A roaring laughter. Mary’s face lights up like the bright sun in an early African morning. I struggle to introduce myself and my weak Swahili amuses her. After practicing it in my head over and over again, I say in a trembling voice: “Jina langu ni Shimon, na mimi ninatoka Israel.” She immediately corrects me in a firm tone. When I try again, this time addressing all the women in the room, the laughter coming from all directions at once is overpowering. This scene bewilders me, and I know that I have a long way to go.

This group of women collaborates to create a vibrant and self-directed organization that serves to empower women in Nairobi, Kenya. Given their strong presence, joy of life and optimism, it is unimaginable that these women struggle on a daily basis with extremely harsh realities. They call themselves the Power Women Group. They come together to empower one another to win against their daily life struggles. Their biggest struggle is the fight to survive; these are women who are living with HIV, and their home is in one of the poorest places in the world. Kibera, a neighborhood of Nairobi, was named the second largest “slum” in Africa by the International Business Times.

My interest in working with community-based ventures such as the Power Women Group came from a deep-seated curiosity for unexpected and inspiring businesses that empower societies and find creative resilience in situations of inequality, discrimination, and poverty. I have spent the last five years accompanying small businesses and individuals who are struggling to maintain a balanced budget and fighting to stay afloat. As a young financial advisor, volunteering in a small town in Israel with a family of five that had severe debt and financial uncertainty, I became aware of how difficult it is to live in poverty and how hard it can be to escape it. Later on, advocating for tenant rights and affordable housing for low-income individuals living in metropolitan Boston showed me how widespread poverty is, and where it is more prevalent, such as in a community of new immigrants. During these experiences, I started noticing society’s approach to poverty and its role in relieving it. Trying my luck in the entrepreneurial world and interacting with a range of entrepreneurs showed me the role of entrepreneurship in motivating people and assisting them in reaching goals and raising their standard of living. I ventured to Kenya to learn how community-based organizations in one of the poorest areas of the world are making positive change in people’s lives, and to try to draw from my experience to provide solutions for the problems confronting these organizations.

In the summer of 2014, I was set to start working at Kenya Social Ventures (KSV), a fairly new organization with a goal to build on the strengths of local businesses and entrepreneurs, most of which are social and community-based organizations, in order to create and support more sustainable and influential organizations. KSV creates meaningful partnerships with a range of individuals and ventures and provides creative solutions to some of the struggles they might face. My role as the program manager was to communicate with the directors of the organizations and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations. In turn, I had to create tailored programs for future volunteers and interns at KSV. Those volunteers would
be working closely with the organizations to accommodate their greatest needs. Particularly, I had to work with three ventures that were all located in Kibera.

“Slum” Versus Neighborhood

Slum: Isləm
NOUN. a squalid and overcrowded urban street or district inhabited by very poor people
VERB. (slums, slumming, slumed). spend time at a lower social level than one’s own through curiosity or for charitable purposes.
(Oxford Dictionary)

Before arriving in Kibera, I would probably not take issue with this definition and its implications; however, over the course of my internship I was able to get more insight into the way I understand the power imbalance I create by using derogatory language towards a human condition. Initially, judgments about “slums” clouded my ability to see what was in front of me. Coming into this experience with preconceived ideas and beliefs about slums and poverty, I made up my mind before even getting a closer look. This definition positions what “slums” are in the eyes of those who use that word. What might the impact of such definition be on the people who live in a place that was labeled “slum”? What does it mean for those like me, who are coming to work there?

Thankfully, as I started looking closer, and as my summer internship at KSV progressed, I saw with my eyes the people who were living within the Western depiction of abject poverty and tin huts. I remember passing a young girl in a red dress helping her mother with the house chores; I wondered if I was as gentle and caring with my mother growing up. I can still smell the sweet aroma when going to the local kiosks to buy my favorite food, chapati (a local pastry that, with its close resemblance to the Israeli pastry malawach, reminded me of my home). I remember seeing a group of eight-year-old boys with matching green uniforms embroidered with some logo, playing football by the side of the train tracks on a huge open field behind their primary school.

Kibera was not just comprised of “very poor people” of “lower social level,” waiting for Westerners to hand out charity, as the label “slum” led me and probably many others to expect. Kibera contained so much more, from the desolate to the entrepreneurial, representing all of the complex situations that Kiberans face every day. Kibera embodied a varied human fabric to which the definition of “slum” did not do justice. When I walked through Kibera for the first time, what struck me most were the smiles. They were everywhere, relieving the initial stress I felt about fitting in. I saw more smiling faces in Kibera than I had seen in a long time, and it made me feel less like I was “slumming,” as the Oxford definition had blatantly declared.

This contrast between my experience of Kibera and the definition illustrates my personal journey. Choosing to take a step back and observe something without passing judgment is a continuous challenge for me; nonetheless, it is an essential ingredient in my ability to critically consider the way we think about development work. More specifically, it demonstrates that development work needs to be restructured to be more people-oriented, emphasizing relationship- and trust-building, personal and deeper communication, and cultural understanding. Moreover, shallow observations about people and their situation might be detrimental for them, because it confines them in these definitions, establishes and cements their condition, and does not offer any way out.

Kibera Neighborhood, Nairobi

When I first landed in Nairobi, my friend (and former Sorensen Fellow) Abie and our driver Jacob picked me up and we set out to drive through Nairobi to familiarize me with the area. The drive to the center of town did not take long, despite Nairobi’s busy streets, overflowing with cars, bikes, matatus (buses), boda-bodas (taxi-motorcycles), and people. Everyone seemed to be moving in opposite directions, trying to compete to be the first to pass, sometimes defying basic laws of physics, but still maintaining some kind of flow. Although we were stuck in gridlock traffic, it seemed like everything was still advancing. Paradoxically, it was a peaceful commotion.
When I walked through Kibera for the first time, what struck me most were the smiles. They were everywhere, relieving the initial stress I felt about fitting in. I saw more smiling faces in Kibera than I had seen in a long time, and it made me feel less like I was “slumming,” as the Oxford definition had blatantly declared.

A bird’s eye view of Kibera.

Nairobi is made up of vastly different neighborhoods woven together in a way reminiscent of colonial times. Westlands and Lavington, characterized by high-rises and expansive residential areas, reminded me of my hometown in Israel. Developers are creating modern projects for young families that offer increased standards of living and safety, while global franchises and local businesses are working intensely to join and fuel the development wave that Nairobi has seen in the last decade. On the other side of town, in front of some new luxurious real estate projects, Kibera’s plethora of unevenly joined tin rooftops are revealed, creating one of the more memorable landscapes I have seen. Increased development in Nairobi and other large cities, and continued droughts and floods in the rural areas, have resulted in major demographic shifts in Kenya, notably the rapid urbanization of cities and the creation of informal urban “slums.” Kibera is one such neighborhood, and it exemplifies the income inequality and related struggles that result from unplanned, accelerated urbanization.

According to the official population census, Kibera is home to 170,070 people, but unofficial sources estimate the population at 500,000 to 1,000,000 – all living in an area approximately the size of Central Park in New York City. Most of the residents live on fewer than two dollars a day, which the World Bank defines as a benchmark for extreme poverty. On the other hand, as written in The Economist, “Kibera may be the most entrepreneurial place on the planet,” where residents work hard to provide valuable services and products to their community and fight to survive the harsh realities that characterize the area, such as disease outbreaks, food shortages, violence and crime.

I did not expect to see many foreigners in Kibera. To my surprise, people of all nationalities were walking around; some were tourists, equipped with their cameras and travel guides, others were researchers and non-profit workers who have been studying Kibera and implementing various projects. I wondered whether I also looked like one of them. I was told that locals have adapted to this influx of tourists in Kibera; non-profit initiatives and souvenir shops were opening everywhere. There exists a tour through Kibera called “the slum tour,” which brings tourists to visit social ventures, new initiatives and schools. The tour concentrates on the positive aspects of Kibera: the various groups that are working on economic empowerment, public health and sexually transmitted disease awareness, sanitation and education. Despite the goal of the tour, so I have heard, some tourists come to Kibera to appreciate their own privilege by driving around through the streets of the “slum” looking from within their air-conditioned SUVs at what is happening outside, occasionally rolling down the window for a passing child or other visual or auditory stimulations. In Nairobi, I have learned, such contrasts are unavoidable.
Her quiet reserve and smile were distinct and did make her stand out; I could identify which woman she was before I was introduced to her. Leadership and power, I learned, are assumed quietly in this group of women.

Kenya Social Ventures
After getting settled in my one bedroom apartment, my own little tropical paradise, on my second day in Kenya I met with the KSV team. I sat with Blake Simpson, Tony Ogeto and Nash Murugu for a detailed briefing about our operations in Kibera and the particulars of my project. Blake is a young entrepreneur from the state of Washington, who together with Tony, a Kibera-born Kenyan, founded KSV. Nash, also a Kenyan, was overseeing a partner project to KSV called Gaia’s Garden that collaborates with rural farmers to establish markets for them in Nairobi. Blake and Tony had developed connections with three ventures in Kibera with which I was set to work: Power Women Group, Victorious Bones Craft, and SEED Academy.

I first started working with the Power Women Group (PWG), which was created in 2007 to raise awareness for HIV/AIDS and provide a space for women affected by the disease to support each other in overcoming the difficulties in their lives. In the last year KSV had an intern at PWG who conducted interviews and wrote biographies and stories of the women in the group. Out of all that I had heard about the group, the story of one woman stood out in particular. It was the story of the head of the group, Everlyne.

Everlyne
Everlyne grew up in the Western Circuit of Kenya. As the firstborn of seven brothers and sisters, she is now in her late 30s and has four children. Similar to the other women in the group, she takes care of two additional children. She confirmed her HIV status in 2004 and since then she has been working towards empowering women like herself, mainly through work at the Power Women Group, but also through being a counselor serving as a facilitator of social change to fight poverty and violence in her community.

Given all I had heard about her before meeting her, I was expecting a woman with a powerful presence befitting that of the title organizer and leader of the Power Women Group. Yet when I arrived, Everlyne, in a very typical manner, was sitting peacefully in the corner of the room next to the other women. Her quiet reserve and smile were distinct and did make her stand out; I could identify which woman she was before I was introduced to her. Leadership and power, I learned, are assumed quietly in this group of women.

The women create beautiful handcrafted goods: jewelry, decorative fabrics and home decorations. Their customers are infrequent tourists that come by their shop located in the center of Kibera. They have partnered with a range of organizations in the past to market their products throughout Nairobi and even abroad, but for different reasons the collaborations did not last. Ready to work and with a lot of ambition and goals, our KSV team spent time visiting the group and collecting information about how they work and how they lead their daily lives. Part of what we identified as PWG’s needs was to increase production as a means to increase the group’s profits. We suggested creating a catalog and an exhibition that would incorporate the women’s handcrafted products to find additional markets for them and, in turn, generate more revenue streams.

Eager to start implementing the project, we sat with Everlyne to discuss our suggestions. Everlyne, however, had a different plan for us. The group, Everlyne explained, had negative experiences with foreigners in the past. The problems stemmed from false pretenses of help, whereby foreigners took the group’s trademark and story and made a profit on their behalf without including the women, effectively stealing from them. Everlyne told Blake that she did want to work with us, but the process would have to be gradual. She felt that our respective organizations had to build trust before moving forward with projects like these.

It was clear that building trust was of utmost importance for the success of the collaboration, so we slowed down after this and started focusing on building relationships with the women rather than pushing progress for which they were not yet ready or willing. Instead of trying to analyze the group, I started communicating more with Everlyne, trying to grasp every

With some of the women at the Power Women Group.
snippet of information she was willing to share with me. She was willing to share stories about the difficulties of life in Kibera. She once told me how she felt about living with HIV, how she was constantly troubled by questions such as how to tell her children about her status and how to provide for her family when she might not survive the disease. Between sentences she looked at me in a motherly manner, vulnerable and authoritative at the same time. She began accepting me into her life, while trying to maintain her strength so as not to be taken advantage of. I can only imagine how hard it must have been.

Complexities of Health Education
Kenya, like many other places, has a lot of stigmas about HIV/AIDS. Many people believe that the disease can be transmitted through any type of contact. This creates a huge challenge for people, but especially for women living with HIV, in finding jobs, interacting with others in the community, and most importantly, providing adequate living environments for their families. To break such stigmas, Everlyne and the rest of the women want to inform the public and raise awareness regarding the disease. “Having HIV doesn’t mean it is a death sentence,” she said. “In 2004 and 2005, people believed that if you are [HIV] positive it is the end of your life. But now you [as an HIV carrier] can still work on your own and take care of your children.”

PWG, therefore, is a transformative platform for women living with HIV, as well as for community leaders such as Everlyne. The women feel empowered by being part of a group of people with similar issues and hardships, and at the same time they earn an additional source of income and find new avenues to develop valuable skills. In addition to operating the store and selling their handmade crafts to tourists coming through Kibera, the group runs a salon to train women in cutting and weaving hair, and a daycare facility so that the women can have their children looked after while they are at work.

Everlyne communicates the main goal of the group as the commitment to change society’s perception towards women with HIV. The group wants to empower women to be brave about their condition and not shy about their HIV status, and it concentrates on rural empowerment and raising awareness in the women’s original villages. One way to reach this goal is by having each woman return to live in her original village and build a house there. Owning a house will allow her to regain her local status, therefore enabling her to advocate for her cause and be an agent for change.

Increasing profit and finding more revenue streams are important factors in reaching the group’s goal because this, in turn, increases their ability to afford to build these houses in rural areas. However, although increased profits are a means to reach the ultimate goal, we couldn’t immediately focus on efficiency and profit maximization. We had to begin by focusing on the women themselves, and the issues most important to them. Building mutual trust and maintaining reciprocal listening, rather than analyzing and examining them as a case study, were the first steps to a sustainable cooperation that focuses on the goals of the group.

Victorious Bones Craft
The next group I worked with was Victorious Bones Craft, a group of men who create beautiful artifacts and jewelry from recycled animal bones. In the very first meeting we had with the group leaders we were told that they were in need of dust masks to prevent respiratory problems from constant inhalation of bone dust, a by-product of bone processing. They showed us their masks and we started finding a local vendor who sells masks and searching to see if we could import even cheaper masks. Finally, we found a mask from a local shop that was both cheaper and of better quality than the masks the group was buying. We gave Jack, the Secretary of Victorious, a sample mask and tried to monitor its use over the rest of the week. Out of the five times we visited, they had not used the mask even once, and always put it on after our enquiries. This was very confusing to me. Was something wrong with the mask?

Determined to understand, I kept probing for answers to why they would not use the mask. If it was not masks that they
needed, then what was it? What if the masks were just a story that we were told to get us to collect money for this cause? I did not know what to think. It became clear that the need was not the masks but rather the money to buy the masks, which, when given to the group, they would have probably spent on more pressing needs. Through previous experiences, the bone group had learned how to demonstrate a need and use it to solicit charity from foreigners. In their eyes, we were an opportunity to gather funds. Adopting the lessons from PWG, we decided to take a different approach – to first build trust. Instead of suggesting a solution to the problems that we were presented with, we wanted to learn about the group’s goals for the future. The underlying problems did not take long to come to the surface. During a talk I had with one of the group leaders, he mentioned that the group would soon be evicted from their workshop because of the railway renovation project scheduled to take place in a couple of months. The project would affect not only their workshop but would involve evicting thousands of households and businesses that live and operate beside the train tracks that pass through the center of Kibera.

The men did not want to admit this problem to strangers; they previously had not trusted us with the knowledge of their informal status in the “slum” – most of the area below the tracks is informally settled and, therefore, they are all considered illegal squatters. Since the group depends on their workshop for their livelihood and the continuation of their craft and employment, determining the group’s next steps in light of the railway project was crucial. To address this concern, KSV and the group started working on raising revenue to be invested back into rent for a new location for their workshop. I found it hard to put myself in the place of the artisans at Victorious Bones Craft; the uncertainty of where to live and work constantly troubles them, for now without any resolution.

Lessons at SEED Academy

Student Empowerment through Education and Development (SEED) Academy is a small primary school located in the middle of Kibera. I would often go see the children when they were on a break from class. All 51 pupils would greet me. As always, they would cheer and chant the familiar “howayou” (how are you?), which almost every child says to a mzungu (white person) passing by on the street. They would swarm to surround me. Myriad hands would try to shake my hand. Those who succeeded did not let go – they tightened their grip and tried to swing using my hand. The children would recite from start to finish all the songs they knew, both in English and in Swahili. Playing with the kids was always an uplifting experience that offset the difficult realities of life in Kibera.

The SEED Academy offers affordable education to vulnerable children who cannot attend an official primary school due to lack of money. Primary schools in Kenya are “fully” subsidized by the government, but families incur additional charges for books, supplies, uniforms and food. I worked closely with Patrick, the founder and director of SEED, on the school’s feeding program, which provides a warm meal for the children. Patrick was concerned that he would have to terminate the program due to lack of funding. Patrick has gone through great difficulties to maintain the feeding program and he was disheartened when there was no donor to be found for the next term. Patrick established the school in his home, and in the free time he had between managing the school and taking care of his family he was attempting to finish a film and communications degree to be able to take on extra work as a wedding photographer. Patrick exhibited the humility and compassion that can only be found in people of the highest caliber.

SEED is located in a two-story shack that is very dark. Looking out of the window, I could see Kibera’s tin rooftops stretching out to the horizon, touching the new developments that are decorating the skyline. I wondered if the children were aware of the obstacles that Patrick was going through. Patrick and I had worked on the financial aspect of the school — mainly fundraising and the annual budget. Thinking about the kids made me realize that we might have been concentrating on the wrong things. Not only were money and funding on our minds; we dared to dream about opening a virtual library with computers, and creating a fund that would pay for the children to go to secondary school. Although all of these things are important, what we forgot about was what we had in our hands all along.
Rather than taking the asset-based approach to development and building on what we had to make progress, we were too concentrated on what we did not have: money and funding. With that said, I strongly believed that Patrick was able to give the children something of greater value. This community-based organization, the SEED Academy, which had evolved from the strengths and ambitions of the communities in Kibera, was in charge of bringing up the new generation of leaders. Patrick had the minds of 51 children to shape and to improve, and most of all, to teach how to learn – to instill in them the confidence to take the information presented to them, and know how to incorporate it and utilize it. As I saw Patrick investing all he had into the school, I could imagine a future where these children he had taken in continue in his path to overcome obstacles and make a true impact for themselves and their communities. In Patrick they had an inspiring role model.

Working with Patrick made me realize that, all along, we at KSV were concentrating on the “what” and the “how,” but we had forgotten about the “why.” We knew what we were doing; we were doing development work. How we did this was through education, gender and economic empowerment, and social entrepreneurship. But we did not know why we were doing all that. The “why” lies with the end result, which I realized is not just human beings for whom the basic needs have been met, but human beings who can tap into their own strengths to find the resilience to fulfill their own basic needs independently. That was our “why.”

Conclusion

Before I arrived in Kenya, I thought I knew the intricate details of the struggle of low-income businesses. In Kenya I found that understanding social and cultural aspects of people’s lives and their specific situations can offer a greater understanding of their struggles, and that there is no panacea for poverty. My preconceived notions of social entrepreneurship and development work in the business and non-profit world seemed to distance me from the people I was trying to work with in Kibera. Cultural understanding proved to be the key to effective cooperation between my team and the organizations we worked with. Therefore, understanding how people view their own situations, what their goals are, and how others view them, should be the basis from which development work starts. Through this approach, we ensure a better understanding of the individuals and may potentially have a greater impact on their situations.

These realizations came after a process of learning, interacting with people, making mistakes, and reflecting on my progress. Our work first started with the notion of analyzing someone’s strengths and weaknesses and understanding their needs so we could help them. We first thought that it was all about our expertise, about our analysis and our help. But the way we create effective development and progress is through collaboration, rather than a one-way stream of analysis or help. Creating the space for people to understand and decipher their needs, and working together in the direction of addressing them, was the more effective approach.

All the organizations we worked with in Kibera needed more money – there was no question about that. However, the Power Women Group was more interested in the well-being of the children under their wing and in advocating for their cause than in buying more materials, pumping up production, and selling and earning more. Victorious Bones Craft severely needed better cooperation and communication amongst themselves because, in the near future, the railway project would force them to close their workshop and come together to recreate the business elsewhere. The challenge is that their craft is their only source of income. They needed teamwork and awareness campaigns rather than dust masks, improved markets and diversified products. The SEED Academy needed to focus on building a curriculum, and on establishing sustainable processes to obtain funds and maintain relationships with funders, rather than looking for the means to buy stationery, set up a new computer library, or add another floor to the compound. Although the feeding program is still in dire need of funding, Patrick and the KSV team are creating fundraising campaigns to secure long-lasting support for the program.
Eliciting these answers from the individual organizations was not easy. I remember being surprised when I noticed that one of the first things people wanted from collaboration with a foreigner is financial support. The behavior of foreigners in the past and the belief that aid is scarce and fleeting causes mistrust, even if foreigners proclaim that they intend to stay and do long-lasting work. In the first month of our project the majority of the requests that we got from people were for financial support. As we delved deeper and strengthened relationships with them, the real needs started to emerge.

The key was in forming a strong relationship and drawing from people’s knowledge and expertise to establish a sincere two-way conversation that would help them identify what their greatest needs are. While working on the ground and in close proximity, I realized that we cannot effect change without understanding people’s issues on a personal level. Combining cultural understanding of the communities, relationship building, and effective communication will shift aid and poverty alleviation work from just good intentions to impactful change that endures over time.

After calling Kibera a “slum” throughout my stay there and to the faces of locals, I finally acknowledged my true misconception. I tried to redefine the word from my experience and to discard the old definition of being merely an urban place stricken by poverty and devoid of livable conditions, or a place within a city that is informal⁶ and illegal, dirty and rundown. These definitions can only come from those who try to distance themselves from it, out of distaste, fear or disinterest. Kibera might stay a “slum” in the eyes of those who cannot see past that label. As a result, the people of Kibera find the power to overcome the daily threats to their dignity. My experience has shown me that referring to Kibera as a “slum” or trying to encompass it in any one word is simply impossible. It is much more than that. I can attest to the multitude of faces, voices, stories, emotions and ambitions that come from Kibera, this community, which is labeled a “slum” by foreigners and by the government, and called “village,” “neighborhood” or “home” by those people who live there.

I came to Kenya thinking I had the expertise and experience to effect change. I kept concentrating on being efficient, painstakingly keeping track of notes, time and our goals as a team. I did everything that is considered “professional” by Western standards. That was my mistaken premise, and I now realize that becoming a trusted partner comes before that, and development organizations cannot succeed without this mutual collaboration. As we move from work that is concerned with differences, objectifying others, imposing fixes, exclusion, and privilege, to person-to-person approaches that build on the agency of people in maintaining their dignity, through listening, empowerment and building trust, we might start to transcend some of the differences and achieve worthwhile goals and effect positive long-lasting change.

Notes


6. Areas of a city that are developed in the absence of government planning are called “informal” and are often considered illegal. Those who live in those areas are usually considered “squatters.”