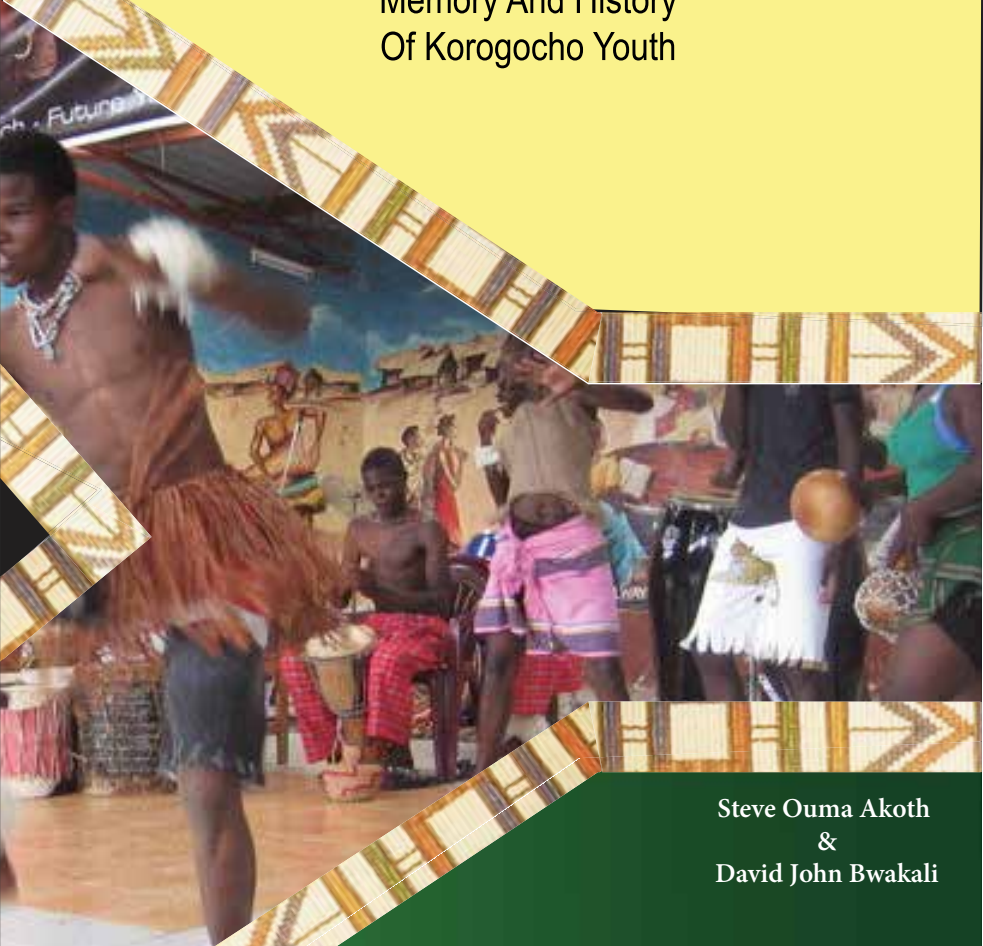


Coming to Life:

Memory And History
Of Korogocho Youth



Steve Ouma Akoth
&
David John Bwakali



Pamoja Trust

Creating Voice and Space for the Urban Poor

**The Youth
Congress**

Coming to Life:
Memory and History of Korogocho Youths

STEVE OUMA AKOTH
AND
DAVID JOHN BWAKALI

Published by Pamoja Trust

PO Box 10269, 00100

Nairobi, Kenya

Tel. +254 20 521 4382

Cell. +254 720 896025

E-mail: landrite@pamojatrust.org

web. www.pamojatrust.org

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing this book was a great joy. It gave me an opportunity to play a small part in telling a big story about the amazing initiatives of Korogocho youth. These initiatives are anchored in their never-say-die spirit and have left an indelible mark in their community and on the sands of time. This book is a non-fiction recreation of the many youth struggles that led to the creation and flourish of youth initiatives in Korogocho and beyond. This recreation is an accurate portrayal of what happened even though it may not be an exact replica of dialogue. Every event and character in the book is real, although a few names have been changed to protect identities.

Steve Ouma Akoth & David John Bwakali

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Preface

FOREWORD

People living in Nairobi's informal settlements suffer multiple indignities, including voicelessness. They are often lumped together by aid and government agencies as 'slum dwellers' (a term that I am also guilty of using in my writings about Nairobi's urban poor). This term is generally accepted within development circles as an apt way to describe the millions of people in cities around the world who live in appalling conditions, without access to piped water or sanitation, usually in over-crowded houses and neighbourhoods that are crime-ridden and insecure. Slum dwellers are not viewed as people in their own right, with thoughts, feelings and ambitions. Governments tend to view them as an inconvenient nuisance. Politicians only get concerned about them before an election, when their vote becomes important. The rich and middle class employ them as maids and factory workers, but rarely see them as individuals with rights and desires. The international media uses them to sensationalise urban poverty. Even the most well-intentioned aid agencies tend to see them as recipients of aid, not as active participants in their own well-being. Yet, it is in slums such as Korogocho (popularly known as Koch) that some of the most innovative and selfless acts of humanity are being carried out everyday, not by outsiders, but by the residents themselves.

This book is the story of such individuals who chose to rise above their seemingly hopeless condition and offered the promise of a better life to youth living in their neighbourhood. The book shows how a mass rape that led to two deaths in Korogocho on the eve of the millennium sparked a desire for change among young men and women who wanted to restore dignity, pride and self-respect among their friends and neighbours who were threatening to plunge into a life of crime, begging and prostitution. The Miss Koch beauty pageant, Koch FM and the Youth Congress are three initiatives that came about as a result of this desire.

I wish the many individuals who are part of these initiatives all the very best in their future endeavours, and I sincerely hope that the government will finally recognise their efforts at restoring the dignity of Nairobi's urban poor, who have for too long remained voiceless and invisible.

Rasna Warah

4 February, 2013

Nairobi

INTRODUCTION

Because my parents spoke Dholuo

In 1978, my parents moved to Korogocho (A place of nothingness in Kikuyu language. It had less than 200 households at the time) with me, a second born in a family of four at the time and my other sibling. I cannot say that these were bad days as I had not experienced any life better than what we were introduced to. We lived in a simple house of earth floor, mud walls and roof of hard carton and plastic. Our meals never followed the bourgeois patterns of breakfast-lunch and dinner or the content rigor of so called balanced diet. Ideas of decent housing, balance diet and categories of food like protein, calcium and vitamins are things that I struggled to memorize in class and often failed to remember during exams. This is a contrast to my current experience where my four year daughter critique our kitchen outputs whenever it does not hold what she has come to experience as balanced diet.

Even then, my life in Korogocho was by all means a better house than the grass thatched house that we used in our rural home in Simenya, Ugenya in Luo Nyanza. In an ordinary day, we had lots of conversation as a large family that was confined in a rather small house. I recall the numerous rebukes that we got from our parents when they caught us discussing school work in sheng, or making jokes in Kikuyu language. Mum often lamented, 'You are Luos and must learn Dholuo!' In their absence we would murmur and suggest that we had no doubt or problem of being Luos only that what we were discussing was not intelligible in Dholuo. We were in a daily struggle against indignity which was expressed through exclusions and evictions.

Growing up, our parents had an unwritten rule, they always spoke Dholuo. But that was good because, the only reason I knew I was Luo is because my parents spoke Dholuo. And to counter what they perceived as influence of sheng and Kikuyu language in our neighbourhood, they insisted on engaging local shopkeepers, water vendors and neighbours in Dholuo. Interestingly, even after I moved to rent my first house in Korogocho after graduating with Bachelors degree from Moi University in 1998, there was still this insistence. Today, when I narrate my life between 1978 and 2000 when I lived in Korogocho, friends and admirers often sympathise and celebrate me as an achiever. They think that I lived a hard and rough life where I was sometimes nothing better than 'bare human' - a state of subjugation that negates the very essence of being human. When living 'bare life', you are stripped of your humanness or better still dignity.

Describing bare human, Italian thinker- Grigeon Agamben makes use of

two analytical categories Zoe – the simple fact of living, common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods); and Bio- indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. (p.1). People who are living in category of 'bare life' are perhaps in the category of a 'Zoe'. Their function in body politics – as was largely the common category for those of us living in Korogocho, was merely a reproductive life – to the sphere of the oikos, "home".

At any rate between 1978 and 1990s the central government viewed Korogocho and many other informal settlements as a broad category of 'illegal cities'. State policy for these areas was that of exclusion and evictions. As residents we were nothing beyond 'vote bank'. Bare life was manifest through several incidents of cholera outbreak and death from preventable diseases such as typhoid and tuberculosis. Sovereign power of the state and city authority had rejected and marginalized Korogocho from the country and city politics. The relationship between Korogocho dwellers and the central state was not any different from that of Black Africans and the white dominated apartheid administration in South Africa at the time.

The histories and life stories documented in this collection is therefore an account of struggles and attempts by men and women from Korogocho to claim space in the politics of the city of Nairobi as well as the state of Kenya. We have argued through the practices of our life that the idea of building a Modern Nairobi (with capital M), must go hand in hand with the politicization of bare life of those living in Korogocho. This is why the story of our childhood which is often described as having been 'hard' has become a useful critique of ideas of modernizing Nairobi. Through our life stories and struggles, we argue that reflections of Nairobi must accommodate the politics of bare life that is the category for about 60% of Nairobi slum dwellers today.

Beyond this narrative of our lives as a critique of ideas of modern Nairobi, I think that 'bare life' – which we all struggle away from, does not stand merely as the baseline from where to measure 'progress'. Rather, there are moments of my Korogocho life that I recall with a deep sense of nostalgia. I recall that after 1983 our parents adopted a strategy- without consulting us, aimed at creating a balance between our life in Korogocho and that in Ugenya (our rural home). School term at the Kariobangi Primary School ended at 12.00 noon after every three months and that evening, we would take a 6.00pm train to Kisumu en-route to Ugenya. In the train, the lingua franca was mainly Dholuo and Maragoli (Luo dialect). Although our parents spoke Dholuo in the house, we always spoke to them in Swahili and our other command was in Kikuyu which was widely spoken by other children in Korogocho.

Our stay in Ugenya was often filled with this tension between the expectations of the locals that we demonstrate our 'Luo-ness' and our own appreciation of resistance against marginality in Korogocho. I learned Kikuyu from the children of an old Kikuyu Matriarch commonly known as Mama Nge'ndo who owned the structure that my father had rented. The matriarch and her children did not look down upon Dholuo nor did they make us feel inadequate for not being Kikuyu- it was simply the lingua franca of our zone.

I am told that in the lower parts of Korogocho that was known as Kisumu Ndogo (small Kisumu), almost every one learned Dholuo which was widely the lingua franca of the zone. What we lacked according to our relatives was Luo consciousness. That is that being a Luo is different from being Kikuyu. Our relatives at home struggled to assert this distinction between Luos and 'others'. But in Korogocho that 'other' was not our language categories or ethnicities. We were made zoe not by those who spoke Kikuyu or Kamba but by city and state politics. Our struggles in Korogocho did not conceptualize or realize ethnic categories. It was a struggle against the fact that our locality was called a place of nothingness or a deposit of scrap. Our struggle was against this nothingness.

I moved out of Korogocho in 2000, but I continued to work there. But while one may suggest that this change in living location is 'progress', my life in Korogocho and the struggles were 'better' than my contemporary realities. This does not mean that am glorifying poverty, rather, what am saying is that my life as a citizen of Korogocho enabled me to struggle against bare life in a context that has not captive to ethnicity. What we politicized in our struggles as young children and later as young adults was category of 'bare life'. This category had no ethnicity or cultural consciousness. Today, struggles both in Korogocho and the larger body politics of Kenya tend to gravitate around ethnicity. Most recently, this fiction has been explained by political commentator Mutahi Ngunyi as 'Tyranny of numbers'. I believe that the cultural chauvinism inherent in Mutahi's hypothesis that is renascent of Hamatic hypothesis may escalate ethnic-consciousness and production of minorities Hamatic hypothesis may escalate ethnic consciousness and production of minorities

Narratives in this collection have no mark of cultural chauvinism inherent in Mutahi's hypothesis. I find most of the chapter of the book to be narrations of nostalgia of memory and history. The current politicization of ethnicity and cultural chauvinism makes me feel lifeless and haggard countenance became indifferent to my surroundings, confused past and present, and even long to go back and live in the community of Korogocho of the 1978-2000. I sometimes feel that Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, who is credited for introducing the word nostalgia to describe. "the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land." But it is Professor Svetlana Boym, A native of St. Petersburg, Boym who has developed nostalgia. Boym distinguishes two types of nostalgia. "Reflective nostalgia," while grounded in longing, contemplating, and remem-

bering, does not attempt to restore the past. The other is “restorative nostalgia,” which “is not about memory and history but about heritage and tradition. It’s often an invented tradition—a dogmatic, stable myth that gives you a coherent version of the past.

This is what makes me cherish the memories of my life in Korogocho. My nostalgia and what is expressed in this collection is both a quest for restoration as well as a reflection. I desire a restoration of a past where our pre-occupation was with politicization of ‘bare life’ rather than politicization of ethnicity. As I see in the everyday struggles at both intellectual and political level, the false consciousness that is embedded in politicization of ethnicity that is now expressed in Mutahi’s hypothesis of Tyranny of numbers could continue a sorrowful reality of exclusion of those who live ‘bare life’. As a reflection I marvel at the self-awareness and the struggles that I had with my parents and natives in Ugenya about becoming Luo. Not that I am averse to being Luo, but rather I resist ethnic consciousness as a function of cultural chauvinism. When growing up in Korogocho, I won this battle and when reading this collection you encounter how the contributors come to life through struggles that were a critique and politicization of bare life!
how the contributors come to life through struggles that were a critique and politicization of bare life!

Steve Ouma Akoth

THE BIRTH OF MISS KOCH

Her eyes had a beautiful, faraway look in them. Her smile had a sparkling quality that pulled you into her world. It was a world that seemed suspended in time as she gazed at the cheering crowd. Somewhere in the back row, she spotted some applauding school mates from Our Lady of Fatma where she had just started her secondary school. Scattered all over the middle rows, were many friends and neighbors from Korogocho, where she had been born and still lived. Korogocho is one of the twenty five slums in Nairobi and the fourth largest of the lot. These slums provide shelter for sixty percent of city dwellers yet occupy less than two percent of Nairobi's land. Isn't something wrong with this picture? Yet it is a picture that was all too real for the newly crowned beauty queen.

It is from this slum, this ghetto, this informal settlement that Rose Nyawira was crowned as Miss Koch in 2002. As her radiant smile swept across the shouting crowd, her eyes rested on Nina Kioko from Vera Beauty College. Nina had added a generous professional touch to the 2001 Miss Koch models one year earlier.

Rose Nyawira's eyes locked briefly with the person who had introduced her to Miss Koch, the organization behind the beauty pageant that she had just won. She nodded slightly at him as he flashed his famous grin. Bernard Otieno Wandei's eyes brimmed with tears as he returned the beauty queen's smile.

Benard Otieno Wandei, popularly known as Oti, had been born in Korogocho two and a half decades earlier. He was the sixth born in a family of eight children and had spent most of his adult life in Korogocho. His family was so big that meal times were akin to small political gatherings. To feed this family, his mother sold vegetables at Soko Mjinga in Korogocho.

Every morning before the cock's crow, she would wake up and ensure that her children left for school on time as she set off for her business.

It was a small business that had big impacts on the lives of her children, taking them through school, thus equipping them for life. She was a woman who subscribed fully to the words of Nelson Mandela that 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' After his primary school, Oti joined Eastleigh secondary school, which was at the time well known for its rogue students. Their shirts were rarely tucked in and they forever walked with a 'bounce.' Every step they took seemed to be searching for trouble, which they often caused if they couldn't find it.

Bus rides to school were usually a game of cat and mouse with the bus conductor. Oti would use every trick in the free-bus-rides book to evade the attention or angry grip of the conductor. With perennial insufficiency of bus fare, he had to devise ingenious ways of making it to school or depend solely on his two legs to get him there.

At home, crime was the order of the day, with muggings and break-ins common place. At school, crime was lurking in the dirty rucksacks that dangled on the backs of most students. Thus surrounded by crime, Oti had to find a refuge that would shield him from waywardness.

His refuge came in the form of dance when he joined a dance troupe that occupied a huge chunk of his waking hours. He was so busy dancing that he had no time for fighting. He could dance both African and contemporary dances and spent most of his free time practicing these dance moves. He was part of a dedicated dance troupe that kept landing dancing gigs in corporate and social events.

Some of the happiest moments in his young life came when he earned some money from his dancing. It felt good to arrive back home not just with a school rucksack but also with a shopping bag that he would proudly hand over to his mother. Her words of appreciation would keep him dancing and studying as best as he could.

Although it was unable to lure Oti, crime remained alive and kicking in Korogocho. It was so rampant that one night, one of the worst forms of crime shattered lives of innocent women.

On the final night of December 1999, when the rest of the country was ushering in the new millennium with song and dance, more than twenty five women were raped in Korogocho. They were violated by fellow Korogocho residents. When he woke up on the bright morning of the year 2000, Oti had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had already been informed of the rape ordeal by the time he slept a few hours earlier. Although details were scanty, he had been unable to sleep properly. And now the bright sun was only jarring his nerves. Why would anyone commit such unspeakable cruelty? This question kept blaring in his mind over and over again, leaving him with a throbbing headache. He voiced the question to a close friend of his when they met later that morning. 'That is exactly what I am also asking myself!' Raphael said as he shook his head. He was slender and looked even younger than his twenty years. Like Oti, Raphael had been born and bred in Korogocho. He was born not with a silver Despite their beauty pageant ignorance, the three friends' latest idea was irresistible, and in the words of Victor Hugo the nineteenth century French writer, 'you can resist an invading army; you cannot resist an idea whose time has come.'

Their ranks soon swelled when they were joined by the one person in Korogocho who did know something about beauty pageants. Fredrick Ooko, popularly known as Toothbrush.

Born in Korogocho, Toothbrush was an immensely talented choreographer and thespian. He had attended primary school in Korogocho and proceeded to Siaya in the western part of Kenya for his secondary education. All this time, his artistic skills were blossoming into an astounding flower of theatre.

His early years in secondary school were a time of political upheaval when Robert Ouko, Kenya's charismatic foreign affairs minister was murdered triggering waves of protest.

During this time in the early nineties, public agitation for the multi-party system reached fever pitch, culminating in the successful 1992 constitutional repeal that resulted in multi-partyism in Kenya.

Toothbrush's artistic mind absorbed all these goings on in the country through artistic lens. He was always asking himself what active role theatre could play in fostering democratic ideals that could empower marginalized people in places like Korogocho. In 1992, as section 2A of Kenya's constitution was repealed to usher in multi-party politics in Kenya, Toothbrush acted in his first play. Thus began a love affair with theatre and showbiz that grew more intense with time.

Toothbrush embraced the Miss Koch beauty pageant idea fully. It resonated warmly with his thespian and democratic instincts. It also stirred in him strong feelings that women empowerment must be at the very centre of any community initiative, particularly in marginalized areas like Korogocho.

Korogocho's mothers are indeed heroes. Whether single or married, they give their all to their children. Thus emptied of narcissism, all their love goes not just to their children, but their community. Sadly, this climate of empathy is often diluted by that all-enduring tenet of capitalism – survival for the fittest.

What do you do when your neighbor's child is hungry and you only have food for your child? What do you do when your child is hungry and your neighbor only has food for her child? Sometimes you break bread and share. Sometimes you don't. This was the plight of many mothers in Korogocho. They tried their best but sometimes their best wasn't good enough.

'These were the women on Toothbrush's mind as he dreamt about the beauty pageant. If only the young women could grow up to be as hardworking as their mothers but with better education and better jobs, then they could inject more dignity and abundance into their own lives and the lives of their parents.

The beauty pageant will show the world that there is more to Korogocho than crime and disease,' Oti said with a sigh.the beauty pageant.

If only the young women could grow up to be as hardworking as their mothers but with better education and better jobs, then they could inject more dignity and abundance into their own lives and the lives of their parents. Gatonga agreed, 'the world will finally begin to see the amazing beauty in our mothers and sisters.'

Their new initiative was following in the footsteps of other organizations that had been birthed earlier by similarly innovative people from Korogocho. These earlier organizations include Kairos, Slum Dolphin and the jungle Africa. Although Miss Koch was following in these footsteps, it was carving out its own path and niche unlike any that had been seen before. Ensuing months brought with them daily meetings in restaurants, St John's Catholic Church and their homes as they planned, probed, brainstormed and made phone calls. Toothbrush was at the forefront of organizing the technical aspects of the beauty pageant. His experience proved priceless helping them to act from a point of knowledge, not ignorance.

St John's Catholic Church occupied a central role in Korogocho's socio-economic development. It was home to Father Alex Zanotelli, a charismatic Italian priest who played a central role in mobilizing diverse partnerships to work with the people of Korogocho.

The St John's priest warmed to the pageant idea and provided vital support, even offering to have the church host the pageant. Sister Paula, from the same church, was also very supportive. However, some community members felt that the beauty contest would expose their girls to immoral ways. They complained loudly and regularly. Against all odds, the first pageant finally took place. It was dubbed, 'don't die, stay alive.' What had started as a troubled idea birthed in the aftermath of mass rape was now promising mass catwalks of inspiration. The stage was set. A long stage choreographed by Toothbrush. Dozens of beautiful girls from Korogocho milled around this stage whispering excitedly about this historic event. They couldn't believe that one of them would soon be crowned as the first ever Miss Koch.

As the first young lady strutted onto the stage and began gyrating across it like a cheery giraffe, Oti folded his arms in front of him and closed his eyes momentarily.

He saw the sweat on his mother's face as she sold vegetables at Soko Mjinga. She was sweating so that he could enjoy the sweet of life. She was a hero. He saw the face of a young girl who had been raped on the millennium night. She was crying. Her tears tugged mightily at his heart. She was a hero. He saw the face of Mama Shiko, a single mother who sold in her small kiosk from dawn to midnight so that her daughter Shiko and her mother would always have food on the table and a roof over their heads.

Khadija was born in Korogocho 1982. She came into the world during the troubled times of Kenya's first and only coup d'état. This seemed to be a precursor of the way the rest of her life would pan out – arriving on the scene in the midst of trouble and being forced to tackle that trouble. She learnt from an early age that burying your head in the sand only suffocates you instead of taking away your problems.

Every Sunday, she was among those who trooped into Oti's house, one by one, two by two, in small groups. Everyone was welcome and whoever came became a member of the Miss Koch movement. These meetings may have been lacking in champagne and grilled chicken but they were full of passionate ideas for a better Korogocho.

Bernard Gachie, one of the older members of the movement raised his hands and drew a box in the air, 'we are tired of being placed in a box and a label being placed on that box reading – poor and violent!'

'I may be poor,' Halima said with a determined voice, 'but I am not violent!'

Shiro nodded in agreement, 'if only we can show the world that we are decent and brilliant people, they will take us seriously!' Apart from such defiance, the meetings also dripped with great ideas.

'Let's make and sell t-shirts.'

'Let's start a youth hotel that will provide food for those who don't have it.'

'Let's organize a fundraising dinner in the big hotels.'

'Let's start our own football league.'

The beauty of their idealism always shone on their young faces as they left these meetings.

Khadija relished the post-meetings walks back to her house. As she navigated the narrow footpaths between mud-walls, she would barely notice the drainage beneath her. Instead of seeing the slimy dark water in the cracked drainage, she saw the bright future that they had just discussed in the meeting.

But sometimes when daytime was replaced by nighttime, the bright future would be replaced by a dark present. Like nearly every other young person in Korogocho, Khadija's nights were sometimes bedrocks of pain. Pain that took on the different forms of hunger, illness and gender based violence. Khadija could stomach a hungry stomach but not gender based violence. Why should anyone use your gender as a basis of violating you? Why should anyone rain blows on you just because you are physically weaker? These are questions that filled her mind and troubled her heart.

She sought for answers in the Sunday meetings and received much needed pep talk from other Miss Koch adherents. Face the ills in our society head on and initiate change. They told her. She gave as much as she received and constantly encouraged other young ladies to say no to the tag, 'victim.' Choose to be victors, not victims. She told them.

Miss Koch had gradually become a fellowship of change agents. In 2004, this fellowship sauntered into more organized existence when it became the proud owner of a strategic plan. Boaz Waruku a renowned activist and Program Officer with the 4Cs outfit helped them to prepare this strategic plan. He reminded them of the famous words by Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of the United States that, 'when you fail to plan, you plan to fail.' The strategic plan became a very useful roadmap that demarcated for them both desirable and realistic action points.

Though long term, the strategic plan could not be realized without day by day diligence. One such day had been long and tiring. Raphael had punched his computer keyboard thousands of times and come up with fourteen pages of a project report that was due at the donor's desk the following morning by 8AM. It was just after five and he was proofreading the report, stifling yawns that were protesting the hunger pangs within him. His phone, which was often in silent mode, vibrated. He reluctantly picked it up, as if unwilling to answer. It was Mariana Cifuentes, and she was reminding him about the LASDAP meeting that evening. Mariana was leading this LASDAP initiative within Miss Koch.

The Local Authority Service Delivery Action Plan (LASDAP) was a government programme that sought to ensure efficient service delivery by local authorities. It was against a backdrop of rot in local authorities that this plan was developed. Although it was a brilliant plan backed by government resources, information about it was often lacking. Without relevant information, people cannot demand and take part in development initiatives. Accessibility to information also enhances transparency and accountability. It was for these reasons that Miss Koch partnered with the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research to ensure public engagement in LASDAP.

TS Eliot the English poet once asked, 'where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' In answer to this question, Miss Koch was not just informing Korogocho residents about LASDAP, it was also analyzing that information with them so that they could comprehend the knowledge hiding within that information about it was often lacking.

Without relevant information, people cannot demand and take part in development initiatives. Accessibility to information also enhances transparency and accountability. It was for these reasons that Miss Koch partnered with the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research to ensure public engagement in LASDAP. TS Eliot the English poet once asked, 'where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' In answer to this question, Miss Koch was not just informing Korogocho residents about LASDAP, it was also analyzing that information with them so that they could comprehend the knowledge hiding within that information.

Analysis of LASDAP information was undertaken in barazas (open forums) that brought together diverse members of the Korogocho community. These barazas were the first step in the process of citizen empowerment by making people aware of the possibilities for collective action.

The barazas became a space where residents not only talked about LASDAP, but started reflecting about services in the area. These heated debates involved people of different religion, sex, age and ethnicity, to discuss their needs for service delivery.

Through activities like these barazas, Miss Koch engaged in concerted LASDAP campaigns that ensured public participation in public funds utilization.

These campaigns managed to recover over eight million Kenya shillings that had been misappropriated. In addition, the campaigns resulted in better service delivery that was seen in tangible results like high mast lights in Korogocho. Symbolically, Miss Koch fought darkness and brought light.

IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

The baby was innocent and sweet as he slept right through the blaring matatu music. It was furahi day, the catchy song by renowned hip-hop musicians Nameless and Nonini. Molly nodded along to the song absent-mindedly. Her arms clutched the baby tightly, as if she was afraid that this bundle of joy would be snatched from her.

She was on her way to Rongai for work. But it was not your every day work. She only got such work once in a while, so she was quite thrilled that this opportunity had knocked on her door yet again. But she was also scared.

On her head, she was spotting short, soft hair. On her wrists, rasta-colored bangles. Her attire was a simple pair of jeans and a black T-shirt whose front was emblazoned with the words, 'najivunia kuwa mKenya.' I am proud to be Kenya. Yet the last thing she felt for Kenya was pride.

To her, Kenya was not some shape on the map or the capital of East and Central Africa. Kenya was Korogocho and Korogocho had given her nothing but hunger, pain and sorrow. How could she be proud of this Kenya?

This black and patriotic T-shirt belonged to the father of her baby. She had yanked it from his cranky wooden bed one morning when she woke up to find that her blouse was covered in vomit. It wasn't clear whether it was his vomit or hers. They had both been drunk.

She glanced from her window and frowned at Langata cemetery. She had been there five times within the last three years. On all those somber occasions, she had come to bury friends who had fallen in the line of duty. Fallen after a bullet ripped through their warm bodies and took their lives. To the world, they were criminals who had met their just end. But to her, they were friends who had once been innocent children before they transitioned into cold-blooded criminals.

'Why am I doing this?' Molly asked herself silently as the matatu hurtled on towards Rongai, her destination.

Why? Because she needed the money. How else was she supposed to feed her baby?

But how did my mother raise me without resorting to such work? The internal debate continued. A series of coughs escaped from her dry lips, waking up the sleeping baby, who immediately began to cry.

Maybe I should have listened to my friend Atieno and aborted. The baby stopped crying as suddenly as it had began and Molly found herself smiling at the trusting innocence of the baby she sometimes wished she had aborted. Rongai is slightly more than an hour from Nairobi city center and has a population estimated at 100,000. It is located in Kajiado County, sandwiched between Ngong Hills and Kaputiei plans. As soon as the matatu honked its way into this sprawling residential area, Molly shot to her feet. It was nearly noon and she had been given strict instructions to keep time. Arrive one minute late and you will not be paid a single penny. They had told her. Minutes later, she was standing just a few meters from the main road, talking casually to a neatly dressed young man. She reached into the shawl that was covering her baby, pulled out a wrapping of green nylon paper and handed it over to the young man. He took it nonchalantly and walked away without uttering another word. Nestled in his hand was a wrapping of a deadly pistol.

Later that evening, the same young man stood in front of Molly at the same spot and handed back to her the deadly wrapping. It had already accomplished its deadly work.

This is the world that Molly had sunk into. A world where her very own baby became an unwitting accomplice in her criminal activities. Payment for ferrying small arms back and forth was never more than one thousand shillings. Her rent was one thousand shillings, so one job was enough to pay rent.

Another job would buy her any number of trappings that a young girl of her age often desires. She was often unable to place her finger on what exactly she bought with her criminal wages. Her mother always used to tell her in a stern voice that, 'ill gotten money can't buy even a single tomato!'

Molly had dropped out of school in her penultimate year of primary school. She just got tired of the boring routine – go to class, sit in the back row, listen to stressed teachers blubbering on about complicated formulas then sit for exams that gave her nothing but stress. Why am I doing all this? She would ask herself. Many of her friends had dropped out and they convinced her to follow suit. Barely fifteen, she was introduced to the world of sex. Her first time was with the older brother of Shiro her friend. It was painful but later it felt good. So she did it again and again until her first pregnancy came along two years later. She aborted. It was painful and it didn't feel good later.

Like Molly, over 3,200 other teenage girls in Kenya had resorted to abortion in 2003. Many ended up in public hospitals with abortion-related complications while others endured at home, hoping that the pain would go away and they would heal. Tragically, the pain doesn't always go away. 2,600 women die every year from abortion-related complications.

At least Molly was alive. But hers was a life of raging waves that kept depositing her into depression and rage on a daily basis. Apart from her equally depressed friends, there seemed to be no one who could give her a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on.

As she was engaged in her small arms assignments in 2007, Kenya's presidential, parliamentary and civic campaigns were well underway. Raila Odinga and his pentagon brigade were barnstorming the country, looking for those elusive votes. Incumbent president Mwai Kibaki and his Party of National Unity team were traversing every corner of the country eagerly searching for votes. There were seven other presidential candidates who were all promising a better life for Kenyans if only they could be voted into Kenya's palatial presidential State House. But none of these presidential candidates reached out to young single mothers like Molly. None articulated solutions for problems faced by unemployed young women like Molly.

But at least on the home front in Korogocho, there was a candidate for a civic seat who gave Molly a listening ear. It was Khadija.

Khadija had listened keenly, not just to the presidential candidates, but also to the parliamentary and civic candidates. She watched as Elizabeth Ongoro walked in Korogocho decked in orange dresses and campaigning with vigor.

But she wasn't just watching. She was also a civic candidate. So every morning she put on a big, smile, flat shoes and matched the dusty footpaths of Korogocho touting her candidacy.

They told her she was too young but she responded that if she was old enough to vote, then she was old enough to receive votes.

They told her that she was just a woman but she responded that this was all the more reason why they should vote for her. What had the men who had been there done anyway? She asked them earnestly.

They threatened to rape her. To kill her. But she soldiered on. Many young people held her hand and shielded her from harm's way.

They told her that she didn't have enough money to run a campaign but she told them that she had enough ideas and enough passion.

In the end, Khadija's ideas and passion resonated so well with the people of Korogocho that she defeated better funded, more experienced candidates and fell just short of clinching the ward councillorship. She was number TWO.

But there was one place where Khadija was number ONE. Link the hidden treasure. She founded this organization when she grew tired of the helplessness

of young women in Korogocho. Miss Koch had inspired her to reach out to her world and change it.

Miss Koch also inspired the establishment and growth of other youth initiatives like: Korogocho Residents Association, Human Rights City, Pendo One Theatre Group, KOMA, Korogocho Mirror and CODE-Korogocho. These organizations saw the light of day partly because Miss Koch had already seen the light of day and proved that it was possible for youth initiatives to flourish in Korogocho.

Miss Koch focused on the empowerment of the community as a whole and young women in particular. Khadija felt empowered by the Miss Koch fellowship and now wanted to pass on this empowerment to others. So she birthed 'Link the Hidden Treasure.' Just like any other birth, this initiative was birthed in pain. Ten of her friends, or may be eleven, maybe twelve, were prostitutes. They sold their bodies for money to feed their fatherless children and pay rent for their cold, lonely houses.

One of her friends, they called her Chichi, had a chocolate complexion and chocolate eyes. And a baby face. She looked sweet sixteen even though she was stressful twenty three. At this age, you have already been in your twenties for three years and you are every inch an adult even though remnants of your teenage years continue to cling on your psyche.

At twenty three, some days you are an innocent child, some days you are a rebellious teenager while other days you are a responsible adult. But for Chichi, she was a rebellious teenager for all the 604,800 seconds of a week.

She slept with men because she could and they wanted her so much that they paid her to sleep with them. How cool was that! She often bragged to her friends. It is called prostitution, some of them told her. I don't care what they call it! She would retort. It's fun and it pays well.

Because she had grown up with her, Khadija had known Chichi the innocent child who had wanted to be a nun like sister Maria of St John's Catholic church. Even now, she still saw flashes of that innocence in Chichi's chocolate eyes. Whenever tears flowed from those eyes, and this was becoming increasingly often, Khadija would see that childhood innocence shining bright and clear. Chichi cried whenever the men who were paying her for the 'fun' she was giving them hit her. Some hit her for no particular reason. It's as if they did it just because they had paid her and could therefore do to her whatever they wanted. These were her really low moments when she missed the child she once was and hated the adult she had become.

Khadija could relate very well with Chichi the child and Chichi the adult. She ached for her friend and wanted to help in restoring her life to that childlike state that is bereft of hurtful compromises. The more Khadija pondered over Chichi and other young ladies who were equally immersed in crime, the more she felt inclined to do something about it. You be the change you want to see. Mahatma Gandhi had said it and the Miss Koch people had reinforced it in her. Although she was one of these Miss Koch people, she was more of a mentee than a mentor. The three founders, together with Ben Gachie and a few more others did a great job mentoring her and other younger ladies to be the best they could be.

Now she wanted other young women like Chichi to also be the best they could be. So she started an organization whose very name spoke volumes about what it was all about – Link the Hidden Treasure. When you award people, you inspire them to reach beyond themselves. To push themselves to the limits. This is exactly how Khadija felt the night after she received the personality of the year award from Miss Koch. She had been awarded for her work in empowering other young women.

Miss Koch's initial heady weeks at the start of the new millennium turned into months of unbridled excitement and eventually years of guarded optimism. In 2006, this optimism took a jolt when an eviction notice from the chief reached the busy offices of Miss Koch. This was quite surprising because this is the same chief who sometimes referred people to Miss Koch for assistance. How could the authorities turn against them like this?

This difficult period inspired Raphael, the then coordinator of Miss Koch to write an article for a local newspaper entitled, 'we refuse to die!'

There were however, those in the community who didn't share this attitude. They were convinced that there was no way Miss Koch would survive. A bunch of young people could not just mushroom from nowhere and triumph where others had failed. Who did they think they were?

How could the organization survive if their premises were about to be pulled from under their feet?

Luckily, there was a major public outcry in support of Miss Koch. Five years had passed since the founding of this organization and the community had since moved to stake its ownership in the organization. Hence kicking out Miss Koch was akin to kicking out the community itself. It was this strong community involvement coupled with Miss Koch's own advocacy that saved the day, ensuring that the roof over Miss Koch's head remained intact.

The meeting started with informal chatter and banter about the goings-on in Korogocho's seven villages. Someone had beaten his wife in the thick of the night, leaving her in screams that awakened neighbors. This piece of information from Oti elicited an instant flash of anger in Irene's eyes. Men who beat their wives do not deserve those wives!

Irene's raised voice travelled across the room landing squarely on the sweating face of Annastacia, whose own voice rose even higher, 'these are the things that we must eliminate in Korogocho!' For almost one hour there were heated discussions in the room about gender based violence – its causes, instances and solutions.

Many felt that drunkenness was to blame. When people were drunk, they did stupid and violent things. But other disagreed. They instead placed the blame squarely on a macho culture. Men who beat their wives simply did so because they could.

The great thing about this discussion was that people spent more time brainstorming solutions than finger pointing.

In her forthright manner, Irene spelt out the solution.

'One year in jail for every slap.' This prompted someone to blast the justice system in Kenya noting that instead of being correctional institutions, prisons enhanced crime.

A young man with a green t-shirt and black jeans cracked his knuckles as he talked about the one year that he had spent in prison. 'Did I leave prison a better man?' he asked rhetorically in his chirpy voice.

Like a skilled orator, he didn't give any answer but just left the question hanging above the heads of the thirteen people in the room.

The meeting then took a lighter tone when Kadogo, who had joined Miss Koch in 2002 reminisced about the 2002 beauty pageant that had been won by Rose Nyawira. Raphael chimed in and talked about the first ever beauty pageant in 2001.

They began talking about the different pageants and the respective winners. Some of the ladies present had been models in these pageants and they talked with a lot of fondness about the experience.

'It felt good to feel beautiful and appreciated,' one of them said in a soft, wistful tone.

Why would people trample on such beauty? Raphael thought silently. He voiced his thought soon afterwards, causing people to launch into yet another animated discussion on whether beauty was a liability or an asset. Someone even quoted Confucius the Chinese philosopher that, 'everything has beauty but not everyone sees it.'

Someone else later brought up the Beijing declaration and its principle of inherent human dignity of women.

The meeting then ended. But not quite. Because the following day, it continued in a different form, at a different venue. It was an ongoing conversation that was sometimes formal and at other times informal. A conversation rooted in the local realities of Korogocho.

A conversation full of intelligence that connected local dots with global dots. It resonated globally and several international players became a part of it. They did so because it was a solution-oriented conversation that totally shunned the victim mentality for a victor mentality. The constant principles in this conversation were, 'we can do it!' and 'we will do it!' Indeed, it was a conversation that utterly embraced consciousness and gave meaning to Kofi Annan's timeless words that, 'our problems are never beyond our power to solve them.' Weeks turned into months and it was soon time to pass on the leadership baton. The day to day leadership of the organization passed on from Raphael Obonyo to Emmy Kemper, a young lady with a deep passion for women empowerment. She was born in Uasin Gishu, in the Great Rift Valley, just over two decades earlier.

Her first major foray into Miss Koch was in 2005 when she was a model in the beauty pageant. It was a testament to Miss Koch's girl child empowerment focus that the model was now the leader.

Emmy was now captain of a highly talented team that comprised of people bereft of a payslip at the end of the month but full of passion for the work that they were doing.

The team members were as follows: George Akwiri the Badilika Programme Head; Dominic Mwangi the Resource Centre Manager; Peter Mwashu the Secretary; Bernard Odhiambo the Daraja Programme Head; Halima Hani the Burudika Programme Head; Evelyne Akoth the Wadada Programme Head and Japheth Oluoch the Finance Manager.

One dark, tragic day in 2009, Dominic was brutally murdered in the very neighborhood that he had called home for the time that he had been on earth. But before that happened, he gave his all in managing the resource center. He may have become a homicide statistic but at least in the final years of his life, he had been a change agent who found dignity and helped to pass it along. This was the dignity that the Badilika programme sought to entrench in youth and place them in the driver's seat of their sexuality and reproductive health. George its head, had witnessed firsthand how HIV/AIDS had left seemingly irreparable damage in the lives of many friends, relatives and acquaintances. Less visible but similarly traumatic were the lasting scars left behind when reproductive health was thrown to the gutters.

As a young woman herself, Emmy could relate fully with the pain felt by many young women in Korogocho when their education was cut short because of early pregnancies or reproductive health complications. Together with George and other team members, she championed the Badilika programme as a means of helping young people to change irresponsible behavior. In dozens of talks organized under this programme, Miss Koch made it clear to young people that sex is a beautiful blessing that can become an ugly curse. In order to reach a wider youth audience,

Miss Koch joined twelve other youth groups to form the Koma Youth to Youth network (Y2Y). This network collaborated with Nairobi City Council and the German Foundation for World Population (DSW) to produce a monthly newsletter that encouraged responsible sexual behavior amongst the youth. The newsletter communicated through youth language using candid words like ‘zip up and hold your pants or succumb to HIV/AIDS.’

Through the Badilika programme, youth were trained in peer to peer counselling so that they could be change agents in their neighborhoods. Such trained youth were able to multiply the impact of the programme. One lasting impact of the programme was that it made it okay to talk about sex in the light so that young people could engage in it more responsibly in the dark. Or even better, abstain from it altogether until they are more mature.

Your talent is God’s gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God. When Leo Buscaglia, the late American motivational speaker uttered these words, he could have been talking about Miss Koch’s Burudika programme. Headed by Halima Hanii, a young tenacious lady with a legendary love for soccer, this programme’s focus was twofold – to help young people identify their God given talents, and to help them tap fully into these talents. Miss Koch’s trademark beauty pageant exemplified what the Burudika programme was all about. Beauty and the showcase of it is a talent that is often derided as vain. This is despite the fact that humanity has been drawn to beauty since time immemorial.

The first ever Miss Universe title was won by Finnish lady Armi Helena Kuusela in 1952 and since then, the Miss Universe beauty pageant has been a globally renowned annual event. Through Miss Koch, young women in Korogocho were now following in Armi’s beautiful footsteps and celebrating their beauty even as it was showcased to the world. In those moments when they glided along the improvised catwalks of Korogocho, when the eyes of gathered guests remained glued on them, when friends called out their names and strangers clapped proudly, they came to believe that they were truly talented in beauty. It was moments like these that gave Halima unbridled joy. In 2003, one year after Rose Nyawira had won the Miss Koch title, Veronica Mumbi was crowned as the third winner of the Miss Koch title. Coupled with her organizational talents, this title catapulted her to yet another victory – she won the Eve Young Woman of the year award for her work with fellow young women in Korogocho.

The beauty pageant also provided a platform for other creative talents to flourish. They include talented groups like Hope raisers, Pendo theatre group and Men of God (MOG), which has since stormed into national stardom. These groups were able to perform their music or theatre during the beauty shows and in so doing hone their skills.

Hope Raisers in particular was able to tap into the space provided by Miss Koch to reach a wider audience and polish some of their musical hits like G8, a song that lobbied for the cancellation of Africa's debt.

Apart from this talent programme Miss Koch also had the Wadada programme that was headed by Evelyn Akoth. It focused on girl child education and overall empowerment of young women. This programme was directly heeding Nelson Mandela's assertion that, 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' In facilitating the education of young women, Miss Koch was empowering them to change their lives and the world. At least twenty five young women have since completed their high school through the support of the Wadada programme. They include Rukia Nyambura and Asha Abdi, two young women who finally sat for their Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education because Miss Koch was able to mobilize resources for their school fees.

Resource mobilization entailed such ingenious activities as fundraising dinners in five-star hotels like the then Grand Regency Hotel. As they walked into the carpeted receptions of these hotels and waited in the pin-drop silence to speak with managers in gleaming suits, they refused to be intimidated because the plight of Korogocho's young women drove them forward.

As Evelyn was busy steering the Wadada programme, Bernard Odhiambo's time was spent working on the Daraja programme that he was heading. This programme was addressing human rights, governance and peace. Low income neighborhoods like Korogocho were prone to all manner of human rights violations. Daraja sought to both counter and preempt any such violations. On 23rd August 2006, a rather cloudy day, thirty-five youth from Korogocho and Kariobangi trooped into a room with neatly arranged chairs and tables. Brand new notebooks and pens were smartly placed on the tables, waiting to be used. As the thirty-five people shuffled into the room, the chairs were pulled back, filling the room with the sound of metal and concrete scratching in an early morning embrace. They took their seats as they exchanged greetings and smiles in the manner of acquaintances who had once been friends. Many of them knew one another since they were mostly from Korogocho and Kariobangi. But it had been a while since they met in close proximity like this.

The thirty five were there for the Miss-Koch organized Human Rights City Summit training workshop. Human Rights was a term that many of the thirty five were generally familiar with, even though they didn't possess a deep appreciation of the same. They knew that Human Rights had to do with the rights of human beings and that was about it.

For the three alternately cloudy and sunny days, the thirty five – twelve women and twenty three men – dug deep into the human rights terrain, unearthing what exactly these rights were and how they could enforce them.

As it continued to grow, Miss Koch became more strategic in its interventions. Yet resource constrain remained a never-ending challenge that kept widening the gap between aspiration and execution. Equally daunting was the challenge of maintaining high levels of transparency and accountability on a continual basis.

Although the Miss Koch leadership, staff and members remain capable of meeting all these challenges, the journey remains far from over. Quite far. More young women and young men still need to be educated. More talents still need to be harnessed. More youth friendly policies still need to be enacted and enforced. More resources still need to be mobilized. It is not yet mission accomplished.

THE BIRTH OF KOCH FM

The humdrum of human conversations could be heard clearly through the wide open door of the new studio. More than five people were talking excitedly at the reception area.

There was Nyash, a dreadlocked young man whose average height and slender frame gave him an air of a reggae musician. He was one of the founding board members of Koch FM as was Roba, the young man whose wide grin had once graced magazines across Kenya. Apart from his social activism, Roba was a hip-hop artiste with the famous Kalamashaka group, generally considered to be the godfathers of Kenyan hip-hop.

The year was 2006 and Kenya was one year away from elections. The famed NARC coalition had fizzled into a series of parties and rag-tag coalitions that were now gunning for the presidency on their own. As newspaper headlines screamed about the latest coalition possibility, people in the sprawling Koro-gocho slums were going about their daily business, struggling for their daily meals. One such person was Kui, a single mother of three.

Kui's three children had two different fathers, none of whom she loved. In fact, she couldn't even remember the last time that she had used the word, love. She didn't go to church and didn't pray often. She couldn't remember the last time she had been to the city center or read a newspaper. It's not that she couldn't read. In fact, she had been the first person from her family to complete high school.

But that was then. Now she had three children to feed and no job to earn money from. Even the two fathers of her three children had no jobs. They still lived with their mothers, who also had no jobs.

Jobs. This was the one word on the minds of Nyash, Roba and eight other young people who were just about to begin a meeting.

'What we need is a powerful film that will showcase what the people of Koch go through,' Hellen Wanjiku, popularly known as Shiko said in her calm powerful voice.

The film idea gathered steam and before long, the ten youth were knocking on doors and making phone calls to anyone they thought could be able to help. The responses had one thing in common – discouraging. Her hair was short cropped, giving her a look of innocence that belied her fierce determination. It was a determination that she had inherited from both her mother and grandmother, two women who refused to succumb to the sad plight of the ghetto.

‘Because I was born and bred here in Korogocho, I understand what people here go through,’ Shiko paused and looked at her nine listeners keenly, ‘just like me, most of you are also sons and daughters of Korogocho, which means that no one can tell the story of this place better than us.’

‘I agree with Shiko,’ Jeff, a young man with big, brown and alert eyes said emphatically, ‘we need to come up with several powerful films that we can then screen right here in Korogocho and in as many places as possible.’

It’s not every day that some young person from one of Nairobi’s largest slums shows up at your office and asks for help in making a film. Some people even told them that real movies were only made in three places – Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood. So stop wasting your time, they were told.

Oti, the Miss Koch co-founder was again in the middle of yet another initiative. He had been told back then that it wasn’t possible but they had made it. So he was sure that even this time, they would also make it. He encouraged his ten colleagues to never take no for answer.

There were however some rare few who gave them a listening ear and nodded appreciatively. But all they got from such was, ‘good luck!’

As it was, luck didn’t seem to be on their side, because it soon became clear that making even one film was a costly affair. In the memorable words of one of them, after a particularly discouraging budgeting session, ‘the cost of making a film would cost not just an arm and a leg, but several lifetimes.’

So they shelved the film idea and went back to the drawing board. It was a drawing board that was full of illness, poverty and crime.

For every child in school, there were arguably two who were out of school. For every healthy mother, there were potentially three who were racked by illness. Many children never knew their fathers and appeared not to care about their fatherless status. Even more heart wrenching was the sad fact that some of these fathers could have been next door neighbors or childhood friends.

The ten youth were back to the drawing board and they soon found help from unlikely sources – Inger-Lill Persett and Richard Suenen.

These two Norwegians were at the time working on a documentary in Korogocho. They came in contact with some of the youth leaders who had conceived the film idea and suggested that they could also explore another idea that was cheaper and just as effective in telling the story of Korogocho – com-

The two Norwegians shared how Radio Favela, a community radio in Brazil had succeeded in articulating the voice of the people.

This radio idea soon gained traction even though some objected. Who listens to radio anyway? They wondered.

'I do,' Jeff said.

'Me too,' Carol added.

I certainly do,' Abdi chimed in.

Shiko nodded slowly as the radio idea sank in. She would later become the second Station Manager of the radio station when she took over from Oti.

It became clear that the ten of them were a mirror image of all radio listeners who listened to radio without consciously seeking to do so. Radio listening was such a spontaneous act that most people often never made a choice that, 'tomorrow at 8AM, I will listen to the radio.' But so powerful is radio in Kenya that 93 percent of Kenyans listen to radio regularly. That is a lot more than those who use facebook or watch television.

So it was that the ten youth got into radio. It wasn't easy. Their knowledge of radio until that point could be summed up with one word – zero.

Roba and his Kalamashaka crew may have featured regularly on radio as their home grown hip hop music blared across Kenya but he was no radio expert. Carol's radio knowledge was just like her Arabic – nearly non-existent. Having studied in Uganda, Martin's Luganda language expertise was way more than his radio expertise. And by his own admission, the only Luganda word that he knew was nyabo, lady.

It was the same story with other individuals in the ten-member gang of young Korogocho pioneers. All they knew was that radio would be a great way of giving Korogocho a voice. This is all they wanted. To give Korogocho a voice so that it could be heard by Kenya and the world.

Someone told them that radio frequencies were issued by the Communications Commission of Kenya and that this commission was situated in Nairobi's westlands.

One sunny morning, three of them jumped into matatu number 14 and off they went from Korogocho to the city center. They then hopped into matatu number 23 and were deposited right opposite the Commission. This was to be the first of many such trips. For several weeks, they practically camped outside the flashy looking offices of the Commission. Answers from Commission officials usually ranged from 'come back tomorrow', to 'the right official is not there.' But still they came.

Even as they waged a consistent war to get a government frequency, they decided to take action that would showcase their readiness.

'As our friends suggested a few days ago, let's get a container,' Oti, said. He was also one of the ten and a passionate believer in people power. He could often be spotted engaged in animated conversations, often in social places like Othaya, a popular nyama choma, roast meat hangout.

Oti's voice was characteristically intense as he gave two reasons why they needed a container, 'we won't have to start digging foundations for a building and wasting a lot of time and money on the building itself instead of the radio station. Once we get a container, we are good to go.'

There was unanimous agreement that a container should be acquired and placed at the local community resource centre. Barely one month later, after dozens of phone calls and incessant pestering of potential sponsors, Norwegian Church Aid finally helped them to get a fifteen-metre long shipping container. It was transported to the resource centre right at the heart of Korogocho. It was 6PM when the container hit the Korogocho ground with a soft thud. Surrounding it like guardian angels were ten young men and women who were all wearing the biggest smiles ever. This was the container that would carry their dream of a radio station. It was a great beginning and they felt great. The following morning, those big wide smiles turned into troubled frowns when they found that their beloved container had been locked up by a gigantic padlock.

'What!' Njeru, another member of the ten pioneers exclaimed as soon as he sauntered into the community center compound and saw the huge padlock staring at him sullenly. Local policemen were quick to own up to the locking up. 'Nyinyi mnataka kuanza radio bila leseni!' You want to start a radio station without a license! A small policeman with a big voice snarled at the frowning youth. Word had got out that a radio station was about to be launched and the authorities were not taking it kindly. To put it bluntly, they were really pissed. You have to fight fire with fire,' Njeru said in a cold, quiet tone. Oti's eyes blazed angrily as he nodded in agreement. They all agreed that the only way to fight the big padlock was to cut it open. It was a bit of a struggle but no padlock can stand in the way of ten angry young people.

Just like the other ten, Francis, also known as Big Toto was furious with the needless obstacles that the authorities were placing in their way. His fury rose even more when he was arrested as he was participating in a demonstration by community members. His quick release proved that

the voice of the community was already powering on the infant radio station that was seeking to articulate and amplify this very voice. But as the ten youth realized in the weeks ahead, a big padlock was but the smallest of their problems. The list of priorities was long and daunting.

Without a license they couldn't broadcast. Without a transmitter they couldn't broadcast. Without powerful antennae, they couldn't broadcast. Without a mixer they couldn't broadcast.

Without a powerful computer, they couldn't broadcast. Without qualified people, they couldn't broadcast. Without programme hosts, they couldn't broadcast. And without money, they couldn't do many of these things that underpinned broadcast.

'If Radio Favela made it, we can also make it,' Raphael's voice was dripping with determination. The same determination that had spurred him on in the early days of Miss Koch.

Radio Favela was a community radio station that had been started in the slums of Brazil in the eighties. Because like-minded ideas have a way of sniffing out each other, the ten pioneers had learnt more about the inspirational story of Radio Favela and had decided that this would be their story too. A story of triumph over despair. A loud and clear voice for the slums. Now that they had a container to ferry their radio dreams, they embarked on the quest of tackling all the other priority items.

When it mattered most, the Korogocho community stood up to be counted. They donated tables and chairs together with unending moral support. For many in the community, this collective effort was a big breath of fresh air. They were joining efforts, not to transport a corpse to the village after a violent break-in, but to birth their very own, brand new radio station. It was all good to have tables, chairs and a container, but they needed a transmitter that would enable transmission of sound. Sound that would amplify the stories of Korogocho and hopefully inspire action.

Sixteen women raped in Korogocho on the eve of the new millennium. Two die in the process. This could have been a headline of the Newsweek or Time magazine. But these magazines had thousands of other stories to cover. Since Koch FM was not there at the time the voice of these violated women remained largely silent.

A young man is shot dead. His family alleges that he has been shot by police on suspicion that he is a member of the dreaded mungiki sect. He is only twenty and has never been a member of mungiki. He was hoping to join a computer college and pursue his dream of becoming a computer scientist. This dream shall never be. His voice has fallen eternally silent. If Koch FM had been there, they would have given him a platform to speak out. But it wasn't all negative.

Against all odds, a young woman completes primary school and goes on to complete high school before managing to join College. Her entire education was paid for by her illiterate mother from her small grocery business. Her triumphant struggle for her daughter's education is a powerful inspirational story that should not go untold. A young man sells roast maize for years without ever succumbing to the lure of crime. He takes care of his family through this humble business. He is a hero who needs to be celebrated.

Such were the Korogocho voices that were yearning for amplification. Mothers who watched with teary eyes and heavy hearts as their children dropped out of school into the waiting arms of drugs and the clenched jaws of crime. Mother who cried tears of joy when their sons and daughters finally graduated from College and ventured into the job market with more promise. Koch FM wanted to give all these mothers together with their children and husbands a voice.

A voice. This is all they wanted for themselves and their Korogocho community. In June 2006, they got this voice when the Communications Commission of Kenya issued them with the 99.9 shared frequency. Finally, after months and months of agitation, hand-wringing, silent prayers, loud protests and uncountable sighs, they had a frequency. 'Poa kabisa!' Great stuff! Nyash shouted in delight as he flashed his trademark grin. It is this happy spirit that would later be missed dearly when Nyash was brutally murdered outside his house in 2012. But at that moment when Koch FM was being born, Nyash was still in this world, changing it for the better.

'This is simply amazing,' Raphael, said as he shook his head in disbelief. He had always believed in the words of Frantz Fanon, the French Algerian writer that, 'each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.' Raphael was part of a Korogocho generation that was discovering and fulfilling their mission. 'When you start doing something, there must and there will be somebody somewhere who will see what you are doing and you will be rewarded,' Tom Mboya said passionately as the beret cap on his head nodded along.

Tom later took over from Shiko as the team leader of Koch FM.

This premier community radio station has continued to give the people of Korogocho a steadfast voice. It has also inspired the founding of other community radio stations like Pamoja FM in Kibera, Ghetto Radio, Kenyatta University Community radio and United States International University (USIU) community radio.

The voice of Koch FM sometimes falters and needs more support if it is to remain powerful, independent and consistent.

THE BIRTH OF THE YOUTH CONGRESS

It all started with the people. The people's manifesto. Miss Koch prepared this simple, but powerful document that clearly stated what was important to, 'we the people.'

Preparation of this manifesto was an all inclusive process that incorporated the input of as many youth as possible. The operative principle was that every young person possessed an ounce of wisdom that should be tapped into if fresh beginnings were to be realized.

The people's manifesto was prepared in partnership with Cordaid, a Dutch organization and Kenya Human Rights Commission. At the time, these partnerships were also working on a broader project that sought to advance youth leadership and participation in socio-economic and political affairs.

Because it is based in Kasarani constituency, Miss Koch organized youth forums in all the wards of this constituency. In these forums, young people discussed pressing youth issues and were asked to state their individual and collective priorities.

What really matters to you? The many youth who turned up in these forums were asked. Their varying priorities became the backbone of the people's manifesto. Next came consensus forums that culminated in a huge social event where 2007 political aspirants in Kariobangi, Korogocho and the wider Kasarani constituency were asked to sign this people's manifesto, committing themselves to the people's agenda.

Some signed this unprecedented people's manifesto while others didn't. But the point was made that leaders had to listen to the people's voice and realize the people's aspirations. Leadership should never be about the leaders but always about the people.

The Youth Congress couldn't change the incoherent youth voice and scattered youth action of yesterday. But this new organization was determined to ensure a more articulate youth voice and increasingly unified youth action.

Six years had passed since the founding of Miss Koch in 2001. One year had passed since the founding of Koch FM in 2006.

By any measure, the youth of Korogocho had stood up to be counted. In the words of Gandhi, they had become the change. Not only were young women in Korogocho, more emancipated and empowered through Miss Koch, they had also found a voice through Koch FM.

However, it is one thing to have a voice but a totally different thing to coalesce that voice into an articulate, unified and powerful force. This was the Youth Congress's mission. It wanted to channel existing youth consciousness into a dynamic organization that would be driven by grassroots youth voices. When ten ward representatives came together to form Kasarani Youth Congress, named after Kasarani constituency where Miss Koch is based, representation and participation were the key words from the word go. This nascent organization knew that representation must walk hand in hand with participation if empowerment is to be realized. These ten worked very closely with Raphael, the convener of the Youth Congress and Stanley Ogolla, the co-convener. Youth empowerment was particularly pertinent at this point because Kenya's elections were just around the corner.

Accepting his party's nomination to run for president, Raila Odinga said, 'We are going to march towards State House and come December of this year, there is going to be a change of government. This battle is going to be a battle between the forces of status quo against the forces of change.' Weeks earlier in a State banquet honoring His Highness the Agakhan, President Mwai Kibaki had said, 'the real G.D.P. growth rate has increased steadily from 0.4 percent in 2002 to 6.1 percent last year. We are looking forward to even better performance this year.'

Indeed, Kenya was on a sound economic footing but a slippery political path. Months later, the country slipped into a tragic post-election violence that left hundreds of people dead, thousands injured and thousands more displaced.

Watching this tragedy unfold, Raphael and Stanley, became even more determined to steer their new organizations to greater heights that would inspire true youth representation and participation. For the whole of 2008 and the better part of 2009, the Youth Congress existed mostly as an idea that had not yet crystallized into a concrete, fully registered organization. But it was an active idea that kept taking shape in a series of meetings involving the ward representatives and other active youth. One rather chilly morning, Stanley woke up feeling slightly nervous. After taking a few sips of tangawizi flavored tea, he sighed several times as he rummaged through his prepared notes. In less than an hour's time, he would be giving a presentation on the Youth Congress to Cordaid representatives.

After confirming that his shirt was indeed properly tucked in and that his black shoes were shiny and dust-free, he ventured out of his house and walked briskly along the dusty footpaths of Kariobangi. A number 28 matatu honked at him and the conductor who was dangling at its wide open door waved at him cheerfully. He was a childhood friend who had dropped out of high school but had never dropped out of the matatu business.

Stanley passed the St John's Catholic Church and couldn't help smiling. This church had shaped the lives of so many young people in Kariobangi and Koro-gocho. During their free time, dozens of youth usually went there to play basket ball and engage in lively bible study sessions. But at that early hour Stanley only saw a bored looking guard at the gate and a silent basket-ball court.

He glanced across the road and saw the rugged, darkened walls of Kariobangi North market. Brown sacks of sukuma wiki were being carted into the market by sturdy, sweaty young men as the head-scarfed, middle aged women who would be selling those vegetables watched with keen gazes. Minutes later, Stanley arrived at the offices of Ujamaa, a locally active organization. Soon afterwards, the meeting began. Also present was Raphael, who was chairing the meeting, Emmy, the coordinator of Miss Koch and two representatives of Cordaid.

Raphael was spotting his usual serious face. A face which reminded you that whatever he happened to be doing at any given moment, he was serious about it. Emmy's alert eyes had an inkling of stress in them. She was leading an organization that was going through turmoil and reinvention. Seated silently but attentively next to Emmy were the two Cordaid staff. They maintained eye contact with Stanley as he took them through a presentation on the Youth Congress. They nodded along as he spoke, causing him to speak with even more fervor. They were impressed, 'We would very much like to visit your office today so that we can learn more about you. You seem to be doing great stuff!' One of the Cordaid people said in a loud cheerful voice.

Stanley froze. He cleared his throat once, twice. Thrice. The index finger of his right hand found its way to the top of his head and scratched it gently. Somewhere on the sides of his forehead, sweat began forming. The Youth Congress didn't have an office. This inconvenient fact couldn't be shared with Cordaid, potential donors who had been impressed by Stanley's presentation and even asked the Youth Congress to submit to them a proposal.

Raphael saw Stanley's discomfort and quickly came to his rescue. 'I think for today you can just visit Miss Koch's offices then we can plan for you to visit to the Youth Congress's office next time.' Raphael Said

Phewx! Stanley shouted silently as the meeting concluded. It had been a successful meeting and Cordaid had asked the Youth Congress to formally submit a proposal to them.

Later that day as they had fish and ugali in a roadside restaurant, Stanley and Raphael exchanged high fives. Funding had been a real headache of theirs and now, a real donor had asked for a proposal!

It didn't occur to them at that triumphant moment that this proposal was easier said than done. Raphael, who was the principal writer of the proposal was also quite busy with his internship at the Kenya Human Rights Commission.

He wanted to make sure that the proposal was a reflection of the ideas of the youth and not just his own ideas. So every time he punched the tired key board keys of his computer, one question kept ringing in his mind, 'is this truly reflective of youth positions?' Sleep and food became secondary considerations for him during this time, leaving his slender stature even more haggard.

A number of meetings later, youth positions and aspirations were clearly carved out in the proposal and Raphael was able to click attach, then send. After that came days and weeks of apprehension as they waited for Cordaid to reply. Would their proposal be successful? They kept wondering.

The Youth Congress was still a powerful movement that hadn't yet crystallized into a concrete organization. If Cordaid said yes to their proposal, then they would be able to crystallize this movement.

When Cordaid's answer finally came, it left them with intense mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were ecstatic that Cordaid had said yes. But on the other hand, this yes came with two simple requests that they were unfortunately not able to fulfill at that time.

'Please send us your bank account number and certificate of incorporation.'

The Youth Congress wasn't a registered organization and therefore didn't have either a registration certificate or a bank account. It was another inconvenient fact that they couldn't just blurt out to a willing donor. So they did the best to pursue registration at the NGO bureau.

In the end, they were able to get and submit the certificate and Cordaid was kind enough to submit the first batch of money to Miss Koch's account since the Youth Congress's account was not yet ready.

Now that some money was in their possession, it was time to get organized. So one typically warm afternoon, several youth leaders gathered at Jeevanjee gardens to map out a clear strategy for a secretariat. They nominated several ward representatives and an accountant who would work with Raphael and Stanley in the secretariat.

Raphael, one of the three young men who had founded Miss Koch nearly six years earlier, once again found himself at the forefront of this fresh organization. Six years earlier, Miss Koch had been birthed in a tragedy – the mass rape of women in Korogocho. Back then, passion for a better, more secure Korogocho had led the youth to say in one, singular voice – enough!

This same passion was at work in Stanley, a young man whose polite mien belied a steely determination to articulate the youth voice through the Youth Congress. Stanley was convinced that this burgeoning organization could take the youth of Korogocho and eventually Kenya to the next level.

Also working with Stanley and Raphael as the first staff members of the Youth Congress were five other youth. Four of them had been drawn from the team of ten ward representatives.

Sospeter, a lanky young man, was the Kasarani ward representative and project assistant. On his young hands fell the task of spearheading peace building and conflict resolution. He had been working in Korogocho since 2003 and had a solutions-oriented mentality to the problems of young people in informal settlements.

Another pioneering program assistant was Halima, the ward representative of Korogocho. She knew where the shoe pinched the most for young women in Korogocho and embraced her new role at the Youth Congress with vigor.

Then there was Tabitha Chege, the Githurai ward representative. She couldn't bear to see her fellow youth treated as doormats by the powers that be. So she was focused on fully fledged youth empowerment and knew that this could be realized through the Youth Congress.

Equally resolute was Isaya Omwango, the Mathare North ward representative and program assistant. He had experienced his fair share of challenges but had never believed in being a victim of those challenges. He believed that all youth should have a victor mentality.

Apart from these program assistants, there was also Chistine Osongo, the accountant. She kept the accounts meticulously and assisted the nascent organization to duly account for every cent that came its way. Christine had also been an accountant with Miss Koch and had considerable relevant experience. This small but formidable team worked very closely with other ward representatives who were not part of the secretariat.

Although none of the seven members of staff was particularly fond of rugby, they did resemble an impregnable seven-aside rugby team. Like such a team, they always huddled together in their new office to strategize on how to take on the societal ills that afflict young people. This office was on the same building and floor with the Miss Koch office so it was easy to consult with comrades at Miss Koch.

Although the seven were the only players on the secretariat field, there were hundreds of other youth players whose energy and voice they sought to channel every day.

These early days were exciting but difficult. Nothing beat the adrenaline rush of coming to the small office in Kariobangi every morning. But this coming meant bus fare. Money.

At the end of the month, the seven staff members had to pay rent for their respective houses. Money. Before they left those small, sparsely furnished houses every morning, they had to pour water into small cooking pans and make some tea. They had to eat. Money.

Being human, there were days when they fell sick from malaria, or from typhoid, or from nasty colds or any other myriad of ailments. When their health failed them, they had to get treatment. Money.

In short, the seven had personal lives that couldn't be sustained without money. Yet they were now part of a young organization whose initial funding could only pay them minimal allowances. The quest for money was never far from their minds even if their hearts only had room for the youth they were serving. Like thousands of other grassroots organizations in Kenya, they had an abundance of passion for their work and a dire scarcity of money to execute this work. Under the able leadership of Raphael, they wrote project proposals whose executive summaries bristled with their idealism even as their project activities remained pragmatic

It always felt good to pen project budgets and imagine the day when these budgets would find corresponding money. Even as they wrote these proposals, they remained really grateful to Cordaid for being their first donor and helping them to take off.

This first donor was in reality the second donor because the seven staff members were actually the first donors of the Youth Congress. They donated their time and skills even when they were unsure whether this volunteerism would ultimately be met by remuneration.

Volunteerism is the oft-trodden path of many grassroots activists. They generously give of their days and months without expecting anything in return but they do need something to get them through those days and months. Simply put, they need money to buy the food and pay the bills. This remains a challenge for the Youth Congress until this day.

THE GROWTH OF THE YOUTH CONGRESS

Kasarani constituency has a population of ten million people who live in eighty six, densely populated square kilometers. These people live in ten civic wards namely: Korogocho, Kasarani, Kariobangi North, Kahawa, Roysambu, Baba Dogo, Githurai, Mathare 4 A, Mwiki and Utalii.

Even as he went about his duties as program assistant in charge of Human Rights, Good Governance and Justice, Stanley bristled with anger at the youth injustices that he encountered daily. The coalition government seemed to have forgotten about Agenda 4 of the National Accord Reconciliation Agreement. This agenda called on the country to 'examine and address constitutional, legal and institutional reforms, poverty and inequality, youth unemployment and land reforms.'

Stanley felt strongly that youth unemployment was not a priority of the coalition government. It was rarely, if ever, mentioned as a matter of national urgency. Stanley reckoned that youth unemployment was something that needed to be treated, in Martin Luther King Junior's words, with the fierce urgency of now.

The government of Kenya did attempt to address youth unemployment by coming up with a programme known as Kazi kwa vijana (work for youth). This programme primarily focused on engaging youth in labor intensive public works projects like road and drainage maintenance. Was this program successful? Did it truly empower the vast majority of unemployed Kenyan youth? By what percentage did it reduce unemployment? Such were the questions that the Youth Congress sought to answer through a social audit of the programme. The audit was conducted in November 2009, resulting in an audit report entitled Mobilization without emancipation-case of Kazi Kwa Vijana in Kasarani constituency.

This report provided an honest grassroots critique of the government program, arguing that though laudable in its conception, the program was flawed in its implementation. What was needed, the report noted, was a holistic empowerment of grassroots efforts to combat unemployment.

The cool thing about this audit report was that it didn't just lambast government efforts. Rather, it gave credit where it was due and criticism where it was necessary. As they spent hours working on the final version of the report, Raphael, Stanley and their colleagues felt a sense of satisfaction. The report was a vindication of their strong belief that youth convergence could articulate the youth voice and hold the government accountable.

The audit report also left the Youth Congress with unintended consequences. By preparing it, they got a clearer understanding of the bigger picture of youth unemployment.

This picture left them inspired and depressed in equal measure. They discovered that 76 percent of working age youth are formally unemployed. 76 percent!

What does it say about Kenya, Raphael wondered, that seven out ten young people, don't have decent employment. It is a time bomb waiting to explode! He jotted down these words in his notebook and circled them.

The Youth Congress subscribed to the belief that every human being is born with a talent. It was Halima Hanii's responsibility at the Youth Congress to work on nurturing youth talent together with capacity building and economic empowerment of young people.

Every day as she walked to work, her mind raced with ideas on how youth talent could be used to steer youth economic empowerment. Many of her friends were talented in skills like singing, dancing, painting and acrobatics. There was Big Toto who could dance like Michael Jackson and Asha who could sing like Miriam Makeba. Even Oti, the co-founder of both Miss Koch and Koch FM was a talented dancer. Nyash, another co-founder of Miss Koch was a truly talented dancer and acrobat.

Indeed, there was an abundance of talent all over Korogocho. The challenge was to tap into this talent and nurture it. Miss Koch had sought to meet this challenge head-on through its BURUDIKA – Talent, skill and capacity development programme. Now it was the turn of the Youth Congress to similarly meet this challenge.

Over a period of several months, Halima worked closely with her colleagues in executing a program on talent search and promotion. Back in 2007 during a visit by Ford Foundation representatives, youth talent shone as brightly as the midnight stars. The stage was set and the front row visitors were all smiles. Seated among them was Dr Willy Mutunga, the current Chief Justice of Kenya. He was at the time working as a programme officer at Ford Foundation, and was a great admirer of the struggle by the Koch youth. Their resiliency appealed to his own buoyant spirit.

The invisible rays of the sun were hot, causing rivulets of sweat to trickle down the brows of the front row guests and the hundreds of spectators behind them.

The wooden stage was dusty and empty. Up above, the blue sky too was empty, bereft of any clouds. A stocky young man with a sparse goatee walked briskly onto the stage and announced with the usual fanfare of MCs that, 'put your hands together for the Seeds of Peace percussionists!' Dr Willy Mutunga and all the other spectators obediently followed instructions and clapped mightily

as a team of drummers and dancers jumped to the stage. The lead drummer kept slapping the medium-sized drum that was resting between his knees. His slaps came in regular intervals that produced a rhythmic staccato sound of pa! pa! pa! pa!

Then came faster beats from other drummers as they swayed their bodies to the beats of their drums. This way, that way, their bodies went. Their hands were blurry motions as they slammed the hapless drums with vigor and chanted along. Their deep-throated chants seemed to be extensions of the drumming. Raphael seemed to be in a trance as he watched the dance. Although he had watched it many times before, every time was always like the first time. He raised his hands and clapped as the drummers danced their way off the stage. Resounding claps and whistles from the crowd followed them. Amazing talent! Similar talent was on show as models from Miss Koch strode onto the stage and strutted their stuff. Their make-up was just right as was their cat-walking. Their confidence was palpable as they gazed right into the eyes of the front-row guests. Amazing talent!

It was this bedrock of amazing talent in Korogocho that the Youth Congress now sought to build into and develop. It therefore reached out to and supported several youth groups that included Kiamaiko Talent Initiative, Mathare Youth Development Group, Dandora Youth Forum, MAPAKA, Koch peace festival, Pamoja Ghetto Group, MYTO and Baba Dogo United Sports Association. Networking with such talent-intensive youth groups was a crucial first step of the Youth Congress's talent programme because talent cannot be nurtured unless it is identified. As Halima and her colleagues were discovering, there were some incredible talent initiatives that just needed a bit of assistance to move on to the next level.

Kiamaiko Talent Initiative was one such group. Led by the charismatic Godfrey Otieno, this organization was channeling youth talents into previously unheard of art forms like capoeira. Who would have thought that capoeira, the Brazilian martial arts dance would be alive and kicking in the ghettos of Nairobi! Sadly, Godfrey Otieno, or Godi, as he was popularly known, later died in a tragic road accident.

The Youth Congress realized that heroes like Godfrey abounded and it was important to unite them into a formidable network of talent heroes. By co-hosting the Sawa Sawa festival of 2010 with Sarakasi Trust, the Youth Congress was able to network even more with other talented youth.

Talented performers of global renown were at the festival. They included Don Carlos, the Jamaican reggae maestro, Ousmane, the young reggae crooner from Kenya, Batuque Batucade the skilled artists from Brazil, Sarakasi acrobats, Sarakasi dancers, Daddy Owen the husky voiced gospel musician, DJ Adrian and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, the young hip hop gurus from Dandora.

Edgar Guest, the American poet once said that ‘the eye is a better pupil than the ear.’ The Youth Congress knew that events like Sawa Sawa festival could equip talented youth with visions and inspiration that no amount of workshops could give them.

As they watched globally renowned artists like Don Carlos belt out their melodies, young musicians from Korogocho found inspiration to keep on singing. After the last song was sung and the curtains of Sawa Sawa festival closed, Amina, a young Borana lady from Korogocho boarded number 28 matatu with her friends, leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes and silently sang Christina Aguilera’s song, ‘keep on singing my song.’

But I’m gonna carry on

I’m gonna keep on singing my song

I never wanna dwell on my pain again

There’s no use in reliving how I hurt back then

Remembering too well,

the hell I felt when I was running out of faith.

The journey is far from over and the Youth Congress is yet to find success in promoting Korogocho’s vast youth talent. A major step towards this direction was taken through an elaborate musical talent search that the Youth Congress organized in the Nairobi Eastlands constituencies of Embakasi, Kasarani and Starehe.

Musically inclined youth were encouraged to showcase their talents through a number of events and auditions. Several were shortlisted with the top-most expected to eventually secure full album recording and promotion.

As Kenya learnt the hard way in the 2008 post-election violence, nothing can function without peace. Peace is like the mother hen that covers her chicks with expansive wings, enabling them to flourish in their chick lives.

At the Youth Congress, Sospeter Mumbi was the Programme Assistant in charge of peace building, conflict prevention and transformation.

Even before the ill-fated 2007 elections, Korogocho had always been a hot-bed of violence. So severe is this violence that it is almost accepted as a way of life. All of Korogocho’s nine villages have violent tales to tell. Death from gun wounds accounts for 12 percent of deaths in Korogocho. It’s like a war zone in slow motion.

Faced with this bleak picture of violence, Sospeter and his colleagues decided that it was time to yank their heads from the sand of indifference and pursue peace actively.

Pursuit of peace is often a lot more effective whenever it is done collectively, not singularly. Appreciative of this fact, the Youth Congress teamed up with organizations on the Youth Platform for Change so that they could together work towards entrenching peace amongst the young people of Kenya.

Proactive action for peace is still work in progress for the Youth Congress. Peace is so slippery that a firm grip on it is needed if conflict is to be avoided.

But the problem is that it is intangible, so how do you grip that which you cannot see? If peace is a journey, and not a destination, how do you ensure that this journey incorporates as many people as possible? What exactly can the youth specifically and consistently do to ensure peace? Caren Wakoli, the chair of the Youth Congress advisory council has an answer to this question, 'just do the best that you can with what you have.' She goes on to quote

Martin Luther King Junior, 'if you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.' This is exactly what the Youth Congress and the other Koch youth initiatives have done over the years – they have kept moving forward. They have lived Kwame Nkrumah's immortal words that, 'we face neither East nor West, we face forward.'

As they walked along the crowded road in Korogocho, the three young men were facing forward because that is the only way you can walk. You look ahead, and then one step at a time, you walk forward.

Raphael had a distant gaze in his brown eyes. It was as if he was looking into the future that was still waiting to be discovered and tackled. What did this future hold in store for the youth of Korogocho and for youth all over Africa?

Two little girls sped past them, running as fast as their little legs could carry them. They were not in any danger. It was just a game. Children playing along a dusty road.

Anthony's big hands were in the deep pockets of his blue jeans. His eyes too, had a faraway look in them. He was looking into the past that had already been tackled. How could this past serve as a bridge to an even brighter future? A boda boda, motorbike taxi, sped past them. The young man riding it didn't even have a license to ride but he was doing it anyway. The plump gentleman that he was carrying was clinging on for dear life.

Oti's lively eyes had a deep intensity that seemed to be interrogating the present. He saw a middle-aged woman with a brown headscarf selling mangoes by the roadside. The big, yellow mangoes smiled up at him and he smiled at the jolly-faced lady who instantly invited him to 'come and taste the best mangoes in the world!' Oti's booming voice called out to Raphael and Anthony to stop and choose a mango each. The year was 2012.

Eleven years had passed since the founding of Miss Koch. Koch FM was six years old and the Youth Congress was five years old.

Raphael was now pursuing further studies in USA and Oti had since migrated to Australia. But the two long-time friends were back home for holiday and had met with fellow pioneer Anthony not just to relive the past but to look into a future that still held in its grasp many opportunities.

The happy lady speedily peeled three of the world's best mangoes. She sliced them into long, thin strips, sprinkled into them a pinch of salt, a dash of red pepper and handed them to the three young men. For a soft, beautiful moment, there was total silence as they bent their heads slightly and readied their mouths for a delicious, deep bite.

In that silent moment, they didn't hear the blaring honks of motorbikes and screeching brakes of mini-buses. Neither did they hear the lively chatter of two young women as they walked home from school.

In that silent moment, the three young men had only one thought as they began to munch the best mangoes in the world – Korogocho has the best youth in the world. Youth who dug deep, beyond the indignity of their poverty and found the dignity of their destiny.

We desire to bequest two things to our children -- the first one is roots; the other one is wings. (Sudanese Proverb)

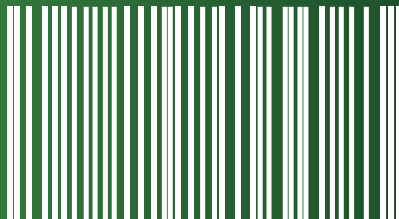
...We didn't like the way our story was told, and we wrote our own story...

Although this book depicts the story of Korogocho, it gives experiences and lessons that transcend borders, race, gender and generations. Indeed, the message captured in this book would find resonance in many parts of the world. This book is not in any sense a legacy project, but a reflection of our contribution as legitimate agents against misrepresentation, dispossession, repression and marginalization.

We were fuelled not only by the negatives and the challenges that surrounded us, but also by our enriching history and dreams. We refused to accept the common discourse and the bare reality of what it means to be identified as a citizen of poor neighborhoods like Korogocho-riddled with poverty, crime, violence and acute forms of systemic marginalization and exclusion.

We wanted to dismantle the jargons that were used to refer to the urban poor. It pained us that the story of the urban poor was usually told in a very negative narrative. For example, the story of Korogocho started and ended with savagery, hopelessness and helplessness. Indeed, the stories that were told did not depict the totality our struggle.

The book gives a glimpse of our journey of consciousness, emancipation and transformation. We hope that the book will give you a reason to reflect on what we humbly consider to be our glorious history. We invite you to celebrate with us and to reimagine a better future for all. Pass the word.



(01)04601234567893