wiki (chopped fried kale), omelette and avocados. These were foods which were all sourced locally and was therefore inexpensive. The overwhelming abundance of avocados was an enjoyment, coming from a country where they are one of the most expensive fruit.

Eating was done with the right hand, as the left hand is used to clean oneself after going to the toilet. The way food is cooked and prepared allows for one handed eating. Although at first I found eating with one hand a hassle, I soon found it brought a much calmer and wholesome attitude towards meals - being able to finish the food before you with you hand allowed me to better feel the texture and form of food. There was no clanking of metal cutlery which would detract from the experience of eating through mechanical sounds, rather the room was filled with the sound of food being enjoyed and devoured.



## Mama Celestin: a true example of Kenyan hospitality

Our closest friend in our compound was to become Mama Celestin and her family. We called her this in the Kisii tradition of naming the mother after the first born, her daughter Celestin. She lived opposite our accommodation with her daughter Celestin, her teenage niece Haphine and her young son Emmanuel whilst her husband worked in Tanzania.

For our first few weeks, strangely enough we didn't interact much with Mama Celestin, but spent our free time with her children. Along with other children in the compound, the 'kids' were full of energy and always without fail put a smile on our faces upon arriving (what we called) home after a day of work at Machongo. As with the students at the school, their curiosity with the added playfulness was truly enchanting.

In our first few nights, as we cooked typical food from home, within the limits of a limited supermarket in the nearby town and not a full kitchen, our neighbours were very curious as to what two Mzungu boys were able to come up with. Their worries about whether we were eating enough, as well as their hospitality often sent Mama Celestin's children running to our front door with a plate of food. A few weeks in, instead of a dish, the whole family arrived in our living room with a meal ready for all of us to share. They made themselves comfortable, finished cooking and served the food.

From this point on, Mama Celestin and us shared our meals every night. It formed one of my best experiences in the two months which was key in making Ikoba village my home. The meal was almost always the same, however we soon grew accustomed to it and could not go more than a few days without ugali (maize corn polenta), skuma wiki (chopped fried kale) and avocado. We further saw how the food was cooked in a particular method, and Mama Celestin or her niece who helped her cook were not open to different ways of doing things when we attempted these.

Sharing our dinner every night also gave me a good sense of continuity and belonging in Ikoba through the exchange and collaboration it entailed. Every dinner we would discuss our day as well as talk about our lives in getting to know each other. Mama Celestin brought the food and cooked



*Sharing dinner with Mama Celestin and her niece. From left to right: Tyson (my boyfriend who visited the village), Haphine (Mama Celestin's niece), Carlos, Mama Celestin and myself.*

it, and we brought the milk and cocoa for dessert and did the washing up. Sometimes we exchanged roles, however once we learnt how things were done, we followed this process without hesitation, out of respect and humility.

A few times we cooked for Mama Celestin and her family, and this always resulted in an entertaining experience drawing in other neighbours. The children would laugh as adults exchanged confused looks. One can imagine how never seeing spaghetti before and then having to eat it would be a very surreal experience. Even when we made a dessert of very typically Kenyan mndazi (deep fried maize dough - much like a doughnut) with bananas (grown right next to the compound) and melted chocolate (considered a luxury), although it may seem this shouldn't be too shocking based on the ingredients used, the reaction was a very confused one. This made it very clear why people such as Mama Celestin had very clear ways of doing particular things, and why we had to first observe and not assume we knew any better.

## Conclusion

As I spent my last month in East Africa travelling through Kenya and Tanzania, I soon realised that what I had learnt in my two months in the village of Ikoba in Kisii, was indeed very particular to Kisii. Although I wasn't able to have the same level of interaction with people I met from other tribes and ethnic groups in Kenya, I could see stark differences in their attitude towards me (an outsider), in their clothing, in their food and many other features. Learning and discovering the cultural differences between my life and that of the people of Kisii through the friendships I built over two months has given me the clearest and most important lesson in the need to approach these differences with respect and tact.

I have been brought up in what is considered a 'global city' with an extensive variety of cultures and practices. However, this experience and the friendships I have built through it are the clearest indicator of a need to be open to cultural differences. After all, being open to differences will lead to the fruition of more deeper friendships. My journey to Kisii is a testament to this.



*Trecking along the  
crater of Mount  
Longonot in Kenya.*