

Upendo Is All You Need

Joe Munnelly of Irish Jesuits International reports on a visit to a developing parish in urban Nairobi.



I sit here wondering how I can express just how moving and inspiring our latest project visits were. Emer and I visited Nairobi, Kenya in June. Emer is our programme officer, and I am the communications officer. As communications officer my role is to highlight the huge impact and difference your generosity and support can make to the lives of those who are the world's most marginalised and impoverished.

'Upendo' is the Swahili word for love, and from my visit to Kenya, love seems to be the driving force of the various

development projects located in the state capital.

'Upendo' is the name of an educational and rehabilitation programme based in Kangemi, a slum, home to more than 100,000 of Nairobi's poorest people. It is an urban, informal settlement located on the outskirts of Nairobi and is comprised of three villages called Waruku, Kaptagat and Gichagi. The programme's main objective is to rehabilitate, educate and integrate orphaned and abandoned children and low-income families, who face

various abuses within the Kangemi district. Since 1995, the programme has supported the education of vulnerable children. Our director, John Guiney SJ, founded Upendo after witnessing the hardship and suffering of the poor while based there for over a decade. Single mothers were often forced into the street to feed their children and HIV was rife, often leading to children losing their guardians and ending up on the street, desperate and vulnerable to abuse. John rallied the local community and gathered St Joseph's parish to identify Kangemi's most poor and vulnerable and outreach began to save the lives of children. The programme since then has grown immensely, through IJI support among other partners, to building livelihoods and brighter futures.

Life in Kangemi is extremely tough as poverty, substance abuse and mass over-crowding place children, and young girls especially, at great risk.

Through St Joseph's Parish, children suffering from abandonment, exploitation and abuse are supported in several ways, including the provision of school supplies such as books, uniforms and tuition fees. Children are supported through balanced school meals and medical care when needed. The Upendo programme also provides much-needed counselling and psychosocial support and continues to empower local youth, parents and guardians through vocational skills training and seminars.

Not only does the Upendo programme support the transition of children from primary to secondary and even third-level institutions, but the programme also focuses on livelihoods and up-skilling local communities

through a number of courses from hair-dressing and dressmaking to electrical work.

The moment that stuck with me the most on our visit, was listening to Lucy, an instructor with the Upendo OVC educational programme, teaching a classroom of men to be future electricians. She spoke with such passion about her career and the defiance to break away from the preconceived notions and imposed limitations of her sex. Lucy expressed wholeheartedly a vision for all to strive for their own passions and to develop strengths and interests without being constrained by gender. Through the Upendo programme women like Lucy continue to grow and continue to inspire women and men alike to break the mould and work with passion.

Another project giving vital support to the most vulnerable in Nairobi is St Joseph's dispensary, a health clinic which is mitigating the AIDS epidemic within Kangemi slums. Poverty is particularly severe within urban slums with an estimated 70% of the population living below the poverty line, disproportionately impacting women and girls. Most Kangemi residents rely on poor quality, informal and unregulated health facilities, and the available private health facilities are frequently unlicensed with no working guidelines or standard protocols for services – the dispensary is a lifeline for people.

As their motto proclaims, 'Love is enough', and I saw at first-hand the triumphs and impact of that love.

If you would like to donate and support projects like Upendo, visit www.iji.ie/donate or send to the Irish Jesuit Missions, 20 Upr Gardiner St, Dublin 1.