

HOPE IN THE VALLEY

Centre keeps Mathare children off the streets

BY KIBIWOTT KOROSS

In the dingy alleyways of Nairobi's Mathare slums, shops and even hospitals keep their doors locked during the day.

Almost every building has a daytime watchman to deter idle youth from breaking in.

"Things here are bad in terms of security," Richard Oluoch of Mathare Children's Fund Panairobi (MCF) said as he led us into their offices. "You can't know who is a criminal here. They strike any time."

Oluoch, the finance manager at the organisation, says most youth in the slum have nothing to do and resort to crime.

To help combat this, MCF opened a centre in 1991 to absorb children orphaned by HIV/Aids.

"I don't know how my life would have been by now," says 23-year-old Charles Njuguna.

Njuguna, who was among the first beneficiaries of the project, joined Kenya Polytechnic University for a degree course in Information Science.

"I should count myself so lucky," he says "I was out of school as my mother could not afford to feed and send us to school."

Njuguna, an alumnus of Kijabe High School, says he is ready to contribute resources to the home when he gets employed.

"I would also like to help another child the way I was helped," he says. "If it were not for this centre, some of us would be thieves or doing other bad things out there."

Oluoch says some of the students who have benefitted from the project are employed in various parts of the country.

The centre does not offer boarding facilities to the children. The children stay with their parents or guardians. The centre works closely with parents and schools to monitor how the children are getting on in school.

To ensure that they do not miss classes, the pupils are given lunch at the centre.

"Most children in Mathare survive on a single meal a day," Oluoch says, "and by giving them food, we ensure that they stay in school."

He says most children in the streets are out of their homes due to lack of food.

"To get them off the streets, the government should come up with ways of feeding them," he says.

The centre pays fees and also meets other costs associated with education, such as uniforms, books and travel to and from school. They also cover counselling and healthcare costs for children in the programme. In addition, there is a feeding programme and, in certain circumstances, support for housing costs.

Vivian Onyango says she has no words to describe what she has gone through.

The 21-year-old joined the centre in 2004.

"I was in Standard Eight then," she says. "I don't know where I would be by now if it were not for Oluoch and his team."

Vivian, who is pursuing a diploma in computer studies at Kabete Technical Institute, says she had lost hope of furthering her education.

"The project has made me what I am today," she says. "I am happy because my parents could have not taken me to this level because they could not raise my fees."

The centre currently sponsors 107 children from primary school up to middle level colleges and university.

"We have 16 students studying in different colleges and universities in the



THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED MCF CENTRE: The Sh6 million three-storey building has a library, computer room and study rooms that students use when school is not in session. Children report to the centre every morning and in the evening after school.



LUNCHTIME: To ensure that they do not miss classes, the pupils are given lunch at the centre. Most children in the streets are out of their homes due to lack of food.



CRAFTS: A boy makes a chessboard. Kids are kept busy and off the streets.



SOCCER: The centre currently sponsors 107 children.

country," says Titus Mwangi, a team leader at the centre. "There are another 43 and 58 in secondary and primary schools respectively."

Titus says they have a lot of requests from other children's homes and rehabilitation centres but due to financial limitations, they cannot honour the all requests. "There are a lot of children out there,

both in their homes and in the hands of care givers," he says, "but we cannot help all of them. We depend on donations from well wishers. We would have wished to help everybody but we are limited by finances."

All the same, the organisation has recently expanded to accommodate more children and moved into a building MCF

constructed, having previously operated from a rented office inside the slum.

The three-storey building, says Oluoch, has a library, computer room and rooms where the students conduct their studies during holidays. It cost MCF more than Sh6 million to erect.

"We have to monitor the children during holidays and weekends," says Oluoch. "It is at such times that they are vulnerable to negative influences if they are not closely taken care of."

Children report at the centre every morning and in the evening after school.

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VIVIAN ONYANGO: The MCF beneficiary is now in college.