



Mt. Elgon Community Healing Circles Quarterly Report

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Shalom Centre for Counselling and Development (SCCoDev), is a registered NGO in Kenya that is creating and holding trusted and transformed spaces for healing and reconciliation, and promotion of sustainable livelihoods in affected communities.

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Introduction

Shalom Centre for Counselling and Development (SCCoDev), a registered in NGO in Kenya core mission is to create and hold trusted and transformative spaces for social healing and reconciliation in communities in need of healing as a result of being wounded and divided by violent conflicts. It achieves this through community-centered healing circle meetings.

It is currently holding healing circle meetings in Mt. Elgon where violent conflicts were experienced in 1991-92, 2006-08 and 2017-18 leaving many torn apart and have remained wounded even up to today.



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Community Healing Circles

6 Community healing circles were successfully held, each lasting for 5 days: 3 for youth, 2 for women and 1 for men. They were held in selected communities in Mt. Elgon identified as most in need of healing: Chepyuk (in Kubura for youth), Emia (in Emia for youth) and Chongeiuo (2 for women in Masaek and Chelebei, 1 for men and 1 for youth in Chelebei).

The healing journey began on the first day where circle holders created a trusted space for circle participants to gain confidence to open up, actively listen to each other and support each other in the healing process. This was done by asking the circle participants introduce themselves, say the meanings of their family names and one or two things about themselves. In some healing circles, the circle participants were also asked to share the most positive experience in their lives as well as the most challenging situation. We observed that some circle participants use this opportunity to immediately recount what they went through demonstrating their need for healing (inner and social).

Starting on the second day till the fifth, the first morning session is dedicated to healing. Circle participants start with a breathing exercise to free their minds, body and soul and bring their whole attention and presence to the healing circles. Circle holders paused open-ended questions to help the circle participants reflect silently and share their feelings, personal stories showing how wounded they are and how they are progressing at their own will. No circle participant is put to pressure to open up.

The second and third sessions held mid-morning and afternoon respectively, circle participants were gradually lead to understand what can make them be wounded, how a person responds when wounded, the impact of being wounded and coping strategies. The method and approach of delivery was largely visual and interactive. Cultural sensitivity designed portraits and stories were used in these sessions. We observed that most circle participants identified themselves, their wounds and their healing with the portraits of a whole basket and a torn basket. On theme of forgiveness and reconciliation, most circle participants are deeply touched by the biblical story of Joseph.

At the close of each day, circle participants were given between 5 and 10 minutes to reflect silently on the day and how they had made most of it in their healing journey.

On the fifth day, circle participants are given time on their own to discuss what they can do next. In all the healing circles, the circle participants agreed to form peace self-help groups. Through these groups, they will be better placed to continue supporting each other in their healing journey, care and livelihoods, and be able to reach out to others in need of healing and care.



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Circle Participants

A total of 116 circle participants took part: 50 youth, 41 women and 25 men and elders. These were identified and selected by the local administration (chiefs and assistant chiefs) in Chebyuk, Emia and Chongeiwo locations in Kopsiro Division. The local administration are an entry point to the community and are best placed to mobilize circle participants most in need of healing from their locality since they know them very well and their needs. Community mobilization meetings were held with them and turned out to be fruitful and resourceful. This helped the organization better understand the community and the happenings that left community members wounded and divided.

The circle participants were widows, tortured men and women, a few former members of the militia, and parents who either tragically lost their sons or disappeared. Amongst men, the eldest was 81 years old and the youngest 20. Amongst the women, the eldest was 89 and youngest 32. We noted many former members of the militia did not turn up for the healing circle meetings when invited or will come and leave on the first day. This was specifically evidenced in Emia and Chongeiwo locations.

Most circle participants gradually opened up during the first two days. They were able to recount their personal stories, how they were wounded as a result of the violent conflicts experienced in 2006-08 and 2017-18. By the end of the fifth day, many had let go the wounded past, forgave those involved and were ready to start a new page of life. Some of those involved were able to ask for forgiveness to all those whom they had hurt. Here we give the instance of a former member of the militia who was still feared in the community. He himself was not trusting anybody, felt rejected by the community and used to walk alone. He willingly recounted his personal story (at a certain point he even broke to tears when narrating his difficult dehumanizing childhood experience) and asked to be forgiven and be supported to begin a new life. The circle participants who feared him openly came out and now felt free to interact with him.

We also noted transformation in the circle participants as evidenced in their change of dressing, look and expression of joy through singing.



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Key Learnings

- Community mobilization meetings with the local administration are key in order to identify and select community members most in need of healing.
- Community members have shown appreciation organizing healing circle meetings at a time when the elections are just about. Most violent conflicts have occurred during this time. Every time therefore when the elections near, people living in Mt. Elgon fear for the worst. These can be overcome through community-centered healing and dialogue circle meetings.



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Recommendations

- Youth circle participants proposed we urgently have healing circle meetings exclusively for the former militia members in Chepyuk, Korng'otuny, Chepkurkur, Chewangoi and Masaek. Most of them do not turn up when requested to attend the healing circle meetings for the youth. They fear and treat these meetings with suspicion. This will require additional resources to hold the 5 proposed healing circle meetings.
- Women circle participants in Chelebei proposed we have healing circle meeting with young women who were sexually abused during the violent conflicts in Chongeiwo location.
- The local administration proposed we hold healing circle meeting for them as well. They felt the need to be better prepared to support those in need of healing
- Circle participants strongly expressed the need to have dialogue circle meetings to discuss and find lasting solutions on the issues that emerged during. 3 need to be planned for Kospiro division where we are about to complete the healing circle meetings for the women, men and youth.

