

## **WE's Twenty Years of Impact in Kenya**

**By Kenneth Basanga**

**WITH FILES FROM ZEDDY KOSGEI, WE CHARITY**

There is a quiet revolution in female education, opportunity and leadership in Kenya's remote Maasai Mara, where girls who once trudged for hours to fetch water now choose a different path—walking each morning into the classrooms of WE College.

This opportunity is provided thanks to an innovative organization called WE Charity that is winning awards and supporters for its sustainable, holistic development work.

Twenty-two-year-old Valentine Chepkorir is one of these students taking a new and unexpected path. When she dragged her heavy luggage up the steps of WE College one year ago and walked through the front door, she was already her family's first high school graduate. Now, she is the first to attend college.

The fifth of eight siblings, Chepkorir attended primary and secondary schools built by WE Charity, and she excelled. But college was not a viable option. There were no post-secondary institutions in the Maasai Mara region, and even if there were, her family couldn't afford the tuition.

With the support of committed donors, WE Charity not only built the college but also raised money for scholarships, and another door opened for this talented student.

"When I got the call informing me that I had qualified to not only get in, but get a scholarship as well, I cried," she has said in an interview.

She entered WE College's School of Tourism. The School of Nursing also opened in 2017, followed by schools of clinical medicine and entrepreneurial agriculture.

"We started with tourism management because there is a high demand for professionals in this field," Gertrude Manani, the principal of the college, said in a previously published interview. "These young women will be able to gain employment and improve the standard of living for themselves and their families."

The work of WE Charity, and its commitment to innovation and community partnership, is a breath of fresh air in Kenya. And it's based on constantly learning from elders—and students—in the communities where it works, to break the cycle of poverty.

Twenty years ago, WE Charity began building quality primary schools in this rural region in Narok County, home to Kipsigis and Maasai people. Girls began attending school in record numbers and their hunger for access to education grew. High schools for girls and boys were built, with the support of generous donors of all ages, including western school children who wanted to help, mostly from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

"The college was the next logical step for us to support the learners in South Narok, where WE Charity works," says Scott Baker, executive director of WE Charity. "WE College was built to provide this new generation of high school graduates with the skills to uplift their communities."

From the early offerings of primary education, the organization has created its five-pillar model, which is built on 20 years of collaboration with dedicated community members and international development experts to find solutions that work. Their development work is award-winning. Its Baraka Hospital Maternity Wing was voted best in its county in 2015 by the Narok County District Quality Assurance Team. The Kisaruni All Girls High School consistently ranks in the top five per cent of all the high schools in Narok County, based on scores on national exams.

Beyond the support of young and old donors, WE Charity's work is powered by an innovative partnership with ME to WE, a social enterprise that offers socially conscious retail, hand-crafted Artisans accessories and immersive volunteer trips, creating employment and opportunities for marginalized people. Every ME to WE product or service sold supports WE Charity programs, locally or globally.

ME to WE supports the work of WE Charity by donating a minimum of 50 percent of all revenues every year to support WE Charity's operations with the balance of funds generated re-invested back into the social enterprise to help ensure sustainability and growth.

### **Meeting community members**

To appreciate the power of WE Charity's five-pillar model is to hear the stories of those community members seizing opportunities and changing their lives.

The five pillars are education, water, health, food and opportunity. Each pillar is a critical component in breaking the cycle of poverty. Each pillar is interdependent on the other. The charity's projects provide education daily to tens of thousands of children, medical care serving a catchment region of hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries, and alternative income projects empowering thousands of women to lift their families from poverty.

Mama Jane Marindany, known affectionately as the CEO of Maasai Mara, has greatly benefited from WE Charity's financial literacy training, which is provided in 20 communities in the Maasai Mara to over 70 women's groups across the region. Marindany is the leader of all these groups. She was the focus of a recent video celebrating the power of WE's opportunity pillar to create women entrepreneurs.

"I know what it's like to be spinning your wheels," she says in that video. "Ten years ago, eight of us lived in a tiny house. We didn't even have the money to send our children to school."

When WE Charity brought financial literacy training to her community, she put her hand up. Through the Savings and Loan group, she raised chickens to create a new source of income.

"Then we learned that goats are like bank accounts with great interest rates. And if you sell a few goats you can buy yourself a cow. Then you can put your kids through school."

Philes Kebaso teaches science at WE Charity's Kisaruni group of schools and mentors students to take science and math courses.

Kebaso says educational resources, like Kisaruni's fully equipped labs, ignite the students' passion for science.

“Most of these learners are the first in their families to not only go to high school but to access resources like these,” she noted in an earlier interview. “We want them fully prepared to pursue careers in STEM. They are the generation that will become role models to other young girls... It makes me very happy knowing that I am making an impact on these learners.”

### **ME to WE: An innovative social enterprise**

A fascinating and innovative part of WE Charity’s five-pillar development model is that people can travel to see it in action, through ME to WE, a separate social enterprise, which offers immersive volunteer travel experiences and also employs many of the Kenyan mamas to make hand-crafted jewelry and accessories.

Naitalala Nabala creates beautiful strings of bright colours known internationally as Rafikis.

Nabala was 12 when she first made a beaded necklace. She was taught how to bead by her mother, who, too, learned the craft from her mother. It’s a ritual—and duty—in the Maasai community for every girl to learn beadwork.

ME to WE set up the Women’s Empowerment Center in Narok County, where women can come together to bead and find an international market for the beadwork. To date, more than 1,400 women are able to earn a living through beading.

Nabala said the biggest impact Rafikis have in her life is allowing four of her five children to get an education. The school fees won’t be a problem. “Beading is part of our tradition, but I want more for them. They must go to school,” added Nabala, of the benefits working as an artisan for ME to WE have brought her.

In addition to receiving a fair wage from ME to WE, amounting to an average of a 300 per cent increase in their income, the women also get financial literacy and leadership training.

According to Russ McLeod, chief operations officer of the social enterprise, ME to WE’s immersive travel experiences enable youth to volunteer in communities where WE Charity has a long history of sustainable development and give adult travellers an opportunity to stay in comfortable facilities and immerse themselves in local culture.

“The partnership between WE Charity and ME to WE, the social enterprise, makes it unique in development circles. A social enterprise is a for-profit company selling a product or service, but its mission is primarily to better the world.”

Each entity—WE Charity and ME to WE—is operated separately, with its own staff, budgets, board of directors and financial controls.

McLeod says since 2009, ME to WE has donated over \$16 million in cash and cost-offsetting in-kind donations to WE Charity.

The other half of the earned income is used to develop infrastructure for the social enterprise, such as the Bogani Luxury Cottages and Tented Camps in the Maasai Mara and Toriana Beach House, on Kenya’s coast, where adult travellers stay when they come for culture immersion and volunteer experiences. In

addition, Tegoni, the beadwork manufacturing facility near Nairobi was also developed through the profits from ME to WE.

According to McLeod, the combination of ME to WE's eco-lodge hosting facilities as well as the partnership with WE Charity's five-pillar development model has attracted individuals who feel safe and comfortable visiting rural regions of the country, and later sponsored the charitable projects. The social enterprise also hosts doctors and teachers who travel to Kenya to work for free at the medical clinics and local schools.

Abbey Stude is an optometrist from Denver, Colorado. She heard about the program called "Passion to Heal" to send volunteers from a classmate. She goes on a volunteering mission every two years and she was happy to put her five years' experience in optometry to good use in Kenya.

"Optometry can lend itself to simple solutions like simply giving reading glasses and sunglasses for care. The education we provide is also very important. This trip is about relieving people's immediate symptoms but also educating the community to make it a more sustainable program," she said.

The model is both unique and one that works.

The social enterprise model helps to create revenue for the work of WE Charity, while, at the same time, creating a separate sustainable earned revenue stream for the charitable projects.

A dedicated team of lawyers, accountants and staff help to keep the mechanics working well. Farrah Ebrahim, a partner in the law firm Raffman Dhanji Elms & Virdee Advocates, has been working with both WE Charity and ME to WE in a legal capacity for many years. According to her, there is no use of money from WE Charity for any purchase of property by the social enterprise ME to WE. She said: "I can verify that all of the source funds for all ME to WE properties came from the social enterprise, and all source funds for charity originated with the charity." Ebrahim went on to say that "Kenya would benefit from having more purpose minded organizations such as the social enterprise, ME to WE, to help support charitable works across the country."

This would be just one example of how, with the support of targeted investors to the social enterprise, ME to WE has created job opportunities and supported the tourism industry while, at the same time, helping to financially support key charitable projects.

Travellers with ME to WE get the unprecedented opportunity to immerse themselves in a successful, sustainable development model, 20 years in the making. Says Scott Baker, WE Charity's executive director: "We are so happy to be able to showcase our work, and our incredible community partners in the Maasai Mara. We're so proud of our work together."

He explains that WE Charity seeks to work in a region for an average of five years, and then phases out support once the community is financially sustainable. "It's important not to create dependency, but enable long-term growth," through education, agriculture and financial literacy.

The quiet revolution in Kenya's Maasai Mara continues. One school house, one empowered woman, one Rafiki bracelet sold and one traveler at a time.

