

The Kibera, Kenya WASH Facilitative Development Project

What was it?

In 2008, an informal organization called the Kibera Working Group was formed to assist with project development, cross-cultural liaison activity, fund-raising, monitoring, advising, and applied research for a water/sanitation/hygiene (WASH) project in the informal settlement of Kibera, Kenya. It was led by University of Denver faculty and Rotarians with expertise in fund-raising, health communications, business and entrepreneurial development, and African community development. Throughout, it was assisted by others, including Kenyan and D.U. students (from Korbel, Daniels, and Health Communications). It developed and maintained cooperative, affiliate relations with the Nairobi-based water and sanitation organizations Maji na Ufanisi and Ecotact, as well as with a Nairobi-based Rotary club.

Initial conversations and observations made it clear that water and sanitation challenges were extreme. The infamous “flying toilets” of Kibera were discovered, consisting of bags filled with human feces thrown out of a house, over a wall, and into an alley, usually at night. These homes had no latrines and certainly no toilets. The material remained where adults walk and children play. Open defecation also was practiced by some children.

What was the approach?

Local leaders said they would support what applied anthropologists call “facilitative development”: Under local advisement, outside expertise in WASH and outside funding would be welcomed. Soon thereafter, it also became apparent that outside expertise in business development also would be welcomed. As the construction of eight WASH kiosks was completed, and as the Kibera Working Group gained traction, “facilitative development” became “capacity building.” It meant full-blown community buy-in and local institution-building.

On-site data collected by D.U. students and faculty clarified constraints and incentives for ultimate project success. Constraints included perceptions that dirt causes diarrhea, that women would be attacked at night on the way to using the kiosks, and that human rights do not include water rights. Success came to be defined not merely by kiosk functionality (e.g., a faucet that consistently operates) but by community engagement (e.g., an indigenous community-based organization that consistently operates the facility). A three-pronged model unfolded with sustainable operations and improved health becoming dependent on these factors: (1) hygiene, including training regarding proper hand washing; (2) governance, including engaged community groups at each kiosk; and (3) business planning, including innovative entrepreneurial activity and training in records management. Soap production and mini-franchises emerged.

What was said? What were the outcomes?

To quote one of the project co-leaders, Karen Loeb: “The more people care about hygiene, the more women make money selling liquid soap, water purification, and other related items, the more money the franchise makes as a cut from those businesses.” The entrepreneurial approach evolved into profit-making, social-franchising opportunities for Kiberans. One of the D.U. students, Kelly Fenson-Hood, went on – with Kiberan colleagues – to establish Power of Hope, a business attuned to the needs of female entrepreneurs. What once might have been called “community WASH kiosks” became “community WASH and business hubs.”

Work in Africa often is difficult. Along the way, there were broken pipes and broken promises; frequent repairs were needed and some early Kenyan champions did not follow through. Some of the community-based organizations faltered. Yet this program still continues, with the D.U. role having appropriately decreased.