

Against All Odds to Support Children

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There are days that are irresistibly rewarding in community empowerment and development work. For me, today is one of those. I spent my day in Korr, Marsabit County, a remote arid and semi-arid region of northern Kenya. Despite the rather, rocky terrain, harsh, dry climate with high temperatures and low, very unpredictable rainfall, you will weave your way around and among a generous pastoralist Rendile community. The Rendile have a rich cultural heritage with traditional practices and ceremonies. They are known for their distinctive attire, beadwork, and community-based lifestyle. The community relies heavily on their animals for food, income, and social status. Until very recently, most households would not condone the idea of sending children to school. Families have heavily relied on children to tend their cattle often several miles in search for pasture and for weeks and months away from home.



Parents Day

At least 50 parents, 15 of whom being male caregivers, gathered at our Early Start ECD Centre situated at Rangumo village for a parent's engagement activity. Though many had to walk a few kilometers to our centre, there was no trace of fatigue in their faces. They radiated joy and expectation. This is one rare opportunity when both the children and parents are at school. This day, however, tells a different victory. It is a story of a people challenging cultural and gender norms to provide education for their children.

The 15 Rendile men stood up to represent courage of a generation defying all odds to invest in their children. One by one they stood up to speak of their aspirations. The dreams they never achieved in their youthful days. But now they can see hope in their children. They are slowly beginning to seriously appreciate that education empowers individuals, especially girls, giving them the skills and confidence to pursue careers and leadership roles. Educated individuals contribute to the economy through higher earning potential and increased productivity.



Like many other rural African communities, deep-seated cultural and gender norms resist changes, making it difficult for families to prioritize education. The result is a cycle of poverty. The complexities of poverty are perpetuated by lack of education perhaps more than anything known in the modern society. Educated individuals tend to have better health literacy, leading to improved health and well-being for themselves and their families. Educational empowerment grants communities the

opportunity to make informed religious decisions rather than depend on practices and traditions ancestrally handed down. Education, especially for girls and marginalized groups, challenges existing stereotypes and promotes gender equality. Education encourages informed civic participation, leading to stronger democracies.



One of the most pressing issues in Korr is the scarcity of clean water. Communities often rely on boreholes and seasonal rivers. Frequent droughts pose a significant threat to the livelihoods of the community, leading to loss of livestock and food insecurity. This consequently denies many children their basic needs i.e., food, water and education and promises to determine the fate of many.

This story of change isn't only told today of the Rendile's of Korr. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist, defied the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education and through her advocacy has brought global attention to the importance of girls' education and inspired many to challenge oppressive cultural norms. Kakenya Ntaiya from Kenya, negotiated with her father to delay her marriage in exchange for attending school. As a result, she has founded the Kakenya Center for Excellence, which empowers girls through education, challenging the traditional practice of early marriage. The Grameen Bank and Microfinance in Bangladesh provides microloans to women,

enabling them to start small businesses and send their children to school. This approach has lifted many families out of poverty and promoted gender equality.



Whereas the challenge remains enormous, collective effort by state and non-state actors is bearing fruits. Engaging community leaders and involving them in advocacy efforts can help shift cultural perceptions and encourage education. Policies and programs that provide financial support, scholarships, and free educational resources can alleviate economic barriers. Early Start Africa is actively raising awareness about the benefits of education through community meetings, and success stories are inspiring change. Influencing cultural and gender norms to provide education is a powerful catalyst for societal change, leading to improved individual lives and more equitable and prosperous communities.

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