

Jamii Yetu Wajibu Wetu (Our Community Our Responsibility)



This is a story that is close to my heart, because from a young age it gave me a passion to want to work with organisations that make a positive difference in the society like MSF. My name is Yvonne Okello and my story is about creating action with the community.

I grew up in an environment that exposed me to a realisation of the different hardships that people in my community go through. We lived in a gated estate. I still remember the fresh smell of green leaves and flowers, and every morning the sun would shine bright and illuminate the beautiful nature that surrounded us. A few metres from my estate was a big piece of government land that had not been occupied for years, but after the Kenyan post-election violence in 2007, a lot of families were displaced and sought refuge in the area. Since this was government land, the displaced families could not build permanent houses. Months went by and the families still occupied the land with very little help from the government to relocate to their original homes. Two years later, this piece of land had become a slum, as more and more people moved there.

The route to my high school meant I literally passed through the middle of this slum. There was no other way around. My school was 20 minutes away from home, so every morning when I walked to school I would see the people's living conditions and it seemed to get worse every time. My heart was always heavy at this sight.

The houses were scantily built with mud; some had iron roofs and others were thatched with polythene bags. There was no clean water or proper sanitation in the slum, which made the whole place look like a dumping site. I don't even remember toilets because the place had a really bad smell. This meant that there were a lot of diseases like cholera and other infections. Towards the far east of the slum, there was a small container room that served as a county government clinic. Every day, there was a long queue of people seeking medical help from these infections, since the other hospitals around were quite expensive.

I vividly remember as I walked to school, I would see kids in the area who were more or less my age, not having the opportunity to attend school like I did. Instead, they would hawk nuts and yams to locals in the area to support their parents and make ends meet at home.

One day during school assembly our principal informed us that the government was launching an initiative for student volunteers to help ensure clean water and sanitation in the communities around us. I was so excited to hear this as I knew the slum area needed help, and together with my classmates and friends I signed up as a volunteer. Every Saturday morning for four hours, 30 of us would start with picking litter in the area, clearing the water channels so that dirty water would flow out, disinfecting the water channels, sweeping and de-cluttering the whole area. The residents of the slum were also heavily involved, but the problem didn't change because there was still no access to clean water and sanitation.

With the support of our principal, school board and county government, school leaders were able to flag the issue and after about two months of constant follow up, a borehole was dug right in the middle of the slum. With this we finally started seeing great change. The long queues at the clinic reduced since now cholera infection rates also reduced, the smell improved because there was enough water to clean up, there was better waste management – and as for schoolgirl me, my walks to school became easier and I didn't have to constantly cover my nose whilst walking in certain areas.

The number of volunteers grew and more people were motivated to join because they could clearly see the positive change. Years down the line, I went back to my school and also visited the slum. I was excited and impressed to see that after all these years, people are still getting up every two to three weeks to do the same things we used to do, coming together to pick litter, read books to the kids on Sundays, donate clothes and supplies amongst other activities.

I am so proud of being part of the very first volunteers to make change in my area.

Picture showing different unequal scenes- the slum vs the Estate side.