

Nonviolent intervention in Kenya: empowering community action for social justice

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Power and rank are often used to oppress the poor in Kenya. For example, in 2012, a very powerful government official in the Kenyan police force used his position of power to illegally acquire a farm belonging to a grandmother, a place she had called home for 20 years. She was evicted from the farm and her six-room brick house was demolished. No legal records could be found in the land registry authenticating the powerful man's claim to the farm. The community lived in fear, and felt they could not challenge the power holders who were perpetrating this injustice. However, alongside other social change practitioners and partner organisations dealing with legal aspects of injustices specifically for women, the campaign team managed to file a case in Kakamega high court and obtained an order allowing the grandmother to return to her farm. In the following days, another round of legal battles between the powerful man and the little-known grandmother, who was now backed by the local activists, began.

Strategies...

The nonviolent activists were determined to see the law applied to the letter, though they were aware that any attempt to enforce the law would be challenged, perhaps violently. They knew that any campaign would need concerted effort from like-minded organisations and individuals if it were to be successful. "We started strategising for the campaign. We sought direction from key administrative offices like the area District Commissioner who is in charge of the Security Council in the district. Though he was clear that the law should be followed, he admitted he was not in a position to implement the court order, because the police man was his senior. As a commander in the police, he often deployed armed officers to guard the farm whenever he suspected the grandmother might be planning to return." explains Benson Khamasi, the campaign team leader.

On the Thursday that the activists had intended to take back the grandmother's home, a contingent of armed police officers guarded the farm for the whole day. This confirmed that the powerful man would not respect the law, and would use any means available to him to threaten and intimidate us. The campaign team realised they needed a new plan, and spent the day strategising. One thing that became clear was that the team needed to work with only trusted allies, who would not let their opponents know our plans – knowledge of the campaign plans were therefore restricted to trained members until everything was ready. "We intentionally resolved not to involve the authorities directly as it was obvious that the police chief had threatened them with sackings and transfers, hence they could not go against his wishes." said Khamasi. The campaign involved key allies including the famous *boda boda* riders (motor bike



MAMA ZEPRETA AT HER HOME. HER DEMOLISHED HOUSE DURING EVICTION IS VISIBLE IN THE BACKGROUND
PHOTO: BENSON KHAMASI

transporters), civil societies, Turning the Tide trained resource people, business people, the media, and local farmers (Turning the Tide is a UK-based, nonviolence training collective <http://www.turning-the-tide.org/>).

With the new day for the campaign set for a Saturday, it was time to do serious ground work. This meant visiting the farm covertly and preparing the campaign materials. “I visited the farm late in the evening, disguised as a neighbour’s visitor, to get acquainted with the surroundings, and then left to see the grandmother who had taken refuge in a church not far from her farm. I was moved to tears to see the condition this old woman had been pushed to with her grandchildren. Perhaps this was the moment that made me decide to go ahead with the campaign regardless of the consequences; I could not believe somebody could be subjected to such inhuman acts”, the team leader declared.

Campaign day

The morning of the campaign day was like any other day, apart from in the hearts of the activists – this was a scenario that was between life and death, so determination to push further was paramount. By 9am people had started arriving at the meeting point in a nearby market. “The market was slowly waking up to business unaware of what was about to happen. With leaflets, newspaper cuttings of the story, the court order, and campaign posters, we got on with mobilisation through the market with a fired up jig and dance, and within minutes we had a big crowd that was eager to see what was happening. A short briefing of the plan was given to emphasise our nonviolent campaign discipline, and many offered to join the campaign. We immediately set off in a convoy of motorcycles and women sang songs of praise, all the way into the grandmother’s home.” recalls the team leader.

As the procession entered the home, the caretakers were surprised to see a big crowd in the house they had been hired to protect. The women danced, and the entire village came to see what was happening. Many villagers were happy to receive the grandmother back after many weeks since her eviction. Many could not believe what they were seeing – they knew the farm had been taken over by a powerful person in government and that it was being guarded by armed police. Many wondered how the grandmother was able to take her farm back despite being so “powerless”. The community had opted to remain silent, though they knew that this was the only home for this grandmother, and that she had taken refuge in a nearby church.

One of the activists said a prayer before everyone started the construction of a new house just in front of the earlier demolished one. The entire crowd helped, and was encouraged to see how a community could unite behind a cause to help the woman rebuild her house. Within an hour the houses super-structure was up ready for roofing. The women were busy fetching water for mud walling.

Responding to police violence

Around 2:30pm, when the house was ready to be roofed, the campaign team were told that a contingent of armed police officers was about to arrive. “We quickly briefed everyone to stay calm. In under five minutes the police vehicle – driving at top speed and with flashing lights – veered into the compound and before it could even stop, the armed police officers had jumped out, firing their guns and throwing tear gas at the crowd, sending them running for safety. The whole village was filled with tear gas, and even small children could be seen choking from the gas. Several people were injured, but this did not deter the campaign team from pushing on with the campaign to ensure the grandmother was in her rightful home.

The crowd had left the compound, and officers were everywhere. “We quickly regrouped and discussed a way forward – we agreed three representatives would seek audience with the armed officers. We entered into dialogue, but were categorical that we were not ready to leave except by court order. The crowd became agitated but we managed to calm everyone down, and we adhered to our principles of nonviolence. I believe this was the time the power of cooperation was at work, power with!!” explains the team leader. “After long hours of negotiation the police officers agreed to go and leave the grandmother peacefully in her home.”

The crowd was determined to finish the house before sunset, and by 6pm the house had been roofed. Everyone was overjoyed that they had succeeded even after being threatened and intimidated with guns. It proved that nonviolence is more powerful than any weapon. Though the grandmother lost her big house after the eviction, she is happy to be back on her farm in a house that the community built for her.

Nonviolence strategies have proved beyond any reasonable doubt that they can be used to address the many injustices in our communities. The fact that nonviolence bore results in such circumstances, where violent agitation would not have achieved such a positive result, demonstrates its potential. Violence

would have complicated the issues further and not helped us to achieve our objective. Over the short period that the strategies have been tested in Kenya, they have yielded positive results which have led to many wanting to know more about nonviolence strategies, and allowed the movement to grow. The exposure to risk for nonviolent activism is often less than that compared to violent tactics. Nonviolent social change involves both the oppressor and the oppressed, allowing for more sustainable resolutions to conflict. By minimising risks during a campaign, more people can get involved and the movement can grow by the day. Nonviolence practitioners should seek win-win solutions to conflict to allow for greater reconciliation and dialogue after conflict.

This nonviolence work in Kenya is being implemented by Change Agents for Peace International (<http://www.capiinternational.or.ke>) in collaboration with Quaker Peace and Social Witness (<http://www.quaker.org.uk/work-quaker-peace-social-witness>).

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West Papua: “We will be free”

Jason MacLeod and Rosa Moiwend

One of the biggest challenges for nonviolent resisters is dealing with oppression. A worst case scenario is a remote and isolated community facing a genocidal regime far from the watching eyes of the international media. This is the situation in West Papua, a Melanesian nation-in-waiting on the western half of the island of New Guinea, occupied by the Indonesian military since 1963. Papuans want political independence and at the same time they demand recognition of their basic rights as indigenous people living on their customary land. The Indonesian security forces have responded brutally to these demands. Consider these two brief examples:

1. In the early hours of 6 July 1998, the Indonesian military opened fire on a crowd of unarmed protesters camped underneath the water tower in Biak City. The violence did not end at the Tower. Police and military officials rounded up the survivors and took them on board three waiting warships. There the survivors were brutalised and killed. Their mutilated bodies were then thrown overboard. More than 100 Papuans were massacred. No media were present. It took a week before local human rights investigators arrived and even then they had to operate clandestinely and it was months before the story got a mention in mainstream international newspapers, if at all. Even now there has been no inquiry; no justice. The perpetrators were promoted and the survivors were sentenced to jail.

2. Fast forward to 2010. Rev Kindeman Gire, a priest with the Kingmi Church was stopped beside a road by the Indonesian military. He was forcibly held down while soldiers deliberately burned his genitals with a burning stick. Gire later died. Sadly, public acts of torture, like that experienced by Reverend