



STAH Program Report

March - June 2021

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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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Vision and Intention

Mt. Elgon region in Bungoma County in the Western region of Kenya suffered one of the worst ethnic land clashes in 1991, 1992, 2006-2008 and 2018. The inhuman atrocities committed by the perpetrators left many community members traumatized even up to today.

Spaces for Trauma Awareness and Healing (STAH) Program is a community peace program with the intention to create, hold and transform trusted and safe spaces for social healing and reconciliation in 12 hotspot areas in Mt. Elgon. To achieve this the core activity is holding community social healing circle meetings for 5 days for each target group (women, youth and elders) of the most affected community members in each of the hotspot area. By the end of this program we envision a peaceful and well-functioning society.



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The Community Social Healing Circle Meetings

8 community social healing circle meetings were successfully held between March and June, 2021 in Cheptonon (2), Kapkirwok (3) and Emia (3). 3 of these were for women, another 3 for men and 2 for the youth. 54 men and elders, 58 women and 38 youth participated. The circle participants were carefully mobilized by the local administration in each of the hotspot area selected. 2 circle holders journeyed with the circle participants by creating and holding safe and trusted spaces for them to support each other in their healing. A rapporteur completed the team for documentation and supporting the circle holders.

Each community social healing circle meeting lasted for five (5) days. On the first day, circle participants were asked to introduce themselves, say what they admire about themselves and their community, explain the meaning of their surnames (for example 'Cherop' means one was born when it was raining) and share their expectations. This created a space for them to start opening up and gaining trust of each other. Elders in addition were asked to say what they admired of their culture. We observed that elders enjoyed talking about their culture and traditions. This helped them understand the value of holding community circle meetings. In fact, in the past the elders met in what they called a 'kokwet' and sat in a circle to discuss community issues. The 'kokwet' was highly respected. In all the healing circle meetings held for elders and men, they identified themselves as a 'kokwet'.

After the introductions, we explained the purpose and importance of the circle meetings and why the community circle approach. This helped the circle participants match their expectations with the need for healing. We then supported them set the ground rules. Considering these were healing circles, the participants themselves agreed to confidentiality, sensitivity, respect and active listening to enable trusted spaces for healing.

Every morning session of the remaining 4 days we had the healing circle session where the circle participants were given the opportunity to freely share their traumatic experiences at their own pace and time. As they continued to share each day, we observed change: ease and confidence in opening up, able to rest and sleep, looking kempt, and confidence and courage to let go and forgive. These indicated they are making a journey towards their own healing. Towards the end we could hear circle participant sharing the following: 'I can now talk to my children in a good way without anger.'

Using portraits and stories relevant to them we created awareness on trauma: what trauma is, the types of trauma, impact of trauma, triggers and coping strategies. This helped the circle participants understand trauma and see how it had deeply wounded them. The circle participants strongly related their traumatic experiences with the image of a torn basket compared to when all was well before the violent conflicts visualized in the whole basket. One elderly woman broke down when she saw the picture of a child kneeling at the graves of his parents when explaining developmental trauma. In one of the circle meetings with men and elders, one of them came to understand why he was persistently vomiting with no medical reason when we showed the picture of a person vomiting as a physical impact of trauma.

We also introduced to them awareness exercises which they can use to support each other in their healing journey. One of the exercises that had a strong impact to them was the examining of one's emotional and energy levels using the energy thermometer (coloured red at the top, green in the middle and blue at the bottom). Most circle participants were able to identify themselves at different levels and examine the cause(s) in relation to their traumatic experiences. For example, one circle participant looking at the energy thermometer identified how she has been at the red level with uncontrollable corrosive anger and very aggressive (negatively). Examining



the cause, she realized that this was actually caused by deep pain still embedded inside of losing her husband. Gradually letting go this helped her reduce and manage her anger.

We observed at the beginning many circle participants were struggling to forgive. They asked very disturbing questions in relation to the perpetrators, for example, “some of the perpetrators are living with us in the community, how can we really forgive them for what they did?” One elder demanded an encounter with the one who killed his son or his kin in order to be able to forgive. Traditionally in this community when one kills, elders bring the two affected families for reconciliation. Reparation in the form of animals is then negotiated and agreed upon to make amend of the killing. The reparation is costly making many to shy off. This is why even up to today families are yet to reconcile with each other. Using the biblical story of Joseph in the Old Testament we journeyed with them to profoundly understand what forgiveness entails and how key it is in the healing journey – letting go the person who hurt you unconditionally.

On the fifth day circle participants spent time to discuss how best they can support each other in their healing journey and how they can mend the torn community basket. A wounded community affects the wellbeing of every community member. A wounded community member by himself or herself cannot journey alone but needs the support of the other. In almost all the healing circle meetings we held, the circle participants agreed amongst themselves to form support groups for their well-being.



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Lessons Learnt

- The value of holding social healing circle meetings in the community – the going to the community rather than the community coming to us. Community-driven adaptive peace approaches such as this have a tangible and sustainable impact both at the individual and community levels.
- The social healing circles gradually help the circle participants identify collectively the root causes of the violent conflicts that ravaged their community. This makes them see the need to have community dialogues as an effective community peace strategy in conflict prevention and intervention.
- Circle participants strongly demonstrated fear for the future though they do not want a repeat of what happened and what they went through – the possibility of recurrence and acting out now that elections are just around the corner. Though the violence was quelled, the historical injustices remain unaddressed according to them.
- Not forgiving is a recipe for acting out – revenge and can consequently lead to vicious cycles of violence. Forgiveness is therefore key in healing and breaking cycles of violence in the community. Circle participants need ample time, space and support to take in forgiveness. There is need to create spaces for dialogue among families and clans on the issue of traditional reparation that can hinder forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Care and support for widows and grandmothers left with children is critical in their healing journey and that of their children/grandchildren. Many as they struggle to come to terms with the loss and at the same time raise the children are totally overwhelmed. This is even made worse with the harsh economic situation with no sustainable income security.
- Circle participants realized that community healing can only happen through collective responsibility – trusting each other and boldly confronting the truth.

