



Reflection for Circle Holders Report

10 -12 July 2024

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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.

Reflection Circle Meeting for Circle Holders

Introduction and Familiarization

In a quest to promote social healing in communities affected by different forms of societal conflicts including Violent Extremism, GBV, drug/substance abuse, Tribal clashes, issues of intersex among others, Shalom Centre for Counselling and Development (SCCoDev) together with Akilimali Associate held a 3-day circle meeting from 10 – 12 July 2024 in Nairobi. The meeting, which was held for circle holders in Mt. Elgon, Nairobi and Coast regions, was meant to give a reflection on the ongoing activities conducted by the members in the community levels. It was also convened to bring stakeholders - from different community programs – together before having bigger activities which would need a unified voice in championing for peace, trauma healing and social justice.

The circle meeting was attended by a total number of 16 peace and social justice circle holders. A representative from Mary Hoch Foundation was also in attendance to get first hand information from the community circle holders for purposes of partnership and support.

On the first day, circle participants were asked to introduce themselves. Say where they come from, what they do and what animals best describe their character. The donkey proved to be an outstanding choice, having characters synonymous to social workers – resilience, peace, humility, social in behaviour and a symbol of service. This created a space for members to start opening up and gain trust of each other, as some, especially from Mt. Elgon region (as later disclosed) didn't know how to interact with their Muslim counterparts from the coastal region.

The Intersex Program

After the introductions, our team leader Dr. Tecla Namachanja noted that besides other social healing pillars, it is best to also include the intersex community in our programs and mobilizations. She therefore introduced in the circle Dr. Dennis Wamalwa, a Commissioner from the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) to shed more light on the Intersex. This initiative was presented at this opportunity to enlighten members, who are circle holders, so that they can incorporate it into their programs to help the intersex in their communities. According to Dr. Wamalwa, this group has over the years been sidelined, shunned upon due to lack of awareness and misinformation which in turn lead to stigmatization and low self esteem to its members. Having two intersex members in our meeting, it was easy to demystify some of the myths and misinformation that are harboured against the intersex. Gloria, one of the intersex persons, explained to the circle holders some of the challenges he/she faces in daily life, amid emotional outbursts from some members who couldn't take in some painful experiences he/she narrated. For example, application for jobs; couldn't be allowed in NYS because of gender uncertainty. Difficulties in getting health services like cervical cancer screening, travelling issues at the airport and stigmatization in school are also some of the few challenges they go through. To counter all these, Mr. Humphery who is a social worker and facilitator helping the intersex, has been working with families and communities to sensitize them. In some communities, the intersex have always been associated with curses, and some kill babies at childbirth.

Activities in Communities

Members outlined some of the activities they have been undertaking in their respective communities. Mvita representative Naima Zubeir for instance, after the Kumekucha initiative reached out to youth



involved in violent extremism (VE). The youth shared what happened in their lives while engaging themselves in these vices. During such times, some were profiled and therefore lost trust from their families and the community. She also had to listen and deal with issues of sodomy among the young community members. To enhance social healing, she had to engage them in community cleaning programs and organize sporting activities. She also held circles to reach out to conservative communities. These activities opened up on issues concerning GBV, sodomy in families and early marriages as experienced in that region. Other circles talked about social issues, for example she held one that hosted 10 politicians who had lost elections. This helped in their psychological healing and impacted in businesses being opened up to empower them financially. Naima, cited that the activities drove her to near depression and that she had to battle with ulcers. She saw this as a big challenge because she always had to be there for them, but no one was there for her. Up to date, she has been involved with at least 120 individuals in and around her community.

Ahmed Famau from Lamu had issues with Law enforcement authorities due to stereotyping. Because of his looks and religion, he has been arrested 8 times on the allegations of being involved in terrorism and associated with the Al-Shabaab. As a result, he despised and became bitter towards the police and even contemplated joining the Al-Shabaab. A call by Dr. Tecla helped him change his stance. He was one of the 30 youths selected for training in a circle for healing. He joined the Green String Network trainings which helped him become a youth mobilizer. Reformed, and imparted with facilitation skills, Famau had an opportunity to meet president Uhuru Kenyatta as a representative of Lamu county in a youth forum. Consequently, he got assistance in opening youth projects in Lamu. These projects and trainings have changed the youth in his area from being radicalized and helped them deal with stress.

The Green String Network appointed him to train police officers to work together as a community with the public. Famau recounted that in these sessions, the police narrated how they are traumatized due to personal and work-related issues. Opening up and sharing helped them heal their emotional wounds. These sessions also helped Famau gain trust and build a good relation with the police, which in turn made him a mediator and peace builder between Law enforcement authorities and the public. Together with his wife, he oversees a number of youth activities which includes sports, talk sessions and community programs. Due to his service to the community, Famau has got invitations globally which has seen him facilitate talk sessions in France, Mexico, US and South Sudan.

In Tana River, Cheyech Peter has been involved in uplifting the livelihoods of single mothers. After having met Dr. Tecla in 2017 during the Kumekucha program, she went on to form a group of 30 single mothers, well known as *Warembo wa Tana*. In a region prone to war and tribalism, Cheyech had to volunteer to mend lives that had been torn apart by broken marriages, teenage motherhood and tribal wars. This has been done through visiting hospitals and sensitising girls about family planning and forming a mother-to-mother initiative, where single mothers encourage each other through visitations. She has also approached the county government and local leaders for partnerships, resulting in empowering the youth through SMEs. Some of the leaders offered to help children of affected mothers go to school through providing fees and school uniform. In the process of offering her services to the community, Cheyech encountered her own challenges. Her husband deserted her and their two children because of her involvement with the group of young mothers. However, she found healing through the circles in form of forgiveness towards her husband and also mending her broken family – bringing together her parents who had separated for more than 10 years.

Anisa Menza, a psychologist by profession, is a seasoned mobilizer and facilitator working with different communities around the coastal region. After the Kumekucha program, Anisa was able to mobilize 15 circle holders who were responsible in creating set group circles for fishermen, the deaf, GBV victims, single mothers among other groups. She recounted how circle meetings helped her bring social healing to the elderly in communities especially in Malindi and Kilifi. She conducts a special program on parenting and children rights, noting that the journey on social behaviour usually starts when we are young, therefore its only right to educate parents on how to mould their children



as this will positively impact their growth. This is also extended to sensitization of women on child disability.

On the second day in the morning session, members were given space for self-reflection in a meditative silence. The lead circle holder posed different reflection questions such as how are you feeling today, what touched you most in the previous day, how is your mind and body. Thereafter, the circle holders from Mt. Elgon started sharing about themselves, what they went through and how the healing circle meetings held in their communities helped them recover.

Susan had a moving life experience which drew a lot of emotions from members. She recounted how her first husband died of HIV within months of being married. She was tormented all through the village, being accused of passing HIV to her husband. This saw all her belongings seized by her in-laws which led to her distress to the point of contemplating suicide. Her second husband was killed by the Kenyan army during the violent conflicts brought about by land disputes in the Mt. Elgon region. He was accused of collaborating with the Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF). These traumatic events drove Susan to depression, but she got strength and hope after Dr. Tecla and the Shalom Centre brought healing and reconciliation programs in the region after the conflicts receded. After letting go and forgiving all those who caused anguish in her life, she decided to stand together with other widows whose husbands had fallen during the conflicts. The widows' group, which has 27 members, offer emotional and material support to each other, preaching healing and reconciliation through circles. They also engage in empowerment programs like farming. Susan is very proud of one achievement, mentoring and offering guidance to a group of girls (aged between 11-16 years) called 'Keng'ota' (meaning star), and another group of boys called 'Vuka'.

Peter Kiprono, a retired chief, narrated how his two children were killed during the Mt. Elgon clashes while he was still the area chief. Explaining the atrocities inflicted by the SLDF, Peter indicated that even as a local leader he couldn't feel safe in his community, as a number of assistant chiefs faced their deaths through the militia. He thanked Shalom Centre for bringing together the warring communities, explaining how the use of the torn basket imagery in the circle meetings helped them mend their broken ties. As the village elders with a mission to push for peace initiatives in the Mt. Elgon region, they went ahead to form a group – the *Kokwet* council of elders – which has 50 members. To bring cohesion in their community, they had to break traditional norms to include women in this group, a move which was earlier a taboo.

Desired Goals and Way Forward

In as much as there is visible progress and good results from circle sessions in communities, members were asked to give their views and suggestions on how we can best improve in serving the community and what should be done in order to effectively promote healing and bring stability in the family and community level. The following were listed;

- Create economic empowerment programs in communities. Starting SMEs and income generating activities will add value and improve living standards to community members. This can be achieved by building skills and creating market for product and services.
- Need to reach people with disability. Circle holders should widen their target groups to include them. Create awareness and sensitization to families especially in the villages who tend to isolate disabled children from the public. The disabled need to be engaged to feel accepted.
- Create intergenerational dialogue, by bringing together the old and the young. Have circles in the community to discuss issues that affect them, this will help keep in check moral decadence especially among the youth and help the community live in harmony.



- Breaking of traditions, taboos and demystifying myths that tend to be retrogressive to the society. Some communities suppress the voice of a woman, making them feel inferior and despised in the society. There is also need to speak against practices like female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Come up with sporting activities that will engage the youth and also include psycho social games in circle sessions. Get free amenities to conduct games like football.
- Create healing spaces for men especially from Mt. Elgon region who experienced physical torture during clashes. Some form of tortures affected their love lives hence led to dysfunctional marriages. Many don't open up and need advice and assistance.
- Collaboration between police and youth to reduce crime levels in communities and also keep in check violent extremism along the coastal region.
- Identify skills among the youth and offer them trainings. This could include sporting or artisan skills that can help them earn a living.
- Use of art to promote awareness. Music, performing arts, drawings and paintings should be used to promote social healing in our communities.
- Enhance circle sessions and empower/equip circle holders. Training of circle holders on new ways of engaging community members for optimum results in regards to social healing and trauma awareness.
- Need of documentation of success stories. This will serve as reference points to specific issues and serve as indicators of good progress in circle sessions.

Reflection

The third and final day of the meeting was used for recap and reflection. Members felt enlightened by each others stories and encounters which encouraged them to volunteer their skills to help bring social healing, reconciliation and peace in their respective communities. There was also an opportunity to plan and talk about an upcoming event; a workshop to be held in Malindi later within the year which would bring together all circle holders, stakeholders/partners, and cultural leaders from around the country. The event will be held to celebrate our diverse cultures, bring in new partnerships, exchange social healing ideas and to chart new ways forward as circle holders and facilitators.



Group members present at the Circle Holders meeting in Nairobi

