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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community Mentoring as a Basis for Youth Empowerment in Kenya: A Proposal

*Peter Masibo Lumala¹

Department of Communication Studies, Moi University, P. O. Box 3900-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

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Corresponding Author

Peter Masibo Lumala¹

Abstract

Violence among the youth, especially politically-related violence, is not only a mounting problem in urban areas in Kenya, but also now in suburbs and rural regions. Youth from low-income backgrounds are the most susceptible when it comes to participating in political violence as they seek to assert themselves and gain revenge against society for fundamentally ignoring their needs. Regrettably, their involvement in violence hardly helps to make things better for them. In fact, majority of them end up in serious problems if not worse. It is with this in mind that the author in this paper looks at how the community contributes to social-economic disengagement by the youth. It is argued that lack of role modeling and mentoring projects are some of the reasons behind youth disempowerment. There is need for the youth to learn to become participants in community development through proactive engagement in decision-making. It is further argued that adults should not assume a 'know it all' stance when dealing with the youth. They should instead mentor youth to air their opinions on various issues. Adults should not to talk to the youth or at them but with them. The youth should be involved in assessing community development needs and coming up with suggestions on ways forward through structured focused youth groups. The paper proposes what can be achieved in empowering the youth through positive mentoring. It also addresses the challenges that have in the past militated against youth empowerment at community level. The author concludes by looking at the various approaches that can be used by leaders at community level to mentor the youth and how in turn this could help in engendering positive values among the youth. The paper also examines the different levels and modes of engagement in the face of the current technological advancements to bring about peace and stability in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Youth is undeniably the most important formidable force and resource a nation can have (Korongo, 2012). In recent years, several countries of the Great Lakes Region, such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Tanzania, have directly or indirectly been impacted by political violence and conflict resulting in large scale population displacements and humanitarian emergency situations. The youth (aged between 18-35 years) in these countries have been particular affected by violence (whether urban, armed, gender-based or ethnic) as they have been the direct perpetrators as a result of unemployment and idleness.

Community Mentoring for Youth Empowerment (CMYE) is an approach that proposes to put the needs and interests of the disempowered youth at the centre of community activities. The approach is quite related to the provision of adequate supervision and simulation whereby youth criminality can be prevented is through adequate supervision

and by providing environments where young people are not left on their own for long periods of time (Palmary & Moat, 2002). The aim of CMYE process is to ensure the capacity and capability of the youth to have a say and voice their perspectives on the issues that most concern them.

This paper is in line with the vision and mission of Kenya's Ministry of Devolution and Planning (responsible for youth policy and mainstreaming) which aims at enhancing youth empowerment and participation in public affairs. The Ministry's vision is to see "young Kenyan citizens who have greater control over their lives, able to make informed choices, have better options and actively participating in the transformation of their country." The Kenya National Youth Policy (KNYP, 2007) states the following vision: "The National Youth Policy visualizes a society where youth has as equal an opportunity as other citizens to realize their fullest potential, productively participate in economic, social, political, cultural and religious life without fear or favour". The policy claims to be driven by principles of respect of cultural belief systems and ethical values, equity and accessibility, gender inclusiveness, good governance, and mainstreaming youth issues. The overall policy goal is to promote youth participation in democratic processes as well as in community and civic affairs, and ensuring that youth programs involve them and are youth-centred.

In line with the vision, MDP is charged with the responsibility of enabling young people exploit their potential as individuals and fulfill their obligations as equal partners in the national development processes. According to the former Ministry of Youth Affairs' website, the following were some of its core objectives set by the government towards youth empowerment in the country:

- To initiate and support youth empowerment initiatives
- To facilitate opportunities for youths to participate in all processes of national development countrywide
- To improve effective youth participation in all structures of decision-making
- To conduct youth empowerment clinics countrywide
- To build the capacities of young people to be able to handle and participate in the day-to-day affairs of the country.

These are excellent objectives targeting the youth if they can be realized. But it is one thing to have good objectives; it is another to operationalize them. The youth belong to given communities and it is right from their homes that youths should be involved in decision-making. It is at the community level, at the villages, sub-locations, in their locations, among other levels, that they can participate in the processes of development and decision-making.

This paper focuses on community mentoring as a basis for youth empowerment and development. It defines community mentoring, and shows how this proposal can be utilized meaningfully to engender youth empowerment and development, especially in the context of the post-election violence that rocked the country in 2007/2008.

It is important to point out right at outset that while the author's proposal is significant in reducing youth idleness and involvement in destructive activities, it should be realized that the impacts of mentoring may not "show up for several years" as Pedersen et al. (2009) correctly observes. The paper thus highlights the importance of mentoring, and how this can be done at community level. It is the responsibility of communities to come up with appropriate short-term, medium-term and long-term goals for any mentoring programs they come up with.

Main Discussion

The Concept of Mentoring

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary by Hornby (2005), the term "mentor" refers to "an experienced person who advises and helps somebody with less experience over a period of time". The term is also synonymous with "adviser", "counsellor", "guide" and "guru". To be a guru presupposes some form of expertise and leadership qualities that are unique. Mentors should possess some special qualities which they can use to impart new ideas to the mentees. Mentors must of necessity be excellent role models, of good social standing, and be willing to give up their time and energy to develop outstanding relationship with the given youth groups in need of mentoring.

The Mentoring Approach

The Community Mentoring Programme links role models drawn from members of the community to local youth. The focus should be on supporting young people to successfully negotiate the transition points in their lives. These

transitions may be between primary and secondary school, between secondary years of schooling and from high school to further education, training and employment. It is particularly important that such a programme, especially, targets youth out of school and who are not in any formal employment. This is the most vulnerable group. They are easily manipulable by politicians for their own personal gains. But if properly mentored, such youth would be able to say no to political machinations for selfish gains and instead to proactively participate in the community's development agenda.

Community-based mentoring programmes typically include a wide variety of activities. Rhodes (2002) came up with a model of youth mentoring that focuses on three key aspects of development:

- Cognitive dimension
- Social-emotional
- Identity development.

Her model advocates that mentoring efforts are likely to have the greatest impact if they focus on at least two or all the three aspects. From this perspective, mentoring seeks to raise awareness, help the youth develop a strong sense of belonging and take charge of their own affairs in the not just in the future but while they are still energetic.

The idea of mentoring indicates a particular kind of personal relationship in which there is some degree of choice between the parties to it. Can mentor-protégé relationship work in our communities? In most cases, the youth may admire someone for their success. But there are no formal arrangements in our society where the youth can have an opportunity to learn from the success stories from successful individuals. Indeed people who feel they have 'reached' in terms of social-economic stability put a barrier between them and the rest of the community, especially. It is due to these circumstances that the youth end up venting their anger and frustration against society through violent and other accompanying criminal acts.

Although community mobilization and mentoring has been undertaken in many countries with great success, the same is not true in the Kenyan context. Youth have more often than not been mobilized to engage in political violence and less in development activities. The proposed mentoring approach would help generate knowledge locally rather than having new ideas transmitted from outside. Indeed, Awaya et al. (2002) regard mentoring not as a role imposed from the outside, but as a "developing relationship between the mentor and the mentee over a given period of time" (p. 46). CMYE therefore should be home-grown, engaging both the youth and the mentors in the development process.

The youth should, right from the word go, be encouraged to participate in deciding who qualifies to be a mentor in their communities and why. They should then be helped to select the mentors. This in itself would imply that the youth know what is right and wrong, good and bad, and have the capacity to make the right choices when accorded an opportunity. The youth also grow in accountability.

Following the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007/2008, community mobilization focused more on rebuilding houses for the internally displaced persons (infamously referred to as IDPs) with little focus on addressing peaceful co-existence between communities. Little attention was given to those youth who had been actively involved in the PEV. The youth who had taken part in the violence were worst affected. Amidst fear of being arrested, efforts to address their role in the violence appeared disconnected, uncoordinated, and lacking in policy. Given what happened, it is suggested in this paper that violence prevention in Kenya should move from focusing primarily on individuals and the legal provisions as deterrent measures, to considering community involvement in pre-empting such acts among the youth and entrenching peaceful resolutions of conflicts with the help of the youth in our society.

Theories of social disorganization, social ecology and social capital, suggest that a community's ability to prevent youth violence is based on its internal level of support, connection, and organization (Griffith et al., 2008). Collaborative partnerships and mentoring have been recognized as effective intervention strategies for addressing youth violence. The key feature of this approach is broad community engagement in creating and sustaining conditions that promote and maintain behaviours associated with widespread youth empowerment and development.

CMYE focuses attention on the structures and practices of both the community and the youth themselves which could contribute towards engaging each other in productive activities. Such structures should be able to play a central role in facilitating attitude change among the youth.

Levels of Community Mentoring

Community mentoring can be seen at three levels:

- Intracommunity
- Intercommunity
- Extracommunity

Intracommunity mentoring represents the internal structures and function of the community, which provide the foundation for the youth to engage in proactive behaviours necessary for their own growth and advancement. This component includes community viability, adult leadership, and the mutual trust between the adults within the community and the youth. The focus is also on the kind of examples and direction provided by the adults within the community. It is imperative that within the community, there are people who can be looked to by the youth as influencing positive thinking and practice; people who are positive and patriotic, not to their tribes, but to the wider national aspirations and to general human good.

The intercommunity mentoring enables the development and utilization of connections between neighboring communities for youth mentoring purposes. Among the Luhya community, there is a proverb that says 'he who has not eaten someone else's food thinks the mother is the best cook in the whole world'. The proverb criticizes those who lack of exposure and suffer from myopic thinking. Youth who are closed up in their own communities could easily be moved into fighting other communities because they think their own community is the best and self-sufficient. Intercommunity mentoring leads to mobilizing and sharing of resources, gaining credibility and standing between communities, and creating opportunities for the participants (the youth in particular) to develop networks and positive relationships with members of another community. Included here are linkages and relations between communities (e.g. collaboration, accessing inter-cultural facilities, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of other communities' beliefs and lifestyles, appreciating differences in development levels and the reasons for this, and alliance building). The intercommunity mentoring helps the youth learn to respect other people and to appreciate that it takes more than just one's community to succeed.

The extra community mentoring of youth presupposes actions taken by various communities to influence youth life and progress, such as disseminating information, procuring and marshalling resources to benefit the youth, developing opportunities for community mobilization, and harnessing collective power to influence youth behaviour and development within their respective contexts.

Youth Empowerment and benefits of CMYE

Youth empowerment refers to youth efforts that increase individuals' perceptions of power, control, and ability to influence the larger system of which they are part. While in the existing literature there is hardly any research that has delved into this area, it is worthwhile to describe some of the theories and applications that explain how empowerment occurs within a multilevel framework.

The interrelationships of community structures aimed at the youth and the resultant activities that provide opportunities for youth empowerment and social cohesion and stability need not be taken for granted. The youth must be formally targeted in communal activities, especially those that prepare them for future roles in the country. The adage that "the youth are tomorrow's leaders" must not be taken lightly. Communities need to nurture young women and men into the roles required of them tomorrow.

Interactions between the youth and successful farmers, politicians, businessmen and women, educationists, the police, government departments, and church leaders among others, in a mentoring process should provide a basis for enhancing youth standing, influence and dependability. Often society is prone to condemning the youth as being misguided without offering them a chance to learn what is right, what is good for them. What alternative does this leave them with but violence and crime?

Besides helping the youth to learn from the best that the communities have to offer, community mentoring, through partnerships would provide a means by which the youth, individually and collectively, can influence policy, development and taken responsibility for their actions.

There is need for our communities to come up with projects and programs that provide opportunities for the youth and their mentors to influence decisions and development priorities at local level.

Operationalizing CMYE

Effective CMYE requires the formation of a community mentoring committee (CMC) to manage the mentoring process. Such a committee would oversee the fiscal and management responsibilities including the identification of volunteers and matching them with respective youth groups. The committee could also oversee inter-community mentoring activities with an effort to identifying the best practice and learning points for their own community. The CMC should also plan and execute activities that would keep the youth proactively engaged in positive activities leaving them with little room for taking part in violence and other criminal activities as seems to be too often the case. CMC has a duty too to identify and train community members mentoring procedures and to involve local professional in matters youth.

CMC should further organize bipartisan meetings between mentors and mentees. Such meetings should be held regularly to promote contact between mentors (who otherwise interact with small youth groups at individual level) and the all the youth from the community. The meetings could also be extended to mentors and youth from other communities in order to achieve national cohesion and understanding of issues that are of mutual interest.

Intra- and inter-community mentors should meet as often as possible to compare notes with the youth from their respective communities on how well the mentoring is going. This provides them with a forum for self evaluation and review of goals and objectives for future activities.

Research and CMYE

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is central to the success of the CMYE. According to Griffith et al. (2008, p. 92), CBPR is a “partnership approach that equitably involves all partners in all aspects of research and intervention”. Such research, they argue, should aim to increase knowledge and understanding of intra- and inter-community issues and to link these with extra-communal interventions and policy changes necessary for youth empowerment and development, and for fostering peaceful and cordial relations across ages, cultures, genders, religions and tribes.

By serving as a sounding board and providing a model of effective adult communication, research has shown that “mentors can help [the youth] better understand, express and regulate both their positive and negative emotions” (Rhodes et al., 2008, p. 185).

Recent research on mentoring, especially in the USA, has moved beyond the question of whether mentoring works to more specific investigations of how it works, under what conditions, and toward the attainment of what goals (Nakkalu & Harris, as cited in Pedersen et al., 2009). Below is a quick look at what those developing mentoring programme should focus on.

Key considerations for Setting up a Mentoring Programme

The following are key research-based considerations that need to be borne in mind when setting up a CMYE programme:

1. Aims to create outstanding relationships
2. Has got to be objective, with the number and type of contacts between the mentor and the mentee being monitored and tailor made to achieve specific objectives. Community based mentoring typically include a wide variety of activities.
3. Length of mentoring relationships – the longer the better
4. Bridging the differences: there is need to best match a mentor and a mentee. This typically includes matching criteria such as proximity, youth future interests, gender, among others.

5. Age: the literature is not specific on whether younger mentors or older mentors have a greater impact. But from our cultural context, the age difference should be sufficient enough as to warrant respect between the mentor and the mentee but not so wide as to create generational disharmony.
6. Culture: it is important to take into account cultural factors when planning a mentoring program. But this must take into account the fact that culture is dynamic and wherever necessary, the mentoring program should assist in breaking up some retrogressive cultural practices that go against the grain. Certainly respect for existing cultural norms should be the starting point.
7. Impact on the mentor: the focus should not just be on the mentee. It must be understood that mentoring may have very positive impacts on the mentors too. In a research by Pedersen et al. (2009), the mentors identified their experience in positive terms, particularly in helping them to make sense of their own lives/past experiences; they gained in understanding of youth and their ability to develop positive relationships with youth. Mentors/volunteers should be sensitive to potential difficulties too, which may impede closeness and satisfaction in the early stages of the mentoring relationships.
8. Gender: Research shows that gender shapes the functions and importance of relationships (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). This may also call for changes in the way the youth perceive inter-gender issues.

Effective Mentoring

Effective community mentoring calls for the following considerations:

1. Using effective methods of communication between the mentor and the mentee: Meetings, if used properly can build relationships and mutual trust. According to Heller (1998), these should enable instant feedback and facilitate mutual feedback. The youth should be kept informed wherever possible and uncertainties should be avoided at all times.
2. Creating a no-blame culture. Anyone with responsibility must accept their failures. However, in order to mentor effectively, there is need to cultivate a culture in which no blame is laid for failure. Errors should be recognized, and then used to improve chances of future success. Youth must be made to accept risks and learn from mistakes.
3. The basic component of community mentoring for youth empowerment is co-operation, which mentors expect of the youth. Mentors should ensure that their wishes have been understood and be genuine in dealing with the youth. Never, for example, should they offer to finance youth activity unless they can raise the funds. The CMC should however come up with free incentives in order to win cooperation.
4. There is need to encourage initiative at all levels. A sure way of high motivation is a lot of initiative. The ability to take initiative depends on empowerment as well as an environment that recognizes contribution. As Heller (1998) puts it, "the more you expect of people, the more they will give you, as long as you support them" (p. 30). Members should ask for suggestions or hold brainstorming meetings; respond positively to all volunteered ideas; use marketing devices such as "Idea of the Month", or "Mentee of the Month" to recognize and encourage good contributions. If one must reject any ideas, one should give a reason to the youth— and do it with sincere regret. Set high targets. If the mentor is the baseline/benchmark of success, then the youth should be encouraged to achieve even higher targets. One must not look at the glass being half-empty but rather recognize present achievement and encourage continuous improvement until it becomes second nature to the mentees.
5. Recognize differences so you can tailor your actions. Youths at different stages of success and achievement may require different ways of mentoring. Give tasks to the most suitable people. Hence it is useful to do background checks before being allocated mentors.
6. Offer incentives wherever possible and appraise effectively the mentoring programme.
7. Empower the youth by encouraging input and delegating authority wherever possible
8. Let change be gradual and in manageable bits.

Conclusion

The Kazi kwa Vijana initiative was a positive step in empowering the Kenyan youth. The programme has been implemented in various locations across the country in both rural and urban communities. In each case, focus has been on locations where the youth can be employed productively in activities that benefit them and the communities they live in. The government's aim is to create employment opportunities for our youth in the areas where they live, so that as they earn a wage, they will also be contributing to the welfare of their local communities.

While this is a laudable step, there is need for the government to be proactive in dealing with issues and not reactive. The proposed CMYE if effectively implemented on long term basis would help the government achieve some of the objectives envisaged under the Kazi kwa Vijana programme and Uwezo Fund.

This paper has explored how community mentoring can be a basis for youth empowerment and has shed some light on the benefits that would accrue. The thesis for the paper is that no amount of strategies and good will from the government would succeed unless the local communities are involved in helping advance youth issues.

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