



The story of Gabriel Teo, a volunteer missionary who lives and works among some of Kenya's poorest people, is a remarkable saga of a caring Malaysian national's effort to empower a marginalized community in the Tana Delta with education and agricultural skills. **By ALPHONCE GARI**

Most of Idsowe's locals then hardly went beyond the primary school level. Among the Orma community, very few could go to university because of the financial challenges, cultural inhibitions and their parents' ignorance on the great value of education.

Men were almost invariably supposed to take care of cattle for life and women to bear children, cook and construct and maintain the most rudimentary housing for the family, with education being considered to be a low priority waste of time. For the Pokomos, early marriages making it difficult to break out of the poverty cycle was one of the major obstacles.

Poverty

The result was a community in which grinding poverty, ignorance and disease held them back on every index of human development and social mobility, including child nutrition and early education. In 1997, Teo decided to join the community, eat, drink, and sleep with them so as to understand the root cause of the problem and be part of the solution. By the time he embarked on this missionary decision, he was already supporting individual students to complete high school and engaging others in social work. All these efforts culminated in the setting up of a private trust – the Tana River Life Foundation (TRLF) in 2005.

Teo's lifestyle is austere to the point of being monastic. Other foreigners who work in other hardship areas, as well as local professionals working for not dissimilar projects, prefer to live in luxury hotels or villas and only come to the field during the day. Not so Teo, who lives in a simple rented house among the locals. Behind it is a section set aside for the offices, very small and cramped, but they act as the Foundation's headquarters.

The Teo compound and office area is steeped in the silence of libraries and

The Tourist Who Became the Resident Good Samaritan of Idsowe

He resigned from a well-paying job as a Tax Accountant in faraway Singapore to engage in charitable work in a poverty-stricken and marginalized community in Kenya's Tana River region.

Gabriel Teo, 46, now lives a Spartan existence in the hardship area of Idsowe, near the Tana River, with the local people. He has bridged huge cultural and ethnic differences to empower them with educational and survival skills through innovative small-scale

projects. The Teo story began way back in 1988, when he first came to Kenya on holiday as a fresh graduate from university. His first encounter with poverty Kenyan style was in Turkana, in the Catholic Diocese of Lodwar, where lack of even the most basic human needs like access to clean water amongst the community shocked him.

During his stay on holiday Teo went as far afield as Tana River District, an area largely inhabited by pastoralists and smallholder subsistence farmers.

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other serious study areas and the students sponsored by the Foundation clearly have a space conducive to studies, learning and reflection. Teo's no-nonsense reputation when it comes to educational matters precedes him. When its study time, he insists they keep things quiet, but when its work or playtime, he openly welcomes some noise and laughter.

I find him in the office with his laptop, no doubt communicating with some of the donors who fund him to help some of the needy students of Tana River and beyond. The TRLF operates in Idsowe, Garsen Division, in Tana River District, in the Coast Province of Kenya, and now has one base, that is in Idsowe, although the area of coverage extends to all neighboring districts.

All of the Foundation's activities are aimed at benefiting rural communities, especially the marginalized members of these communities. Although most of the beneficiaries are from the Delta district, schools and students in the two neighbouring districts of Lamu and Tana River also benefit from TRLF programmes.

Norm

Living the local life is quite the norm for Teo, who says, "I find it comfortable. For me, it's not doing anything out of the ordinary". He clearly would not have it any other way. He says it has helped him to understand the community better and establish the best ways to help improve the standards of education in the area and with those uplift other living standards too.

"I have been staying here in since 1997, eating the local meals, using the same amenities and it has helped me understand them even better and set up better ways of helping them," he says early in our conversation.

Teo says he was introduced to Idsowe by a bishop who had raised concerns over the poverty levels in a conversation with him and he was soon sponsoring children in school using his retirement fund accumulated while he was working in Singapore. After many a small-scale humanitarian intervention, it was not until December 13, 2005, that Teo managed to set up the Foundation as a private trust. On December 6, 2007, he registered it as a non-governmental organization with the Kenya Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Board so as to cope with the increased scope of work.

That scope has grown exponentially over the years. The Foundation now has an annual expenditure averaging Sh20 million for its projects, the bulk of the funds coming from organizations and individuals



in Malaysia and Singapore. "The aim of this Foundation is to help the locals to be self-reliant, make them responsible with the little earning they get, and ensure they do not forget their backgrounds, which have involved a lot of hardship," Teo says.

According to its records, the Foundation is sponsoring four full-degree scholarships overseas for bright needy students doing degree courses in Electrical Engineering, Information Systems and Business Administration.

The sponsored scholars are local role models setting an example for others to work hard and aim high. In January 2012, the Foundation will be sending their fifth sponsored student to do a degree in

Accounting under the overseas scholarship programme.

The Foundation also spends about Sh8 million each year to sponsor students from needy families whose parents or guardians cannot afford to pay their school fees at secondary and tertiary levels.

Nurture

Teo says the Foundation was created to assist members of the local communities, especially the most marginalized and economically disadvantaged, to nurture their inherent talents and potentials so that they have the freedom and ability to make meaningful choices in their lives.

As a way of empowering the students

Left: Three student tend crops grown by small-scale irrigation.

Right: Joseph Otieno, a teacher at Garsen Primary School in the modern library donated by Tana Athi Life Foundation.



On the farm: Gabriel Teo with a team of farming students.

with survival skills, the Foundation purchased 10 acres of land for farming activities as a pilot project so that students waiting to go to college can keep themselves busy and earn a little income. Those in high school usually work on the farm on a part-time basis during the holidays.

"I give each student capital of Sh200 to start with and plant vegetables in a small piece of land throughout the year using the Money Maker irrigation process; the products are then sold locally", he says, adding that the profit is usually kept by the student as pocket money and to assist with the families' daily bread.

Sustainable

Apart from the farming the students are also taught bee- and poultry-keeping using the cheapest methods that are affordable and sustainable in the local environment.

The Foundation also has two buses, which are used to ferry students to Garsen High School, an institution largely sponsored by TRLF. The buses are sometimes hired out to generate income for the Foundation.

The TRLF has spent over Sh12 million at Garsen High School to improve infrastructure, including the construction and facilitation of a twin laboratory project at a cost of Sh6 million, and a library and a bakery at Sh4 million.

The farm's well-irrigated lush green stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding sun-drenched areas, which are dry and parched due to the prolonged drought. It is a hive of activity, with everybody on

“My main motivation is not philanthropic, I believe this is what I am called to do with my talents, and it is not a sacrifice as such for me. I do believe I am only doing what I am supposed to do, and am satisfied”

the farm busy with his or her work, some harvesting sukuma wiki while others plant.

Teo observes: "Diligence and discipline are the key motto here because idleness has really contributed to drunkenness and early pregnancies amongst some youths, leading to high dropout rates".

Teo adds that he and the students usually have night meetings daily to discuss social and moral issues openly and he always encourages his wards to speak up about their lives without fear so as to help those who need counseling.

The Foundation, which survives on donor funding, has yet to approve good salaries; its staffers earn not more than Sh12,000 monthly, which is what Teo himself gets. The rest earn a little below that.

Kazungu Benedict Kambi, who did not get the opportunity to study beyond Standard Eight takes me around the farm solemnly says TRLF has helped him realize his potential in life.

After completing his primary education, he says, life was terrible but when he met Teo things changed as he was encouraged to enroll for a course in a polytechnic and now is a qualified Grade One mechanic. Kazungu manages the bookkeeping records for petty cash expenditures and is said to be doing a good job.

Hope

He takes me to the farm, where I encounter faces of hope, the students being sponsored each clearly having a goal to succeed in life. I find Simon Saitoti Buko, one of the beneficiaries, tending to poultry under a shelter for the chicks and he smiles as he stands up to greet me.

"I came here in 2006 after completing Standard Eight to seek support so as to further my studies, I volunteered for six months and qualified for Form One the following year", he says.

Buko is the first-born in a family of three. He describes how tough life was after his parents divorced and he was forced to live at his grandmother's.

He says the Sh200 capital generated about Sh4,000 from his sukuma wiki patch on the farm, which he is still harvesting and expects to get even more money from the poultry section.

Malindi Moses Gwiyo, 21, lost his father in 2006, when he was in Standard Eight and almost lost hope of proceeding with studies until Teo came to his rescue. After six months of community service in the Foundation, he was enrolled in secondary school and managed to score a D plain.

His vision was to study accounting but, due to the circumstances and his grades, he went for carpentry and masonry instead.

Being in the Foundation at the same

time as he was pursuing his carpentry course has taught Gwiyo valuable multitasking skills and his ambitions have soared accordingly: "My ambition is to become a successful businessman; in January I harvested five 50-kilogramme bags of peas at Sh5,000 each, and harvested 15 bags of maize from our farm at home, which enabled me to build a good house for my mother".

Income

Gwiyo says he has learnt many farming skills at TRLF and he looks at land in a completely different way now – as capable of generating a lot of income and dramatically improving standards of living. The only problem with the community, he says, is sloth and lack of the foresight necessary to see the value of engaging in economically viable activity.

A sea change is essential at the level of the communal mindset for the people of the Delta. To this end, TRLF members are usually brought together to share life experiences so as to understand the various challenges faced by individuals and seek ways of overcoming them jointly.

Teo has great plans for the Foundation's near-future expansion: "The Community centre shall have a solar system that is estimated to cost Sh16 million, servicing the nursery, primary, security fence, guardhouse, water and power supply".

He goes on: "Our plan is to build a Community Centre housing a pre-primary and primary school offering quality education, a community library and computer and Internet centre offering high-speed connectivity, a meeting and conference facility for training and accommodation and catering facilities for staff and visitors".

He adds, "There will also be a TRLF administrative support centre with income generating units worth Sh10 million, staff and visitor accommodation and an eco-sanitation system at a cost of Sh20 million".

The tourist who became the live-in Good Samaritan of Idsowe is clearly both passionate and totally committed to the human development endeavour he launched so many years ago and in whose future and expansion he has invested all his efforts and the balance of his life.

Good causes do not come much better than the TRLF and Good Samaritans like Teo come along only once in a very long time indeed, for both individuals and communities.

In his own words: "My main motivation is not philanthropic, I believe this is what I am called to do with my talents, and it is not a sacrifice as such for me. I do believe I am only doing what I am supposed to do, and am satisfied". ■

