



## MKOMBOZI @ WORK

### Parents fail to follow up on their children's schooling: A look into the everyday realities of teachers and parents in Majengo, Moshi

Mkombozi's role while working with communities is to facilitate change, not to provide social services to children for the long term. As such, we share methodologies, support others development and ultimately hope to build a cohort of professionals and private individuals who are committed, skilled duty bearers in the promotion and protection of children's rights. In opening the door to the community, an important part of Mkombozi's work is listening and observing the trends, dysfunctions and possibilities that are already intrinsic to the way it cares for its children.

### Reaching out to primary schools to help adults better care for vulnerable children

By first-hand experience in the exploration of child vulnerability, Mkombozi has made a key discovery... The root causes of child vulnerability lie in the school as well as in the home and community - and even in the lack of linkage between these contexts. While facilitating positive development for children in communities, it is important to turn to the multi-faceted nature of the environment that surrounds them.

This "Mkombozi @ Work" issue offers a brief, but exemplifying look into intrinsic community issues, and it does so through the transcription of a discussion that took place between teachers and parents in urban Moshi. It also aims to offer a glimpse into Mkombozi's external working environment and the dynamics it offers while facilitating local government, schools and adults to better rear and protect children. Most importantly, the discussion which follows below casts light on the challenges a community is facing in providing its youth with quality care, at the same time showing its inherent ability, strength and sense of participation in addressing such challenges.

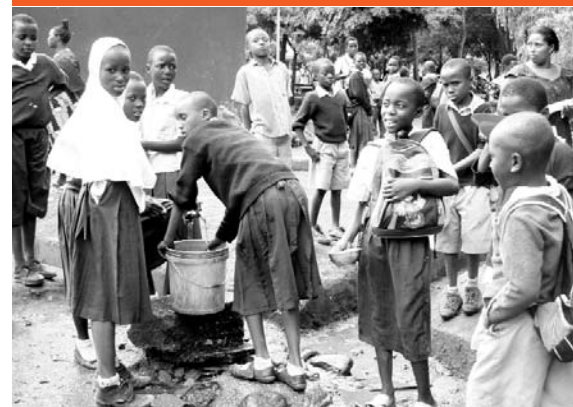
Mkombozi has for years worked with Majengo ward in Moshi, and has played a key role in investigating and addressing the underlying causes of child migration to the streets. Mkombozi is currently continuing its work to strengthen the local government's ability and consciousness in caring for children who live in difficult situations. Also, as part of the intervention "Helping adults to better care for vulnerable children", Mkombozi's Community Engagement group has now started reaching out to parents and primary school teachers in Majengo by raising awareness on why children run to the streets, what is considered abusive to children and how to better protect them - all with the aim to strengthen the community's responses to local child vulnerability.



Teacher expresses concern for children at Mji Mpya



"School payments becomes the fathers decision"



Pupils of Mji Mpya at school yard water tap



Parents discussing the upbringing of their children

# A parents meeting at Mji Mpya Primary

Serving more than 1200 children, Mji Mpya Primary School is running at its maximum capacity. In this school, it has become a challenge to strike a balance between the needs of children, the involvement and contributions of parents, and the regulations and morale of the school management. Mkombozi attended the school's bi-annual parents meeting in June, observing how these issues became unveiled on a practical level, but more importantly - and on a much deeper level of complexity - concerning parenthood and child safety in Majengo. In fact, the following discussion that took place during the parents meeting voices the community mindset about what is considered "good" and "bad" behaviour in children as well as in parents. Observations such as these are opportunities for Mkombozi to work with community members in softening the current perception of children's behaviour which clearly influences adult-child relationships and the way children learn to communicate and interact with the social world around them.

A few hundred parents and relatives showed up at the meeting in Mji Mpya on the 10th of June, representing less than half of the children who currently study in its classrooms. As parents took their seats on benches in the shade of a grove in the school yard, the Head Teacher opened the meeting by expressing concerns about the lack of cooperation between parents and teachers which so strongly affects the coordination of Mji Mpya: *The problem that we face here is that parents don't come to follow up on their children's schooling.*

The crowd of parents remained silent as the Head Teacher set the agenda for issues that need to be brought up for discussion: *There are some students who don't even show up for school in the morning. Instead they go to hide by the creek or other places during the day, and their parents don't bring them back to school. Also, children show up not wearing the complete school uniform; many have not cut their hair and some are wearing the wrong sweater - this is against the schools values. Many children show bad behaviour. Parents need to show up in school from time to time, because if they don't, their children might even start spending time with groups who hang around in the town streets.*

At Mji Mpya, students receive a school lunch for which parents are supposed to pay 20,000 Tanzanian Shillings (Tsh) per year for every child. When the meeting was held in mid-year, only about half of the parents had paid this fee, forcing the school to cook significantly less food than required for all the students. Yet, all the children are still getting lunch whether their parents have paid or not - only in much smaller quantity than planned.

This issue is the first to be raised among the parents when the meeting was opened for questions:

- *We have paid the fee for lunch, yet my child comes home hungry - the portions are too small.*
- *We hear that there are fights among the children at lunchtime because the food is not enough - they need better supervision.*
- *Children of parents who have not paid their fees should not eat!*

The last comment attracted brief applause from the parents as many start making loud speculations about where the money they have paid has gone to. As a response, a member of the school committee stood up and asked loudly: *Should we punish a child by refusing him food? Or is it the parent who should be punished for not paying? If we return a child home because the parents have not paid, we are punishing a child who has done nothing wrong. What should be done to parents who don't pay?*

Many parents cheered and talked in agreement, others in disagreement, as another school representative, an older woman who has become touched by the discussion, stood and exclaimed:

## What was learned at Mji Mpya Primary School?

**Strengthening existing communal ties is vital**

Mkombozi's interpretation of the conversation that took place in the parents meeting of Mji Mpya is that **there is no strong connection between the school and the parents, and children simply end up suffering from this gap.** We believe that such connection, if it was strengthened, could potentially help children to progress in their studies and also in their lives (since both home and school could be informed of problems children face in those respective environments).

Especially for children who are vulnerable, and who might be at risk of going to the streets, a stronger and more committed relationship between parents and school could make the crucial difference in detecting and tackling problems that negatively affect the quality of a child's life.

Mkombozi's role in this situation is to **facilitate** community members (teachers, local government as well as parents) to strengthen their common understanding around the effects of the existing gap between parents, students and teachers, and to find a way forward in building more functional relationships...

**COLUMN CONTINUES**

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*Dear parents, children are a gift from God! Really, 20,000 Shillings per year - if you see them as important you cannot fail to pay this. I know parents out there who spend money on beer or soda for themselves every day, but at the same time they fail to give their children lunch.*

*Teacher or parent; we are all parents and we are all human beings, and we were raised when times were even worse than they are now - but our parents did not fail. Let us be a good example to our children. And for those who do not pay - let them be reported and fined!*

From the discussion, it became clear that the majority of people who spoke at the meeting see the problem of failure to pay as one caused by neglect of parents - not by actual inability to pay.

The Chair of the school committee attempted to round up the debate by leading the meeting through participatory decision-making on the issue; the majority decided that people who don't pay their children's lunch are to be fined 20,000 Tsh.

The Chair reminded the parents of the debate that just took place by stating that: *There are no parents who fail to pay - they refuse! And even if someone would not be able we would forgive them if they would only come to explain. From now on, if someone does not pay, it lies within the authority of the local government together with Mji Mpya to follow up and fine them.*

An elderly man surfaced another issue of great controversy - it is an issue that some mothers face when confronted with having to pay for their children: *Look around you - most of the parents in this meeting are women. Many mothers come home to bring this up with their children's father, and he says no! The issue of payment becomes the fathers decision, and some fathers do not even come to visit the school a single time.*

The discussion took a more serious turn when another father stood up and said: *We are facing a challenge in the way parents care for their children. If a child is in trouble now in this school, she will only keep getting into trouble in secondary school or even in college; and the fault comes back to the parents. We don't care properly for our children, and we are directing them to a bad place (i.e. an unfavourable future).*

Several parents spoke more specifically about what may cause some children to fall into negative behaviour: *Watching bad movies in the video-places really destroys our children! One day, a child from this school passed me in the street and insulted me, and this is because of the videos he has watched. Also, there are small children who use bad language which they have picked up in magazines!*

One teacher, concerned for children who show undesirable behaviour at such an early age expressed: *For now, they are our children. But later in life, when they are older, they might even come to stab and rob you.*

A colleague of this teacher raised her voice and said strongly: *How are we using the gifts that God has given to us? If you would get the gift of money, you would not throw it away would you? A child, dear friends, is a gift too!*

The closing comments focused on what is missing in the parenthood of many adults, and what they need to do more of: *Do we really sit down with our children and teach them about how to handle different things, such as bad movies? It seems that we don't take time to sit down to talk to children even about things like puberty. Children behave badly because you have not sat down to talk with them.*

Before the meeting broke up during lunch hours, and people slowly started walking back to their homes, the Head Teacher closed the session by saying: *We ask those of you parents who live in this area to help each other in looking after the children in our school.*

In this situation, a real challenge for the school, as well as for Mkombozi, lies in finding a way forward by reaching the hundreds of parents who were not present in the meeting at Mji Mpya. The absent parents are likely be the very same people who do not follow up on their children's schooling, and whose children play truant, and in some ways are the most vulnerable in the whole community.

Mkombozi's involvement in local communities moves outward from the departure point of "potential". That is, to foster and facilitate potential where it already exists; for example, in public gatherings like the one documented in this story. In Mji Mpya Primary School, the parents meeting reveals upset around issues that deeply affect many people, but at the same time, it also shows the community's ability to discuss problems collaboratively, in order to work towards their solution.

In such environments, **Mkombozi's attention is tuned to strengthening existing communal ties and raising awareness** which can further help adults to care for vulnerable children, and by doing so preventing them from running to the streets.