

# Take Off ▶ Guru

## Mara libraries boost education and promote literacy levels

What started as a writing competition has seen students in Narok County improve their communication skills, school performance and the benefits now flow beyond the classrooms

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There was an air of anticipation at Ololulunga Boys Secondary School in Narok County, as various schools gathered, eager to participate and exchange insights on the essay writing competition that was being launched on that calm, sunny day.

The essay project is part of the Olive Seed Foundation's education programme between Morocco, Kenya and the US with the various students being challenged to write about the main challenges they face in their generation. The winner would get to travel to the US and tour the Silicon Valley. So far, 15 high schools have signed up for the essay competition.

For John Ogutu, principle of Masaai Mara Secondary School, one of the schools participating in the competition, the initiative will assist in improving the scores in his school.

"The essay challenge is an opportunity to improve communication skills amongst the learners in my school and will likewise awaken the competitive spirit amongst learners in the region," he says.

The essay writing was inspired by the need to ignite literacy and an interest in learning to the young students.

### Towards a sustainable future

"Whether essays or short stories, these writing programmes are a natural evolution of our library and knowledge work. Students start thinking for themselves and learning how to express and have confidence in their own thoughts and to share their thoughts with others. We publish books from these projects, and with our libraries, we have places to put them. Imagine a young person who never had access to a library before, how inspiring it must be to not only have a library now, but a book in it they wrote! Can you imagine how they feel pulling that book off the shelf?" asks Barbara Mackraz, founder and CEO of Oliveseed Foundation, and the co-founder of Oliveseed Kenya.

As for the essay topic, it was inspired by the anxieties in the world about the future that the older generation is leaving the younger generation with such as climate change, environment, poverty, or social justice. "So why not ask the next generation what they think? What are they seeing as they look ahead? Their apprehensions? I'm hoping these essays will inspire young people to think seriously about the future of life on earth, and especially to consider what people everywhere need to do to create a

more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable world," Barbara adds.

What started as a national short story competition in Morocco for teens during the Covid-19 pandemic has become so popular that the organisation is currently doing it every year extending it to Kenya.

"The anthologies are going in school libraries in the US and Kenya, and I've always loved the idea of having students in Kenya, Morocco, and the US collaborate. Recently, one of our supporters in the US named Gee Gee said she'd sponsor a writing project bringing together these countries, and that is this project," she says.

According to Daniel Lemein, director of Strategy Sustainability and Impact at Oliveseed Foundation, the competition was inspired by the need to develop to improve talents as well as develop the student's critical thinking in the region.

### Access to resources

"The students' thirst to write during the pandemic inspired us to get them to write the effects of the pandemic on their education and tell their thoughts to the world," he says.

The essay writing is part of Oliveseed Foundation's mission to uplift the next generation through literacy and education. Only 11 per cent of the young people in the Mara enroll in secondary schools and the region has one of the highest percentages of drop out rated and teen pregnancies in the country. It is estimated that 66 per cent of young girls undergo Female Genital Mutilation too. By setting up libraries and science labs, Barbara together with the organisation's co-founder in Kenya Amos Kipeen, desires to transform the region by giving the students access to resources that they have never had and improving the education sector in the region.

"I started Oliveseed in Morocco 10 years ago developing English libraries for under-resourced rural public schools, working closely with local teachers. I first came to the Mara in 2016 as an organiser of the 'March for Elephants' and had gotten to know Maasai



Barbara Mackraz, co-founder of Oliveseed Kenya. BELOW: Students revising in a library. PD/PHOTO CREDIT

### BARBARA

The anthologies are going in school libraries in the US and Kenya

men who were doing the same in the Mara. I immediately saw that I could help with education and development here too, so I expanded my programme to Kenya in 2017," recalls Barbara.

So far, the organisation has set up libraries in five rural public schools in the Mara, a high school science lab, and two small village libraries (Manyatta libraries).

"The idea of the Manyatta libraries is to

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- Barbara Mackraz started Oliveseed Foundation in Morocco 10 years ago developing English libraries for under-resourced rural public schools.
- She expanded the programme in Kenya in 2017.
- In Kenya the organisation has set up libraries in five rural public schools in the Mara, a high school science lab, and two small village libraries (Manyatta libraries).

bring reading and learning to where people live. These are for villages with earthen homes and are the only lit building in their village (solar). This is a very promising initiative we hope to expand. The Manyatta libraries also become community centers. We've seen that the first one has become a place where elders share traditional knowledge with the community," she continues.

One of the beneficiaries of the programme is Masaai Mara Secondary School, that had a library constructed and stocked with books for the students.

According to the principle, the library has created a conducive reading space for both the students and the teachers.

"It has enabled the schools to slot a library lesson and this has improved the readership and writing skills for Form One and Twos. It has also positively boosted the school's performance from a mean score of 4.328 in 2021 to 6.145 in 2022 and finally 6.458 in 2023. English improved from 2.7 to 3.629 to 4.116 in the three consecutive years respectively," he says.

### Future developments

The only issue now is that the library has become smaller due to the number of students accessing it and would need a bigger and more modern library.

One of the biggest challenges that the organisation faces is funding. "I'm constantly looking for ways to fund our work, and it's exhausting. There's no limit to what we can do, if only we have the financial support," says Barbara.

Other projects in the area include a Women's Work Centre near Sekenani and a Purified Water Facility near Aitong. The Women's Centre provides income-generating activities for women in beadwork arts, and soon also sewing and milk delivery by electric motorcycles.

"We recognise that when you support women, you're uplifting entire communities, as women everywhere spend their income on their children and families. When we asked the women at our Centre what they would like to spend their money on, every one of them replied, "To pay school fees and keep my children in school," she explains.

In future, the organisation is planning to develop the first public library in the Maasai Mara. In addition, they plan to continue building libraries for schools and villages, and are already developing science labs as well. They also plan to greatly expand their writing programmes — and to grow all the initiatives beyond Morocco and Kenya to other parts of the world.

"We look at "education" as something much broader, beyond the classroom. It's life experiences, and it's interactions and collaborations between people, even from different places. It's everyday critical thinking and doing, leading to responsible behaviour. We will foster initiatives such as youth groups in conservation and civics by providing access to knowledge resources, research projects, and shared learning and exchanges with counterparts in other places. We're also planning a Maasai story project where we will interview elders and preserve their stories, wisdom, and traditional knowledge. This is an initiative that can engage young people to know and value their own history," Barbara says in ending.

