



# Igniting a Culture of Reading & Learning: Public Library & Education Center for Maasai Mara, Kenya

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## THE FIRST RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Maasai Mara, in the southwest of Kenya, is one of the most wildlife-rich regions of the world, and communities here live a traditional, pastoral way of life close to nature. Men herd their family's cattle, while women take care of the home, fetch water, raise the children, prepare food, and milk the cows. Many families live in earthen homes without power or light.

Educationally, the Maasai Mara region is extremely disadvantaged, with the highest school drop-out rate and highest teen pregnancy rate in Kenya. Only 11% of students in Narok County reach in secondary (high) school, and for girls the percentage is even lower, around 7%. And when girls here don't succeed in school, they are often subjected to forced marriage at a young age. The resources to support education in this region are almost nonexistent. Until we began our work with schools in this area, the public schools here had no libraries or other resources that could possibly ignite a culture of reading and lifelong learning — the key to success in education and path to a better future. Now we're building the first public library in the region to expand learning resources to many more students and to support the whole community.



Since 2017, OliveSeed has been developing quality educational resources in this area. We have established Libraries at five rural schools (Talek, Aitong, and Enturoto Primary, Mara Girls Leadership, and Maasai Mara Secondary); a Science Lab for Maasai Mara Secondary School; "Solar Home Libraries" for students sequestered at home during the pandemic; and an intimate

solar-powered Library in the village of Ololchura, the first inside a traditional Maasai manyatta. We focus on high quality and cultural relevance in everything we do, and we include capacity-building workshops that turn into transformative reading, writing, and learning programs for the next generation.

**The time is right to develop the first Public Library in the rural Maasai Mara.** We have seen again and again that the school libraries are working. Through access to knowledge, more children stay in school and progress to the next levels, teachers are encouraged and create enriched activities, test scores improve, and young students have a path to a hopeful future. A Public Library will scale this initiative meaningfully.



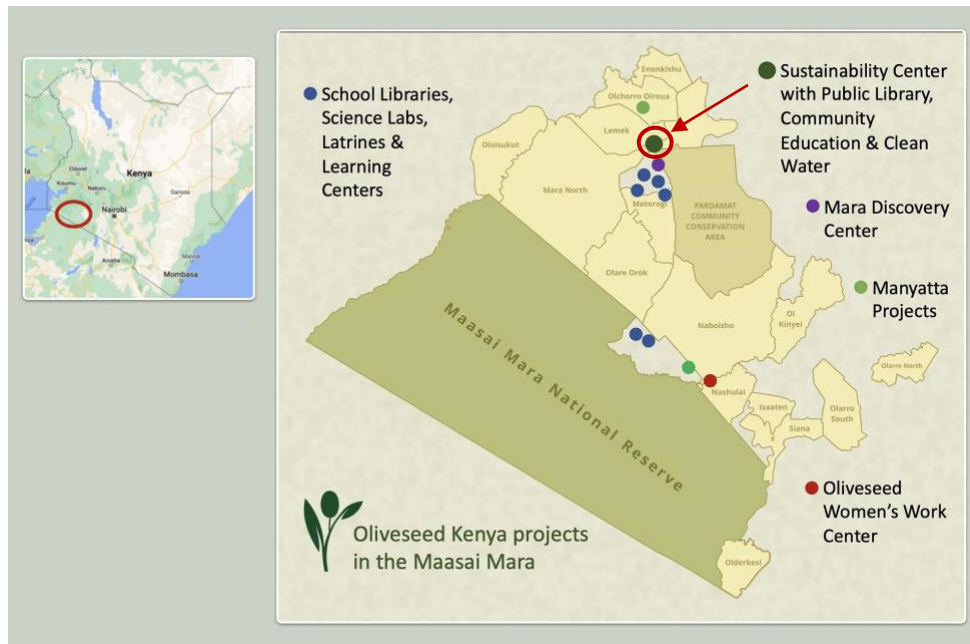
We have a tremendous opportunity now with donated land near Aitong, support from Africa Publishing Innovation Fund and other partners on materials, library expertise, strong relationships with local schools, and trust and good will from the community. Despite the many disadvantages here, there is enormous local support for education and positive alternatives for young people. When we launched the first public school library, over 1000 parents and community members came to celebrate it, walking long distances to get there.

Like all great libraries, this Public Library will also be a community hub. We are planning a Meeting Space for vocational and business skills trainings, literacy and computer classes, mentorships, and community and conservation meetings, as well as room for locally curated cultural exhibits and for elders to share stories and knowledge.

## SITE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

This Library will be just north of the town of Aitong, along the county road in easy reach of 20,000 people and a dozen schools. The community has donated 10 acres of prime land to Oliveseed Kenya for this project.

Over the long term, our program on this site is the Maasai Mara Center for Sustainability, addressing sustainability for both the Maasai community and the environment they depend on. This site will provide a platform for bringing together education, water, micro-enterprise, cultural preservation, locally led conservation and grasslands preservation, a tree nursery, demonstration gardens teaching regenerative farming, and other benefits not found elsewhere in the region — but greatly needed and desired by the community.



*Along with the Water Facility, the Public Library will be the centerpiece of the upcoming Maasai Mara Sustainability Center. Note that this is in the middle of conservation land. The yellow areas on this map are community-owned wildlife conservancies.*

We have already launched our first big community resource on this site: the **Lemek Hills Purified Water Facility** with borehole, solar pumping, filtration, and bottling of certified drinking water available at low cost to the community. Up until now, people were obtaining their drinking water from dirty sources such as open pits shared with cattle and wildlife, and 80% of hospitalizations were the result of unsafe water. Sales of cooking and drinking water to the many safari camps in the region will generate revenue to sustain the Water Facility and contribute operational funds to the Library and other services of the Sustainability Center.

The Water Facility has already made this community center a destination, and the Public Library will enhance it even more.



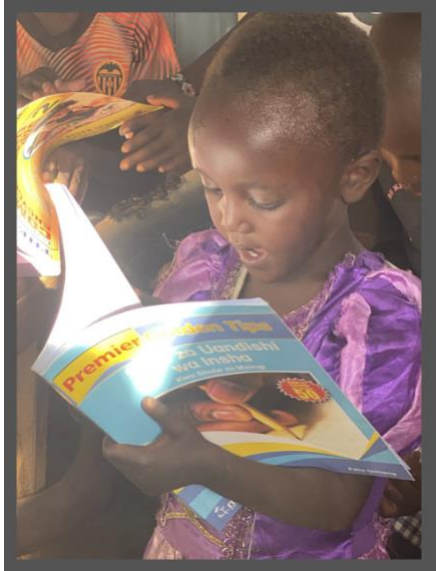
*Previously, community members obtained their drinking water from dirty sources including the open pit shown on the left shared with cattle. Now, clean water is available to all at our Purified Water Facility, right next to where the Public Library will be.*

In the past year, we also developed this 10-acre site with an entry road, fencing all around the property, a tree nursery, and planting of over 1000 indigenous trees.

In addition to the educational benefits of the Library, over the long term this site will also be a platform for micro-enterprises, water-efficient demonstration gardens, cultural interpretive center, community tree planting, and other features that support the community.

## WHAT WILL BE IN THIS LIBRARY?

The Maasai Mara Public Library will house books for curriculum and pleasure reading, laptops with eKitabu content, and other learning materials for all ages, as well as a Meeting Space for literacy classes, computer classes, and vocational and business skills training. In addition to being a public facility accessible to over 20,000 people, this Library will extend and unite the services we already offer at our public school projects in the area and will expand access to 10 more schools. Like all our Library projects, we focus on quality and relevance, and the materials (in English and Kiswahili) will be purchased in Kenya.



One of our goals is to ignite a culture of reading and lifelong learning in the next generation. The Library will include a children’s area with picture and chapter story books and games to engage the youngest ones. We will organize reading times and other activities for children, even pre-school age. This is already being done successfully at the Manyatta Library we established in the village of Ololchura.

The Library will also include a significant collection on nature, climate change, and environmental conservation, as we are right in the middle of the most wildlife-rich region of East Africa with local Maasai as stewards of this heritage, and there are career opportunities locally in eco-tourism and conservation. Outside, the Library will be surrounded by a Cultural Arboretum, to demonstrate and preserve the

traditional medicinal and cultural value of indigenous trees. We are working with conservancies and Wildlife Clubs of Kenya on these cultural and conservation assets.

When schools in the Mara reopened after the Covid pandemic, we engaged students from ages 10 to 18 to write about their lives while sequestered for 8 months at homes without power or light. We published their essays in a book now in libraries in Kenya and Morocco — and the students were interviewed on national television. The new Public Library will provide a platform for many more writing and publishing initiatives like this, elevating the voices of young people and bringing their stories to the world. We are also planning an indigenous story project with students interviewing elders to capture, write, and publish oral stories before they are lost.

We know from our work in both Kenya and Morocco that a great library is much more than a collection of materials. It’s a hub that brings people together, amplifies learning and knowledge, and builds community. There is nothing like this in the region today.

## WHAT WE HAVE SO FAR

	<b>Value</b>	<b>Source</b>
An ideal site	10 acres	Donated by the local community
Purified water facility	\$90,000	Global Water First
Land development (road, fencing, trees)	\$7,000	Private donations
Literacy grant from APIF	\$20,000	Africa Publishing Innovation Fund
Infrastructure support from Rotary	\$40,000	Rotary global grant with support from multiple clubs in U.S. & Kenya
Partnership with local library supplier		Text Book Center, Nairobi
Collaboration with local conservation organizations		Wildlife Clubs of Kenya & Mara conservancies

- **An ideal site:** The community donated 10 acres to us, and the land is owned by Oliveseed Kenya. The site is on a county road with easy access to 20,000 people and 10 schools. We have already improved the site with an entry road, fencing, and indigenous trees; and we have launched the only Purified Water Facility in the area.
- **Purified water facility:** Our partner Global Water First installed a clean water facility with borehole, solar pumping, filtration, and bottling. This facility right next to the Library offers the only clean drinking water in the area. The income from the sales of water to local safari camps and businesses will support the operations of the Library.
- **Literacy grant from APIF:** We were awarded a competitive grant by Africa Publishing Innovation Fund (APIF) to outfit the Library with books, digital resources, and other media, plus games and picture books for the youngest ones. APIF supports one of our school library projects, and they have witnessed the impact of our work.
- **Infrastructure grant from Rotary:** We have support from three Rotary Clubs in the U.S., led by Los Altos Rotary, and the Kitengela Club in Nairobi on a Rotary Global Grant. This grant will fund furniture, solar-powered lighting, latrines, more books and materials, and the development of literacy classes, computer classes, and vocational and business skills training (curricula and “training the trainer”).
- **Partnership with local library supplier:** We partner with Text Book Centre (TBC) in Nairobi, the largest supplier to schools and libraries in Kenya, on all our literacy and library projects. They provide library expertise and implementation, run capacity-building workshops, and engage teachers to create extra-curricular reading clubs. We purchase at a discount from TBC.
- **Collaboration with local conservation organizations:** Wildlife Clubs of Kenya (WCK) and Mara wildlife conservancies will provide environmental expertise on the development of this Library. We already partner with WCK on the conservation corner of all our school libraries and support for wildlife clubs at the schools. Both organizations will be able to use our site for conservation education events and research.

Perhaps our strongest asset is local trust, experience, and respect. We have the full support and collaboration of this community, with deep relationships on the ground. Amos Kipeen, our co-founder in Kenya, is a long-time local leader here. This trust is priceless.

## THE LAST PIECE WE NEED TO LAUNCH THIS PROJECT

**We are now seeking contributions for the structure.** The building will be a comprehensive space that includes reading areas, an office, a meeting hall for classes and training, and other features. We are also in need of an architect who can design the building and the overall site plan for the broader Sustainability Center. We are looking for one or more philanthropists to make this possible.

## ABOUT OLIVESEED, AMOS, AND BARB

We know there are many ways you can invest in positive change, and we are very grateful for your support. Over the past 9 years, we have earned the trust of our donors and the teachers, communities, and elders whose close engagement is a vital ingredient of everything we do.

Oliveseed Foundation is a 501c3 nonprofit in the U.S., with board oversight on all finances. We are co-registered in Kenya as the community-based Oliveseed Kenya Trust, with local Maasai leadership and team. **In our projects, we handle everything as a team, from conception, to design and build, to continuing operations on the ground.** Our work is direct with the communities we serve, and at our scale your financial generosity makes a tangible difference.

We have earned the Platinum Seal of Transparency (the highest rating) from GuideStar, a widely respected platform in the U.S. for researching and analyzing nonprofits. We have also been vetted by Benevity, Bright Funds, and other corporate giving programs in the U.S.; have collaborated with the Peace Corps in Morocco multiple times by invitation; and have earned grants from Rotary, Kiwanis, Africa Publishing Innovation Fund (for grassroots African organizations only), and twice from the U.S. Embassy in Morocco.



**Amos Kipeen** is Co-founder and Director of Oliveseed Kenya. A native Maasai, Amos is a life-long conservationist, and a long-time community leader and organizer in the Maasai Mara. From 2015 to 2021, he was Area Manager for Basecamp Foundation Kenya in charge of the Foundation's many programs in the Mara, including Mara Girls Leadership School (one of the highest performing schools in the region), Mara Lion Project, and programs in green energy, clean water, public school improvements, and micro-financing. In 2009, he founded the Mara Discovery Community & Empowerment Centre, a training center and community-based organization that combines

education, conservation, eco-tourism, and micro-enterprise to promote non-consumptive use of natural resources. Amos has a BS in Wildlife Management and graduate diploma in Tourism and Wildlife Management from Maasai Mara University. He has also done further study in management and in 2015 was a participant in the Young African Leaders Techcamp in South Africa, with training on digital strategies for community organizing.



**Barb Mackraz** is Co-founder and Director of Oliveseed Kenya along with Amos. She is also Founder and CEO of Oliveseed Foundation U.S. Before coming to Kenya, Barb developed English libraries in over 40 schools in rural Morocco, and her program there has now evolved to a nationwide Short Story Competition for youth. Barb founded Oliveseed in 2014 first as Morocco Library Project and then expanded to Kenya in 2017, where she and Amos immediately joined forces. Previously, Barb had a long career as a software product designer in Silicon Valley and was also an editor for Princeton University Press. She has a BA in history from University of California and a Master of

Liberal Arts from Stanford University. Barb brought her tech skills and her love of education, knowledge, and environmental conservation with her to Kenya.

Our name Oliveseed is based on the idea of planting a seed of peace and sustainability, and we see education as the core of this. We believe strongly in the power of knowledge and equal access to it. A great library will be a change-maker in this part of the Maasai Mara: a community center and learning hub rolled into one, a “naboisho,” a space where people come together.

Barb often thinks back to her first library project in the Moroccan desert. When she went back to check on it later, she asked a young student named Meriem what she thought about libraries now that she had one. Meriem replied, “A school without a library is like a body without a soul.” **We have a golden opportunity right now to build the first Public Library in the rural Maasai Mara, a place where it is greatly needed and wanted. We hope you will join us with your support.**

Thank you,  
Barb & Amos

## SUPPORT OUR WORK

Visit [www.oliveseed.org](http://www.oliveseed.org) to learn about our past and future projects, and to help our work with a recurring or one-time donation. Our work truly makes an impact on the lives of families and children.

Please contact Barb ([barb@oliveseed.org](mailto:barb@oliveseed.org)) to explore a deeper philanthropic engagement.



## Appendix: LIFE IN THE MARA & OUR LIBRARY PROJECTS



*Many families live in the earthen homes without power or light. Here, children are preparing to go to school from their home.*



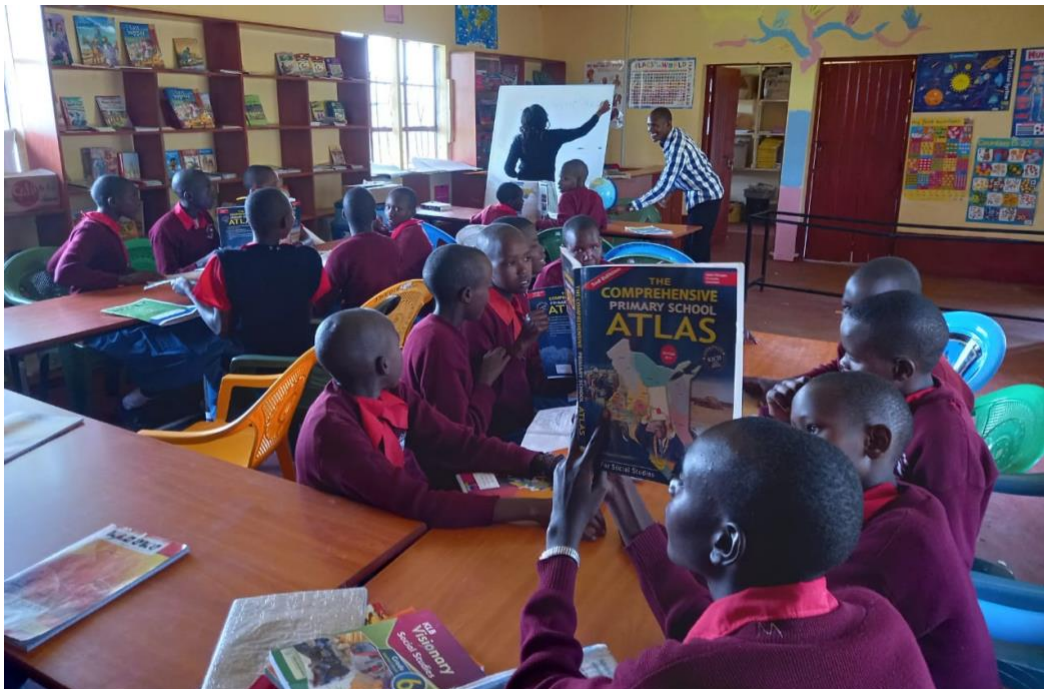
*A 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade class at Talek Primary School  
We later developed a library here, which teachers now call a “hub of transformation.” Like other schools where we work, Talek had never had a library before.*

*We have developed a library at 5 rural schools, with 2000 books for curriculum enhancement and pleasure reading, laptops with eKitabu, art corner, games and puzzles, and conservation materials. We also provide capacity-building workshops and training for extra-curricular enrichment.*



*Aitong Primary School Library*

*We renovated an old storage building inside and out to create this Library.*



*Aitong Primary School Library, one week after opening*



*A scene from the Talek Primary School Library  
During “free time,” students explore whatever they desire.*



*We include games, puzzles, and children’s books for the youngest ones  
in all our library projects. This scene is from Talek Primary.*



*We recently built the first library inside a Maasai manyatta (small village of earthen homes). A simple structure powered by solar, this little library is full of people every day and evening. They're even holding preschool classes here now, also a first in any manyatta. This is the only lit building in its village.*



*We include portable solar reading lights in all libraries, for people to check out with a book. Many homes do not have power or light, so reading at night would not otherwise be possible.*



***"I used to be almost the last student in class, but since that time when they gave us lanterns and books, I'm even topping in the class."***

*During Covid, we put a Solar Library in the homes of students. With these resources, Nelly continued her studies at home for 8 months. She graduated from Mara Girls Leadership School in 2022 and is now attending one of the top high schools in Kenya.*



***"It became a matter of survival for all of us."***

*We run writing programs to elevate voices rarely heard and publish these stories in books. This student, Linda, wrote about her family's life during Covid and is being interviewed here on national television. Our writing and publishing program will flourish through the new Public Library.*