

THINKPIECE - PRESENTATION OF IDEAS, OPINIONS, DISCUSSION & FACTS

Reaching across the geographical divide: Reflections by a Social Worker

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INTRODUCTION:

My name is Hannah Collings. I am a Social Worker from Scotland who joined the Mkombozi team in Tanzania 6 months ago to work with youth at the Mkombozi residential centre in Moshi, a small town in the northern Kilimanjaro region. Having visited Africa several times, I fell in love with the continent and decided I wanted to invest my time, energy, love and skills here in some way. My work at Mkombozi to date has shown me that there are generations of children and young people in Tanzania with incredible potential, who are highly creative and innovative, who have the same dreams of success and achievement as others in Western countries, and yet, the fact is they come from a completely different experience of life wherein opportunity, support, services and wealth are scarce commodities.

LIFE:

Here, in Tanzania, I am catapulted into a land where being white means that I am suddenly part of the minority, and yet my so called "superiority" (in terms of perceived status and wealth) seems to be highlighted and reinforced on a daily basis. I am surrounded by a landscape which is vulnerable and fickle, dependant upon extremes of weather conditions. I am faced with a nation of people who, for the majority, are trapped on a treadmill of vulnerability and poverty, due in large part to a social system that bleeds corruption, segregation and injustice.

In effect, I realise that despite the downside of my "western world", I am rich in power, opportunity, choices, support, information and money and do not face the daily struggles and issues faced by people here. The lives of those in the west and those in Tanzania are on differing extremes of the earth's geography, and as such, the paths of many people will never cross. For many who are comfortable in their comfortable lives, they have no desire to move out of their comfort zone. For others who are uncomfortable in their uncomfortable lives, they have no means to change their circumstances.

The fact is that life here in Tanzania is raw and harsh. For so many locals, each day is an uphill struggle, and everything is an effort or fight. That includes the simple act of boarding a grossly overloaded local mini bus (which instantly halves your mortality rate); local transport "dalla dallas" are consistently and intentionally overloaded because of both careless drivers as well as the required competition between drivers for passengers and income.

So far, I have been unable to determine a "retirement age"; the elderly seem to get older quicker, and yet work every day. It seems they have no time for rest, no chance to sit and watch television, play golf or go on a holiday.

In fact, Tanzanians have no welfare system to fall back onto when problems arise, no monetary or social support is available. This means that all choices are limited or taken away by poverty. It also means that "homes" here in Tanzania are beyond our description of "basic" - for many living in the villages, "home" is a simple mud and grass construction that is very vulnerable the extremes of weather.

EDUCATION:

In Tanzania, government primary schools are free but many parents are hindered by the mandatory requirement to buy a uniform and pay for any books or stationary items. The cost of these items probably does not exceed what many western primary school children get for lunch or snack money in a week. This means that Tanzania's children are only able to receive education if their parents can afford it. Moreover, all secondary schooling in Tanzania comes at a cost which many families fail to afford. Ultimately, poverty becomes a generational, crippling disadvantage which is weaved throughout many families, individual's lives and society.

Notably, if you are "fortunate" enough to go to school here, you're packed into a class with up to 100 students (and sometimes more) with one teacher who has likely received poor quality training. The teacher's time must be divided amongst the numerous students, prohibiting special attention and help for any specific child who may be struggling and requiring guidance with learning and work load.

And then, of course, there is the issue of language. Imagine if your schooling was delivered to you in a language foreign to your mother tongue, and imagine sitting examinations in that foreign language. This is the experience of Tanzanian young people in secondary school as they are taught subjects and receive literature in English. As a result, many students actually rely on memory to “learn” a subject because their English vocabulary is too limited to enable them to comprehend the subject matter itself. The irony here is that many examination papers are written in poor English, and are therefore misleading, unclear or do not assist the student to fulfil his / her examination requirements. Thus, English language schooling actually sets many Tanzanian students up to fail! Overall, it goes without saying that the frequently touted national regard for education as “the key to success” is, in practice, a frustrating paradox.

EMPLOYMENT:

As I stated previously, there is no such thing as a welfare system or the “dole” in Tanzania. There are no job centres or “back to work” initiatives and training schemes either. So, for many Tanzanians, no job means no income. But, employment is hard to find as there is great competition and not a strong labour market. Many jobs are very physically demanding and low paid. It’s difficult to watch people - young and old alike - engaged in extremely laborious work (like pulling heavy laden wooden carts along bumpy, damaged roads, balancing sacks of vegetables and fruits, wood, hay stacks and much more on their heads and carrying them for kilometres too many to count). I guess that’s why we have our personal cars, delivery vans and lorries at home?!

Salaries are at a disgustingly low level, with the average monthly income being a mere £25 - less than an average weekly shop in a supermarket or a Friday night out at the pub. Although it might be argued that living costs in Tanzania are cheaper, the fact is that wages here do not cover the cost of basic needs. It is also true that many work places have very poor working conditions, and most do not undertake risk assessments or attend to standards of work health and safety. There’s no free phone number to call regarding getting help to reclaim compensation money for these accidents. As such, many employees risk their lives and damage their bodies carrying out “risky” work in order to earn an insufficient salary.

HEALTH:

As in many other countries, health comes at a cost in Tanzania. Unfortunately, here, the costly health care is actually sub-standard and poor quality. Lack of skills, education, resources and money dictate the standard of health care received here. Sadly, sickness and death are things that Tanzanians are well acquainted with. I recently had the shocking experience of being on board a local minibus which knocked an elderly woman down. We were in the middle of nowhere - at least an hour from a hospital - with no emergency services to call upon. When I pulled back the woman’s sarong and saw that her lower right leg, from below the knee down, resembled a carcass of meat from a butcher, I realised that the woman’s unfortunate fate had been sealed. I read in the paper a few days later she died. I was sad, but I wasn’t surprised - she never had a chance.

I have also recently had the difficult experience of watching a close and well loved colleague fall sick after having a massive stroke and deteriorate to the point of death. There’s something to be said for “ignorance is bliss”... I don’t think I will ever forget watching as nurses ponder the inaccurate readings from a faulty blood pressure machine, nor will I forget being asked to assist a nurse to insert a airwave tube into my colleague’s mouth. I will never forget the complete astonishment I felt after being asked to drive into town to buy medicine because the hospital couldn’t provide it, and then the frustration and helplessness I felt when I was informed by pharmacy after pharmacy there there was no medication available. I will never forget watching as my colleague was resuscitated from the brink of death in the middle of a busy ward corridor. I will never forget watching my colleague lie in a coma, surrounded by machines, and the knot in my stomach as the power cut and I waited, hoping against hope for a back-up generator...

The experience of health care in Tanzania shows clearly that life here is raw, sobering and the establishment and maintenance of health is a daily battle.

CONCLUSION:

My work at Mkombozi to date has shown me that many people are interested in helping Mkombozi’s children to grow by donating their time, expertise and money, but many simply don’t know how to go about it and / or they don’t have the insight into the reality of young people’s lives within Tanzania. I’m hopeful that by sharing my experiences of living in Tanzania and working at Mkombozi I can help others to imagine and understand what life is like here, and in turn, help others to come to the decision to support Mkombozi and the life of the children and youth who are on the streets in this country. Perhaps the most important realisation that I have made so far is that so much of my life in the West was framed by a very personal experience of “normal” - and so many of these “normalcies” and basic rights were taken for granted and expected. Since I have moved to Tanzania and started working here however, I have discovered a completely new experience of that which is “normal”. I hope others will do the same, and then reach out to help, across any and all geographical divide.