

The Activities of a Slum School Education Organisation in Nairobi and the Impact of Covid-19. A Conversation with the Founder of Grapesyard Organisation, Mr. Edmond Opondo Oloo.

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要 旨

本研究ノートは、2020年までの著者のケニア、ナイロビ市における地域社会支援活動やプロジェクトの紹介と現在のケニア社会の新型コロナウイルスの影響についての説明である。これはナイロビ市にあるグレイプスヤード（Grapesyard）という非政府組織の小学校の創立者であるエドモンド・オポンド氏との2021年7月14日にズームで行われたインタビューを通じて新型コロナウイルスが施設の運営、状況などに与えた影響を検証する。オポンド氏がまず、グレイプスヤード組織の在り方を紹介し、地域コミュニティ活動の実例、また教育を通じて地域社会の改善にどのように貢献しているのかを述べる。次にグレイプスヤード組織への新型コロナの影響と、どのような対処をしているのかを解説する。最後に、ポストコロナのグレイプスヤードの在り方と今後のコラボレーションとプロジェクトに関する議論もする。

Introduction

It was in 2016, during his first visit to Kenya, that Ritchie had hoped to visit a slum to undertake a survey of the state of education in the local community. While in Nairobi, he visited the Management University of Africa (MUA), where he was introduced to Dr. Peter Kithae, a professor in the School of Management and Leadership Studies. Dr. Kithae kindly agreed to organise a meeting with an alumnus of the university, Mr. Edmond Opondo Oloo, who had established Grapesyard, an NGO providing schooling to children in Korogocho, one of several large slums located within the city's boundaries. There, an estimated 200,000 people live in an informal settlement in extremely trying conditions, hemmed into a tiny area, within the confines of one of the richest cities in Africa.¹

During that initial trip to Grapesyard, a partnership was forged, and a life-changing journey began. Since then, Ritchie has been to Nairobi four times, and over that period he has had the privilege of being involved in numerous projects with a number of colleagues and students

from Japan.² He has also helped organise several conferences and given numerous lectures at MUA in addition to organizing several trips to Japan for Professor Kithae and his students to undertake research on management and welfare in Saitama, which included a visit to a local farm in Ogawamachi. However, it has been practically impossible to travel between Japan and Kenya since 2020, as Covid-19 has swept across the world.

Over the past year and a half, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on all of our lives, with national responses ranging from complete lockdown to containing the spread of the virus, to little response, or somewhere in between. Many poorer countries lack the resources, and sometimes the political will, to deal with the pandemic.

By 2018, Kenya had years of steady economic growth reducing the proportion of the population living in absolute poverty as defined by the World Bank, but much of that effort would be wiped out, due to the economic carnage resulting from the pandemic.³ When Covid-19 struck, along with many other countries, Kenya initially took a hardline approach to the virus with the government introducing a series of measures, including the closure of businesses and schools in order to stem the spread. The Ministry of Education promoted online (or technology) related learning wherever possible. However, this was only really effective in urban areas that had the infrastructure, know-how and resources in place.⁴ In general, welfare support programmes for the general populace whose livelihoods were heavily affected by the lockdowns were severely lacking, with people having to fend for themselves.

Along with other universities and business, MUA was forced to close for much of 2020, with remote learning initiated and carried out, somewhat mitigating the crisis. Other educational bodies, particularly non-government affiliated schools such as Grapesyard Organisation, were less able to mitigate the lockdowns. This paper will examine the impact of Covid-19 on Grapesyard Organization's school and orphanage through a semi-structured interview carried out by the author with Mr. Oloo. He begins by introducing Grapesyard, followed by some of its activities and how it contributes to education and the betterment of the local community. He then outlines the impact of Covid-19 and how the organisation is coping. Finally, there is a brief discussion concerning future collaboration and projects at Grapesyard, post-pandemic. The interview was carried out on July 14, 2021, via Zoom.

The Interview

Ritchie: "Edmond, how are you doing? It has been an honour to have worked with you and your organisation, Grapesyard, an NGO based in Nairobi, Kenya over the past 5-6 years. We have achieved a lot over that time, including establishing a computer lab back in 2016, and expanding it with the help of students and Japanese colleagues in 2017 and 2018, holding

several symposiums and hosting you as a guest speaker to many of my classes, via Zoom. We also welcomed you as a keynote speaker at the annual Peace Conference at the Global Language conference, held at Josai University in 2019. Additionally, in the same year, I was also privileged to bring a group of students from Josai University to Grapesyard to expand the computer lab, interact with the children and to partake in a symposium on Social Capital, where I discussed the issue of harassment in educational institutions in Japan. Unfortunately Edmond, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been unable to meet in person, which I hear has had a real impact on your organisation. The purpose of this short talk will be to have you introduce your organisation to us, some of the activities you undertake, the impact of Covid-19, and how you are coping. We will finish with a discussion regarding the future of Grapesyard post-Pandemic and possibilities regarding future projects. Edmond, if you could start with an introduction, that would be wonderful.”

Oloo: “Thanks, Ritchie. Yes, I am the founder Director of the Grapesyard Organization. Grapesyard is an NGO that I founded in 1999. It started with a school (Grapesyard Education centre) and has expanded to other community programmes to cater for orphans and vulnerable children and marginalized groups living in informal settlements and economically challenged communities. One such informal settlement is the Korogocho slums in Nairobi, where Grapesyard Education Centre is located. Our vision is a healthy educated child in the informal settlements and economically challenged communities, and our mission is to facilitate, provide and promote access to education, health and healthcare services to children in the informal settlements and economically challenged communities.”

Ritchie: “Could you tell us a little about why and how you established Grapesyard and a little about the local area?”

Oloo: “I started Grapesyard to increase access to primary education for orphans and vulnerable children in the Korogocho slum. Korogocho slum is the fourth largest in Nairobi County. It’s about fifteen kilometres east of Nairobi City CBD. There are only two Government schools. At that time the cost of enrolling a child in a government school was exorbitant. These two reasons locked many children out of schooling. Korogocho is about 2 square kilometres, serving a population of 250,000. Houses are made of either recycled metals or mud. There is no functioning sewer system, but pit latrines are in use in a few houses. A household consists of between six to eight people in a single room measuring about 8 square feet. Food is a problem in many households because of mass unemployment forcing them to lower food portions or skip meals. The result is widespread malnutrition among children and many fatalities. To cope, inhabitants engage their children in labor related activities such the selling of groundnuts, house help etc. to complement family income. Child prostitution is also rife as they try to fend for themselves. Ultimately many children drop out of school. The area is

served by only one Government health clinic. This has given room to many unlicensed health clinics managed by 'quack' health officers, further complicating life for the inhabitants."

Ritchie: "Yes, having visited the area with colleagues and students from Japan, I must say that the conditions are very challenging for you, and I admire your strength and courage and what you are doing in the community. Could you give us some details about the school, the orphanage, and activities you undertake?"

Oloo: "Grapesyard Education Centre School is in Korogocho Slum, and it reaches out to over 1,200 children daily with quality subsidized primary education. It has consistently posted good national examination results since its inception in 1999, despite being a community school run by volunteer teachers. Many children have gone through the school to join Kenya's national schools and top public universities. The school's alumni are running and are active stakeholders. The group is currently driving mentorship programmes in the school and are involved in community activities. The following activities take place in Grapesyard Education Centre. A School feeding programme: Hot lunch is offered to children during school days because the majority of households in the informal settlements survive on one meal a day, or sometimes none at all. Thus, many children come to school in the morning having slept on empty stomachs and missed breakfast. Because of this, children can hardly concentrate in class due to hunger and malnutrition, and class attendance is not consistent as they opt for the street and dumpsite to fend for themselves."

Ritchie: "I remember the dump site is very close to you, and that it remains a major source of income for the community, and a lot of children spend time there scavenging for things of value to try and sell. And, a perpetual smell of trash hangs over much of the slum."

Oloo: "Yes, there is a child education sponsorship programme for orphans and vulnerable children. The programme meets school fees, food and learning materials because parents cannot afford to pay. All children are exposed to co-curriculum activities such as scouts, music, football etc. The school has posted success stories over the years. Several children have been able to acquire university education through our education and sponsorship support. Notable ones include a medical doctor, two engineers, two lawyers, four Bachelors of Commerce and several graduate teachers. Many others have acquired diploma certificates in various fields such as civil and electrical engineering and teaching. We also have an Early Child Development Education Centre (Kindergarten): It is located in Grapesyard Education Centre. The centre serves children under the categories of baby class (three year olds), nursery (four year olds) and pre-school (six year olds) and their parents. Besides early child education for the children, the centre also equips parents and mothers in the community with skills for better childcare and protection through scheduled workshops. Grapesyard Children's Centre,

an orphanage, opened in 2008. Alice Village is a children's home with a capacity to accommodate one-hundred orphans and vulnerable children. The home has successfully helped over two-hundred children reclaim their futures. The home is located in Nairobi County, Njiru Sub-County, in the Utawala area. Key activities at the home include a child reintegration programme, mentorship and childcare and protection through the provision of a balanced diet, clothing, shelter, and education. Some of the children who were accommodated in the home are now in employment. Three are going through graduate courses at Kenyan public universities, while others are pursuing trade and artisan training in various fields."

Ritchie: "I think it was when I visited you at the Orphanage in the very lush grounds of Utawala back in 2015 during my first visit to Nairobi that we first came up with the idea of collaborating to establish the computer lab. It is certainly a lovely area and ideal for your orphanage. I remember the children there seemed really content and jovial."

Oloo: "Yes, the area is an ideal environment for the orphanage. Then there is the Daycare Centre. The centre is a drop-in child protection centre for babies whose mothers work at the Dandora dumpsite. To protect the children from hazardous substances in the dumpsite, mothers drop their babies at the centre in the morning for babysitting, and we provide a balanced diet, bathing, and healthcare during the day while the mothers proceed to work. This ensures that the family income and child's well being are both protected and safeguarded. The centre is located on the eastern edge of the dumpsite for ease of reach by the mothers. We also have what is called table banking for community empowerment. The organization is helping Korogocho community members to form self-help groups with a view to practicing table banking."

Ritchie: "This is interesting regarding the table banking initiative. Could you explain a little about how it works?"

Oloo: "Sure, this is a group-based funding strategy. There are currently 13 groups that meet once a month for members to pool their savings. The amount collected as members' savings is lent among themselves and earns between 2% to 5% interest. The interest earned in a year is shared by members as dividends. Members borrow from the groups either to sort out family emergencies or start an income generating activity. The groups meet monthly to support each other with business ideas and to help each other financially. Group members are expected to raise and save an agreed amount of money. This comes from members' savings which will ultimately be refunded when one retires from the group. Savings are collected monthly. All members are expected to have the same amount of money saved at the end of the year. Individual members' gross saving collectively forms the groups' working capital. The capital is lent among members with interest during monthly meetings. Money which is not

loaned is banked into the group's account. Besides loans, members' savings can also be invested into a group investment scheme to earn interest for the group. Such investments can be joint businesses, etc. The interest earned from loans and group investments are proportionally divided at the end of the year to members. Cycle groups provide a financial source where its members can obtain loans to meet financial needs and or start Income Generating Activity (IGA) with its potential to enable households to meet basic needs such as food, rent, medical etc. In summary the programme promises to mitigate extreme poverty through turning around the financial fortunes for the better, for those who embrace the concept wholly. And finally, I want to mention the Digital Literacy Programme (DLP). Grapesyard School offers computer literacy lessons for its children in line with the Government's requirement that all schools in Kenya should embrace and offer the programme for the children in their centres. The school currently has a small computer room with 15 fully working laptops and two desktop computers."

Ritchie: "Thanks for bringing up the computer lab, Edmond. It was a pleasure to have been involved in establishing it, and I do hope that you are finding it useful in your education programmes at Grapesyard. It is a pity to see the numbers of working computers down to just 15, from around 30 working ones when we last spoke. In any event, post pandemic, I look forward to working with our colleagues and partners in Japan and in Nairobi to continue to expand and to work on solutions regarding computers."

Oloo: "The computer lab provides numerous benefits to us. Teachers are able to acquire or improve computer literacy skills. This has helped them to access digital textbooks and also do research in their subject areas for improved delivery of lessons through the internet, to which we have limited access. Access to internet connection and secretarial services are now closer to home. Children have been able to acquire computer literacy skills. This has helped them to access digital textbooks for self study. This has helped address the lack of curriculum related materials in the school library. The availability of computers has enabled the school to align itself with the newly introduced competency-based curriculum which has incorporated ICT as units of study."

Ritchie: "Edmond you have certainly expanded the range of your activities over the years, thanks to kind donors and hard work on the part of your alumni and partners. Now let us move onto the impact of Covid-19. You mentioned to me in past conversations that it has had a huge impact on your organisation, and you struggle to survive without government support and a shrinking number of financial donors."

Oloo: "Yes, Covid-19 has affected the running of our organisation and our activities immensely, as it has impacted all of Kenya, and as part of a series of hard lockdowns implemented to stop

the spread of the virus, schools were also required to close. This has impacted our students and families more, since we are located within a slum and our role beyond education for the children of the community. And when we were finally allowed to open again, the impact of Covid-19 could still be felt. Social distancing meant that classes could only hold less than half of the earlier population. This means the school could not find space for all its students. There was demand for increased desks, as ironically more students clamoured to try and get into our school. There was also the increased demand on numbers of teachers to cope with the number of classes brought about by physical social distancing in class. All this has meant that we are faced with Increased school operational costs as well. Finally, due to Covid, we have been unable to work effectively with donors and partners, and many of them have been impacted themselves, so donations have dried up.”

Ritchie: “Covid has had quite an impact on your operations, especially regarding your position as one of few NGO based schools and your important role within the community.”

Oloo: “Yes, the school is struggling to survive. It is trying to cope by putting in place the following strategies, some of which will take time to generate meaningful revenue. We have capped the school enrollment at 1,400 students, a number that it can accommodate and serve at the moment. We are still soliciting donations in kind and in cash to increase the number of desks, learning materials and general school operating costs. We have also been advocating for a case to put more children on sponsorship programmes to stabilize and make school revenue regular and predictable. We are also considering opening up computer literacy classes at a fee to the local community members to increase school revenue. We are also opening up a full-fledged commercial ICT centre for internet access, photocopy, document lamination and typing services. This has been able to generate some extra revenue for the school but still not enough to sustain its operations.”

Ritchie: “It is quite amazing what you are doing or planning to do for the community. I really do hope that you get through these very trying times. Finally, could you discuss some future directions of Grapesyard post pandemic, and possibilities for future collaboration?”

Oloo: “The school is looking forward to increasing the learning space by purchasing a private building which is currently in the middle of school. It goes for two million shillings of which our fundraising efforts have raised one million. This money is kept safe in a restricted bank account. When this is done, we plan to bring it down to design and build a multipurpose storied building, complete with a school dining hall, a medical clinic, and classrooms. This will make the school competitive in terms of infrastructure and learning outcomes so as to attract fee paying students. Once completed, the building will help address feeding challenges such as lack of a kitchen store for cooking utensils, and food contamination, because children currently

eat out in the open air. It will also ease current classroom congestion, thereby improving teacher-learner interaction for better learning outcomes. The school playground area size will also increase slightly for children. Post-Covid, we are planning to initiate and run income generating activities such as our current ICT centre in order to increase overall school revenue.”

Ritchie: “Edmond, thank you so much for accommodating me for this short talk on Grapesyard organisation. I really appreciate you outlining your organisation, and how you have worked to support and help the local community, and give your pupils hope in a very bleak situation.”

Oloo: “Just finally if I may? There is a need to urgently raise money for the building sitting within the school compound. As it is, any one buyer with money can take it at the expense of the school. Acquisition of the building will go a long way in boosting school programmes. We have not been able to raise the remaining one million shillings due to the effects of the Covid pandemic.⁵ Many of our parents have lost income and are not able to pay school fees at the moment. The daily school attendance is high, at over 95%, primarily because of the school lunch programme because food is a problem at home, yet the issue of arrears in school fees is worsening. The school library that we have at the moment cannot satisfy the reading hunger among the children. It only has a handful of course and story books for some classes. It lacks tables and chairs that children may use in the library in order to reap its maximum benefits. It is small in size and can only accommodate up to 50 children at a go, given the lack of tables and chairs. Children have no space to read at home and they need a library space. The nearest available public library is about 12 kilometres from Korogocho. Buying the building I mentioned above may help the school to reorganise the school library and increase reading space for children. The ICT centre also needs a more reliable Internet connection. The cost of bandwidth has been a challenge to raise from the meagre school revenue. This has slowed down computer literacy lessons for children and Korogocho community high school children waiting to go on to further education opportunities outside the school.”

Ritchie: “Thanks for those final words, Edmond. Indeed, Covid-19 has greatly impacted Grapesyard, and you are really struggling at the moment. As soon as I am able, I look forward to going back to Nairobi to work with you on solutions and future possibilities and projects. It is my sincere hope that your story will resonate with potential partners in Japan and elsewhere and encourage them to support you. Thanks once again for taking time from your busy schedule to talk to me today.”

Concluding thoughts

The impact of Covid-19 on Grapesyard Organisation has been particularly profound, due to

the nature of it being located in a highly vulnerable area with an extreme rate of poverty and deprivation. During the interview, Mr. Oloo describes how the pandemic negatively impacted the operations of the school and how a complete loss of income meant that he was unable to cover the wages of teachers and staff and how all aspects of their lives were severely impacted. Even after restrictions eased, social distancing rules meant that the school was only able to operate at half capacity. Extra burden was placed on teachers and staff and operational costs increased. The activities of the school and its role in not only providing an education to local children, but also in giving them a safe haven and to feed them have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and it has been a struggle to survive in a very trying climate. However, amid the untold stress that the pandemic has had on the pupils, staff, and the community, there remains a beacon of hope, and if anything, the pandemic has strengthened Mr. Oloo's resolve to keep pushing forward, despite the untold hardship and adversity. By continuing to network and expand ones' partnerships and contacts, it is still possible to overcome adversity. Mr. Oloo is to be commended for not giving in to despair due to the pandemic.

Finally, Ritchie is looking forward to visiting Nairobi and working with partners at MUA and within Japan to help Mr. Oloo realise his goal of facilitating, providing and promoting access to education and healthcare services to children in the informal settlements and economically challenged communities of Nairobi.

《Notes》

- 1 Bank, AfrAsia. "Africa Wealth Report 2021." (2021): 15
- 2 For a narrative of the first cohort from Japan to Grapesyard to establish the computer lab in 2016, please refer to: Gondree, Eric, et al. "Narratives from an Excursion to Grapesyard School in Korogocho Slum, Nairobi: Reflections and Perspectives on Education, Community Spirit and Resilience." *Bulletin of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies 2* (2018): 285-299. Additionally, for an account of Josai University student perspectives of their trip to Korogocho to help with the computer laboratory project in 2019, refer to: Ritchie, Zane. "Collaborating with Japanese University Students on a Computer Laboratory Project in a Nairobi Slum School." *Josai Contemporary Policy Research* 13.2 (2020): 55-66.
- 3 In 2018, the World Bank reported that absolute poverty had been falling within the country. See: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kenya/publication/kenya-economic-update-poverty-incidence-in-kenya-declined-significantly-but-unlikely-to-be-eradicated-by-2030>. However, a new report in 2020 noted that Covid-19 had eroded progress in reducing poverty and that another two million had become impoverished.
Refer to: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kenya/publication/kenya-economic-update-covid-19-erodes-progress-in-poverty-reduction-in-kenya-increases-number-of-poor-citizens>
- 4 Refer to the following report by the Brookings Institute for more details regarding the effect of the closure of schools in Kenya. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/>

[05/06/how-school-closures-during-covid-19-further-marginalize-vulnerable-children-in-kenya/](#)

- 5 In November 2021, a donor from Japan kindly donated 800,000 yen (around 800,000 shillings) which was enough to allow Mr. Oloo to purchase the building. The dream of turning the building into a community clinic and canteen to provide hot meals to the children is on the way to being realized with the design and layout having been recently drafted.