

## INTERVIEW

# Transforming a community

The Kiteto Community Education Resource Centre, in Kiteto, provides an opportunity for the community there to access to books, computers, multimedia technology and qualified teachers. We spoke to Mary Malekela, Jifunze Project's country director, about the centre and its role in bringing about change in Kiteto district

## Could you tell us the background of your organisation?

The idea for the Kiteto Community Education Resource Centre (CERC) was born in 1997 as a group of young women in Kibaya gathered to study around a kerosene lamp. The young women met at the home of two teachers in Kibaya, Christina Gabriel, a local kindergarten teacher, born and raised in Kibaya and J. Carrie Oelberger, a young woman from the United States who was volunteering at the Kiteto Secondary school. The numerous female students would arrive each night in order to access educational resources and study together in a supportive environment. As the group grew participants realized that an ample, well-lit space where students could gather to study, would provide an immense benefit to the Kiteto community.

Oelberger and Gabriel then began developing the idea for a one-room study centre for female secondary school students. Oelberger then founded the Jifunze Project. It was through this organization that she conducted her fundraising activities, allowing her to return to Tanzania in January of 2001 and begin development of the centre.

In January 2001, Oelberger and Gabriel began consulting local interest groups representing primary and secondary school students and adults. After the meetings, it was determined that an education resource centre would be an invaluable resource for many different sectors of the community, not just for female secondary school students.

## Why start this project in Kiteto rather than in other districts?

Oelberger, one of the founders, was working as a volunteer at the Kiteto Secondary School. Also the girls who were studying at that school needed a safe and proper place to study.

Kiteto is an ideal place for a centre like this, as the district lags far behind other areas of Tanzania in terms of education facilities and provision. In a 2005 report, it was ranked 117th out of 118 districts and last in the Manyara region, in achievement and pass rate at primary level. None of the region's top ten schools were

found in Kiteto, while seven out of the region's ten worst schools were located here.

## What benefits has the project brought to the local people since it started?

It serves the diverse educational needs of the entire district by providing individuals with an area where they can teach themselves with the assistance of books, computers, games, multi-media technology and access to certified teachers. The CERC complex includes academic reference libraries, student discussion rooms, study halls, a basic literacy program, an early learning centre, an adult education centre, an interactive environmental teaching garden and a children's playground. The centre also includes a computer centre and offers training courses to interested community members at reduced fees, increases technical knowledge in the district and serves as a source of income.

Community members are able to study and upgrade their qualifications for various courses, which they couldn't do without the resources available at the CERC and which in turn, improves their employability.

## The education centre and girls' scholarships fund you set up are meant for female students. What about boys?

As I said earlier, the centre caters for the whole community and not only girls, although the initial idea was to provide space for adolescent girls to study.

From the initial meetings held with the community and government officials, however, it was made clear that instead of building a one room study centre only for girls, it would be much more beneficial to have a place where the whole community could have access; boys and girls young and old. We therefore developed the Kiteto CERC in this manner but you are right our scholarship pro-



gram has remained focused on girls and young women.

This is because we feel they have significantly fewer educational opportunities in Tanzania. In rural families, like those in Kibaya, often girls are discouraged from continuing with their education after secondary school, and in some cases even before. Instead of studying, young girls are often expected to stay at home to perform household duties, find work as a house girl for another family, or get married. In many cases we find that the decision to stop a young girls education is the result of lack of funding for school costs and therefore we have initiated a small program to help those exceptional girls and young women who have the capability to succeed but solely due to their gender, they would not be given the opportunity.

## What type of support is the project getting from the education authorities?

During the early interest group meetings, the local government expressed interest in offering support. After the initial meetings in early 2001 it was decided that the most sustainable option would be to run the centre through the District Education Office, transferring local teachers to supervise and run the programs at the centre. In June of 2001, before the community even completed building's foundation, three teachers were transferred from their school posts by the District Education Office to assist the construction and development of the CERC.

After formalizing their partnership, the Jifunze Project agreed to fund the capital development of the resource centre, while the Kiteto Dis-

trict Council agreed to ensure salaries and benefits for all Tanzanian staff employed there. Although most of the materials for centre development was provided by the Jifunze Project, the district education office contributed sand and rocks for building construction.

Throughout the development of the centre, Jifunze Project has been receiving a lot of support from the Ministry of Education as well. At this point, the education office provides staff as well as their salaries and benefits. It is also contributing to the running costs of the centre and participates in managing CERC it is a member of the centre's management team.

## How sustainable is your project?

The Jifunze Project realized the importance of sustainability from the outset. Sustainability is the reason why we felt it was imperative to establish a partnership with the Kiteto District Council. And it is the reason over the last four years we have been running an intense capacity building program at the centre. By working with the national government to achieve national recognition for the CERC model throughout Tanzania we aim to create an educational resource centre that is not only sustainable in Kibaya but perhaps can also be effective in other areas of Tanzania.

## Is Jifunze satisfied with the pace at which the Kibaya community makes use of the literacy centre set up by the project?

We are very satisfied with the pace at which the children and youth use the centre although we would always be pleased to see more members visiting the CERC. Unfortunately, the pace at which adults use the centre is very low and needs to be improved. We are fully aware that what we have developed in Kibaya is a completely new concept and it will take time for the community to fully realize its potential and see how it may benefit their individual lives.

## What are the challenges that you face in carrying out the project?

The Jifunze Project is currently attempting to phase out financial and management support of the resource centre so that it will become fully sustainable.

This process creates many challenges both financially and managerially and we struggle daily to find a balance between sustainability, effectiveness within the community and promoting the values we feel imperative for such a centre.