

The Pathfinder Academy

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Agriculture and rural life is the heart of Kenyan culture: about 80 per cent of the population depends directly on agriculture. However, the agricultural sector is facing a number of serious challenges. Agricultural inputs have become very expensive and market prices are low, leading to low profitability. Kenyan families are increasingly at risk of poverty and malnutrition. Young people are losing interest in farming and flock to the cities. The traditional village songs and dances have all but disappeared; the soul of farming is dying.

Negative attitudes

Seeing the poor yields and meagre income, farmers work hard to get their children off the land so that they can do other jobs. Parents often say, "If you play with education, you'll end up farming!" Farming is not a career to be proud of, but one resorted to if everything fails. This negative attitude is passed on to successive generations. Children's statements clearly illustrate this:

"When I grow up I do not want to dig again! I want to wear nice clothes and shoes all the time. I will live in town in a nice house."

"I want to be a pilot, to be able to fly away from the life of digging."

"I want to be a rich farmer. To use tractors and prisoners like our neighbour, then my children will never suffer digging like we do."

These negative attitudes are not countered at school. The traditional education curriculum does not train children to become self-sustaining small farmers, who can fend for themselves and tackle new challenges. Instead, children are sent to work in the garden as a punishment.

Building motivation, creating options

A proper basic education is essential for rural development. It is linked with food security and enables rural people to improve their lives and livelihoods. In January 2002, the Common Ground Programme (CGP), a local non-governmental community-based organization in western Kenya, started a Garden School Project called the *Pathfinder Academy*. The objective is to promote the integration of sustainable natural resource management into basic education, strengthen the links between school, homes and communities and enhance the effectiveness of formal and non-formal education through experiential learning.

Children, parents and staff work together to provide an appropriate learning environment. The school provides opportunities to 200 pupils aged 3 - 12 years. Building self-esteem and confidence are essential ingredients, encouraging children to become motivated and active learners.

The school's curriculum includes the subjects taught under the national education system. In addition, it integrates subjects such as agriculture, agroforestry, environment and wildlife conservation. In this way, pupils are introduced to bio-intensive farming, self-help food production based on organic agriculture.

The school has 900 square metres of garden where sunflower, kale, maize, wheat, pearl millet, indigenous vegetables, collards, sorghum, sweet potatoes, vetiver grass, groundnuts, *mbambara* nuts and fruits are grown. Children participate in all stages of garden planning and implementation. In the garden, children

The school garden at Pathfinder Academy is a learning ground for the pupils.

Photo: Author



learn Maths by counting seeds and weighing harvested products. They learn Science by observing germination, watering the plants and studying the soil structure. Christian religion is taught by observing God's creation.

The goal of education at Pathfinder Academy is not the mastery of various disciplines, but the mastery of one's self. Being responsible to one's self cannot be separated from being responsible to the planet. The best way to get this across is by placing "Food" at the core of activities. From the garden, kitchen and the table, children learn empathy for each other and for creation. The children are taught compassion, patience and self-discipline. Gardening, composting, cooking, serving and eating... these are truly basic things. They teach an appreciation for the real, the authentic and lasting, for things that money can't buy; the very things that matter most of all if we are going to lead good, healthy and sustainable lives.

Reaching out to the village

Pathfinder Academy provides children with knowledge and skills related to land, soil and water management. Through the skills learned at school, children can teach the community how to produce food using locally available resources such as compost and traditional varieties. Children also take care of gardens of HIV/AIDS affected families in the community. For these families, the availability of food lifts a dreadfully heavy burden from their shoulders, as they no longer have to worry about hunger.

School children practise at home what they have learned in school, like composting. They have managed to earn an income by selling the produce from the family garden; the money is used to pay school fees of the Pathfinder Academy or to buy books. Even though there is free primary school in Kenya, many parents from poor families prefer to send their children to the Pathfinder Academy. Some school dropouts are now returning, and also those who never attended school before are now being sent to school by their parents.

Growing food at school as well as in the community helps dispel hunger and malnutrition. At the same time school attendance has doubled and academic performance has improved. Food production also compensates poor parents for the loss of their children's labour as they attend classes. Above all, growing food locally develops people's inherent potential and builds self-reliance. It provides children with a more positive attitude towards life in rural areas.

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