



# The Nairobi River Peace Initiative

*An international multi-sector service alliance is joining with Kenyan citizens to restore the endangered Nairobi River and advance an innovative model of peace-building.*



■ Volunteers begin the work of reclaiming the Nairobi River.

Nairobi was once called the “Green City in the Sun,” its name taken from the Maasai phrase *enkare nairobi*, meaning “a place of cool waters.” In recent decades, though, Nairobi’s abundant wildlife, forest groves, and labyrinthine wetland ecosystems have given way to unchecked urbanization. Modern Nairobi, the largest city and commercial hub of East Africa, is now the home to some of Africa’s largest and most squalid slums. By 1993, informal squatter settlements housed about 55 per cent of the city’s population, now numbering more than 3 million.<sup>1</sup>

The Nairobi River, once the jewel in the crown of Kenya’s waterways, is today awash in toxic industrial waste and refuse from the burgeoning city. Lorries and buses regularly dump trash from industrial sites and medical facilities, which spread dangerous pathogens. Among the worst polluters are the slaughterhouses in Dagoretti, which contaminate the river with toxic levels of coliform bacteria, and the Dandora Municipal Dumping site, which receives most of the city’s solid waste.

Bordering the river, and both contributing to the toxic chemistry of the Nairobi’s waters and suffering its ill effects, are residents of Nairobi’s sprawling slums. Residents of these unregulated and informal settlements endure floods, land slides, and health risks from water-borne contaminants. Overcrowding and unstable social networks have contributed to a vicious cycle of poverty, infectious disease, and environmental degradation on the banks of the once-pristine river.

Compounding these problems, the disputed 2007 presidential election led to the worst unrest since

Kenya’s independence from Britain in 1963. The post-election violence cost the lives of some 1,300 people, left 300,000 homeless and damaged Kenya’s reputation as a stable democracy.<sup>2</sup>

## Global Peace Festival

The loss of life and daunting social and environmental challenges, including the loss of habitat for East Africa’s renowned wildlife, have awakened the resolve of Kenyans to reclaim the treasured Nairobi River and to invest in strategies for sustainable peace among the county’s diverse ethnic population. In August 2008, a major supporter arrived in Nairobi—the Global Peace Festival (GPF)—whose program of interfaith service, environmental stewardship, and cultural celebration drew a warm response from Kenyans across the economic and political spectrum.

“This is an important day for Kenya and for Africa,” Kenyan Prime Minister Odinga declared at the GPF’s main event. “It is a new beginning in the quest for our nation to be once again known as a nation of peace and security. We long for the day when our nation can again be proud of this river, which could provide water to millions.”

Launched a year earlier by the Harvard-educated peace entrepreneur and Service For Peace founder Dr. Hyun Jin Moon, the Global Peace Festival has brought together more than a million peace-minded people in nations on every continent. A key to the GPF’s success is the grassroots support of many

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Elkington, “Wounds fester a year after Kenya election violence,” Alertnet, 16 July, 2009

<sup>1</sup> Matrix Development Consultants 1993



■ **Above: Modern, cosmopolitan Nairobi is the economic hub of East Africa. Below: Squatter communities in Nairobi face critical health risks from the contaminated waters of the Nairobi River.**

local partnering groups and the organization of service projects that enlist volunteers across religious and ethnic boundaries, particularly in conflict zones. In Nairobi, festival organizers zeroed in on the Nairobi River and launched a cleanup effort that brought thousands of volunteers to the banks of the river in the largest such mobilization effort in Kenya's history.

In March 2009, the United Nations Habitat world headquarters in Nairobi hosted the International Young Leaders Summit organized by the Youth Federation for World Peace (YFWP) and the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), in partnership with Kenya's Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Martin Luther King III's Realizing the Dream, the PLO Lumumba Foundation, Vision 2030 Secretariat, National Youth Parliament, Junior Chamber International Nairobi Central, Nation Media Group, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, and Safaricom, Ltd.

The Summit adopted the GPF's model of service by again mobilizing volunteers with a large river cleanup

and tree-planting initiative, profiled on Kenya National Television. The Global Peace Service Alliance (GPSA) was launched at the Summit along with the Nairobi River Peace Initiative. GPSA is building an international service corps joining volunteers, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and faith-based groups in a mission of peace-building through volunteer service.

### **The Nairobi River Peace Initiative**

The Nairobi River is emblematic of a changing continent. Africa's natural wonders and diverse cultural traditions form an important part of the world's heritage. Many of Africa's environmental challenges have arisen in the context of growing urbanization, weakening of traditional socializing institutions—notably the extended family—and ethnic divisions exacerbated by political instability.

The Global Peace Service Alliance has inaugurated the Nairobi River Peace Initiative not only as an environmental project but as part of a comprehensive program that includes youth empowerment, entrepreneurship, and sustainable peace building. For example, the GPSA-partnering Coalition for Character Building and Community Development has initiated character education and leadership training to reinforce values of personal integrity and social responsibility. These programs, with support from UPF and the Administrative Police, include mentoring and peace education in Mombasa, Nairobi, and the Molo/Rift Valley.

YFWP has hosted Sports for Peace in the western region of Matunda and is making ongoing appointments of Young Ambassadors for Peace who take the principles of living for others into their communities. Notably, the captain of Kenya's internationally recognized Sevens Rugby Team, Humphrey Kayange, has personally backed the Sports for Peace initiative since becoming a Young Ambassador for Peace himself at the International Young Leaders Summit.

The Nairobi River Peace Initiative thus envisions environmental restoration in part as a methodology for peace building, where volunteers from every sector of Kenyan society work side by side to restore the national treasure that was the Nairobi River.

"Those who are here today, young and old alike," said the noted Kenyan constitutional lawyer and leader for national unity PLO Lumumba, "have come here to say, 'We want to reclaim our river, we want to reclaim the environment, we want to make Nairobi a clean city in the sun, a city that will take

its pride of place among cities of the world that have rivers running through them.”

“This is a project that won’t be a one day scenario,” Martin Luther King III told Kenya Television News, “but over time we’ve seen rivers cleaned up all over the world. And this river can be like other rivers . . . to provide fresh water for Kenyans.”

The Offices of the Prime Minister and the Environment have initiated a stipend for unemployed Kenyan youth to clean the river basin. Other Nairobi Peace Initiative partners are stepping forward to scale up the river restoration project, including an “adopt a tree” initiative that will be supported with a GPF seed grant. More resources are needed for the river restoration project!

The Adopt a Tree program will involve the affected communities in conservation, sanitation, and tree planting in water catchment areas. “Our objectives are to empower the communities with environmental management skills and to generate youth jobs from biodiversity resources,” explains project coordinator Japheth Ouda.. “These communities are the real stakeholders in a clean Nairobi River, and the project can provide a platform for change in many areas, including youth empowerment, gender disparities, and economic opportunity.”

## Kenya Rising

On a recent trip to Nairobi, GPSA Director David Caprara and Taj Hamad, Secretary General of the World Association of Nongovernmental Organizations, met with youth service, government, faith-based, media, and business officials to enlist further support for the river restoration and broader goals of peace building in Kenya. They discussed plans to promote international youth service exchanges, and Kenyan GPF organizers also met with the leadership of Jamii Bora, a micro-enterprise project inspired by Grameen Bank founder and Nobel Prize winner Muhamad Yunis.

The Global Microcredit Summit will be held in Nairobi from April 7-10, 2010, and Caprara sees strategic purpose in a combining a bottom-up peace-through-service initiative with microcredit loans that empower developing world citizens to address their own needs.

“Jamii Bora in Swahili means ‘strong’ or ‘better families,’” Caprara says. “We laud these grassroots initiatives of service, engaging in a comprehensive peace building vision rooted in the family from all sectors of Kenyan society.”

“When the Global Peace Festival came to Nairobi, it made the young people reflect on their lives,” said Ida Odinga, wife of the Kenyan Prime Minister, at a GPF-



■ **Kenyans of all ages and tribal affiliations are joining in tree planting and refuse removal to restore the Nairobi River and build a peaceful society.**

sponsored conference in London in November 2008. “We saw those 30,000 young people from different ethnic backgrounds and different religious backgrounds coming together with one destiny — recognizing the importance of being Kenyans and the importance of belonging to one family under God. They came together and said, ‘We want to promote peace and improve our environment.’”

Mrs. Odinga particularly praised the river cleanup and the active involvement of young people in the restoration effort: “They know that unless they do something now to clean the river and make sure it remains clean, they have no future. The Nairobi River belongs to them. Nairobi, the city, belongs to them. They feel proud to go and work for these things. It has given them an idea of what they can do with themselves.”■

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