

Five years of success in Kenya

Quaker approach to nonviolent campaigning helps people across the country challenge corruption and injustice.

Laura Shipler Chico, Programme Manager: East Africa

It was raining and surprisingly cold as the first of the nonviolent activists arrived. Over the day, and deep into the night, they kept coming – 77 in all – to a modest conference centre in Kisumu, Kenya. They were there to mark the fifth anniversary of the Turning the Tide programme in Kenya.

From four Kenyan regions – Nairobi, Western, North Rift and Nyanza – trainers and community change agents attended Kenya’s first ever Turning the Tide national gathering to share their successes and their challenges and to begin to chart a course for the future.

For every person present, there was another who wanted to be there but couldn’t be due to a limited budget. When a small kernel of an idea was first developed in 2009, it was impossible to imagine that it would grow so fast in such a short period of time, or that it would have a fraction of the impact it has had.

After the post-election violence in 2008, peacebuilders in Kenya were

looking for ways to help people speak out loudly against injustice and poor governance, but without using violence. Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) and a few Quakers in Kenya wondered: could Turning the Tide – an approach to active nonviolence developed by Quakers in Britain – be adapted to fill a critical gap in Kenya? Would it work?

“Turning the Tide changed my life, it gave me courage, it built me, and gave me hope.”

Grace Chirchir

QPSW forged a partnership with Kenyan organisation Change Agents for Peace International. A pilot project experimenting with adapting Turning the Tide’s approach to the Kenyan context led to a fully fledged programme that is locally driven and relies largely on community-based volunteers and trainers.

Now, five years after that first pilot, the hall was buzzing with anticipation. “We are here,” said Benard Agona, coordinator of the programme, “to see and hear what nonviolence power has been able to do in a small way in our little villages, in our regions, in our counties, in our beloved country Kenya... Indeed, it has been a journey of excitement.”

And so began the storytelling – in formal panels, in small groups, over cups of milky tea and mandazi donuts. Everywhere one turned and asked, “What is your Turning the Tide story?” the examples of personal transformation and social change tumbled out.

While the focus of the gathering was on community campaigns, it soon became apparent that the programme had first transformed people’s ways of thinking and living. Grace Chirchir got married straight after high school and when her husband went to Japan to study, he left her and their child in his parents’ home. She was viewed as a servant and mistreated by her in-laws. Finally she left, struggling to survive on her own.

“Before I joined Turning the Tide I was just like anybody else. I just took life the way people take it. But, shortly, life changed. I joined this training... and I realised that however much life has been challenging it is now high time I should change also the way of my thinking and face life now, positively. I learned about the principle of Turning the Tide... remember also the opponent. That really touched me. However much those people neglected me, mistreated me, I have to consider them also as human beings.”



Activists from across Kenya gathered at a conference centre in Kisumu to celebrate five years of nonviolent campaigning success. Photo: Laura Shipler Chico

The year after the training, Grace travelled to see her in-laws so that her son could claim his rightful place in the family.

“Because of the courage now I had attained from Turning the Tide I went there as strong, relaxed and a changed person... It changed my life, it gave me courage, it built me, and gave me hope and it caused me to go there and claim that inheritance.”

While Grace found a power within that stemmed from empathy with her abusers, for Aziza Yahya the message of nonviolence was what changed her: “Before I knew about Turning the Tide, I used to go for what I want. I won’t care who I hurt on the way, provided I get what I want. But Turning the Tide has turned me. So even if that thing is mine, rightfully mine, I have to look for a way to get it without hurting anybody on the way.”

Aziza worked with others to get a toilet installed in her neighbourhood of the sprawling Kibera slum in Nairobi. She had to go up against both powerful interests and resistance stemming from petty personal conflicts. “What’s next?” she asks, “Now we need water!”

Many campaigns involve challenging the corruption that sabotages large investments – from road construction to agricultural loans to healthcare provision. By supporting these campaigns, QPSW’s Kenya programme can use its limited resources to help create sustainable livelihoods far more effectively than by investing directly in development initiatives.



Sharing stories during a coffee break. Photo: Victor Kiptoo



Justin Okee talks about a campaign he supported in Nairobi to improve conditions for market workers. Photo: Victor Kiptoo

Patrice Lubumba took on corruption very close to home. A water project funded by the UN and implemented by a large Kenya-based international non-governmental organisation had been stalled for seven years. The aim of the project had been to install public taps with running water in Patrice’s village. The borehole had been dug on public land. But then money ‘ran out’ or had been diverted into the pockets of local leaders.

When Patrice took this on, he began receiving threatening text messages. He lost his business. Even his parents put pressure on him to drop the case. “I felt lonely in my heart,” Patrice remembers. But he continued on, shifting power by building alliances with community members and with political aspirants who had failed in the previous election. Today, there are taps and the water is running.

Other campaigns have focused on women’s and children’s rights. Mothers recently marched to a courthouse to demand that a long-delayed case be heard against a man accused of raping a four-year-old girl. The judge (suspected of accepting bribes from the accused) was taken off the case and a court date set.

Running through every story I heard at the gathering was one resounding theme – that we each

have the power and the potential within us to make a change. And together the possibilities grow. Agona, paraphrasing Nelson Mandela as he stood before a gathering that was difficult to imagine just a few years ago, reminded us, “It is always impossible, until we do it.”

Contact:

Laura Shipler Chico
lauras@quaker.org.uk
 020 7663 1075

www.quaker.org.uk/kenya

New nonviolence projects in Rwanda and Burundi

Drawing on our successful work in Kenya, QPSW has started active nonviolence pilot projects in Rwanda and Burundi. We are funding teams of Kenyan trainers to work with community change agents, providing intensive residential training and accompanying them for several months as they practise their new approach.

The newly trained community change agents have already identified potential campaigns – to protect the rights of orphans being exploited by their foster carers and to help market women who are being harassed by police.