

New lease of life for stigma



ABOUT RODI-KENYA

Resources Oriented Development Initiatives (RODI) is a Kenyan Development organisation started in 1989 as a Community Based Organisation (CBO) interested in promoting alternative forms of agriculture within the reach of poor farmers. It was originally known as Organic Farming Outreach Programme (OFOP). RODI-K is registered as an NGO under the NGO co-ordination bureau in Kenya and as a Charity in the UK.

RODI-K's main office is in Ruiru, in the outskirts of Nairobi.

RODI-K's mission is to break the cycle of poverty, crime and re-offending in Kenya and the East African region. We do this by training school pupils and prisoners in organic agriculture, agro-processing, value addition, natural resource management and HIV/Aids and drug and substance abuse prevention.

This work is carried out through strategic programme known as Sustainable Agriculture for Food Security and Crime Prevention.

Under this programme, RODI-K has five projects namely: HIV/Aids and Sexual Reproductive Health project; table banking project, community and schools hygiene, water, sanitation and natural resource management project; pre-trial detainees and crime prevention project.

SOURCE: INTERNET



Police and communities contribute to re-offending by victimising and sidelining ex-prisoners. Therefore, community participation policies should be formulated to help rehabilitate ex-convicts back into society

By WAIKWA MAINA

DURING a visit to the Murang'a Prisons, one gets the impression that the facility is people-friendly. Laughter, rib-cracking jokes, singing, dancing, free interactions and hearty conversations fill the air as families of inmates interact and enjoy pleasures most have not had the chance to, in months or even years.

The prison facility had organ-

ised an open-day to showcase inmates talents, as well as give them an opportunity to mingle with their loves ones, who had come to cheer them on.

Murang'a Prison's deputy boss inspector Charles Mwangangi, said there are many opportunities that inmates can explore to enable them integrate with the society upon completion of their term in the correctional facility.

But the party is short-lived. As soon as the function is over, warders swiftly take position on rooftops ready with guns for any eventualities.

Agnes Wambui, an inmate, beams with joy as she bids us goodbye, and exudes optimism that when her term is over, she will be ready to turn her life around and make the best of her life.

"Being here has been an eye-

opening experience for me. I am ready to turn my life around," she says.

At the prison, inmates are known by their numbers, and not names, an issue Wambui feels uncomfortable with.

Meanwhile, everything is at a standstill as this number (Wambui) is missing at the gates where female prisoners are paraded ready to leave the assembly area and back into the cells.

New graduates

At this point, visitors hurriedly say goodbye and from the look of things, they seem to understand the cost of committing an offence.

One of the visitors is heard saying: "Incarceration is the most cruel punishment a man can ever be subjected to" his colleague responds: "Especially when an innocent person was victimised and jailed."

Wambui says she was sentenced to five years in jail for an offence she claims she did not commit.

"I am serving my third year. I have forgiven those who fixed me. During my stay here, I have done several technical courses, some which I would not have been able to do in the outside world. My mind is now focused on how to utilise the skills when I am out of here," she says.

Wambui was convicted for stealing from her M-Pesa agent employer, though she maintains she never did it.

"My ambition was to work at the M-Pesa shop and save enough money to start a salon. Imprisonment has denied me the opportunity to take care of my two children

now under the care of my mother. I have never understood why this happened, but I have learnt to forgive. I believe there is a reason for everything that happens in this world," she says.

Wambui was among 39 prisoners graduates, who, after months of training in diverse courses sponsored by Resources Oriented Development Initiative (RODI-Kenya), received certifi-



WELL DONE:

TOP: Inmates keenly listen to speeches at the Murang'a Prisons open-day. (RIGHT) RODI-K executive director Kihoro Ngunjiri presents a certificate to a graduate.

PHOTOS: WAIKWA MAINA

Released prisoners in Murang'a



cates during the open-day function. RODI-Kenya helps fight crime, with special rehabilitation programmes within and outside jails.

Stop discrimination

Its core objective is to fight re-offending by equipping convicts with entrepreneurship skills and capital to start-up businesses after prison.

Wambui graduated in a course on HIV/Aids testing and counselling, human rights, beauty and related courses, cosmetics and marketing. She has a grand plan to put into use her skills when she regains her freedom.

"I had no skills in hairdressing. As much as I wanted to start a salon, I had no skills but now my ambition has started to take shape. I now have the skills. I can now attend to my future clients more confidently. RODI-Kenya and the prisons department have taught us a lot of skills. Soon, we will be resourceful to the society and Kenya at large," she says.

Achievements aside, Wambui says the transition from being a free Kenyan to an inmate is a painful experience.

"On that day when the ruling

was made, the hardest part was to separate from my children. My prison life has been a burden to my family. Despite that, I am happy my family has stood by my side all this time. I have heard of families that have abandon their kin. This leads to depression and some even commit suicide," she says.

"The larger community must learn to treat inmates with dignity and should not mistreat, victimise or sideline ex-prisoners," says Wambui.

Mzee Geoffrey Kimani Maina has been in remand for three years on a murder charge and concurs with Wambui.

A technician in mechanical engineer, Maina faced the charges shortly after he retired from Kenya Railways.

"Murder cases take long due to slow investigations and prosecution process. Sometimes, the delay is deliberate for fear that the complainant's family may decide to revenge if the court finds the suspect not guilty," says Maina, who was a pastor and still preaches in prison.

Prison boss Mwangangi says through Maina's preaching, he has

TALENT SHOW:

(TOP) Inmates lead a praise and worship session. (RIGHT) Ngunjiri enjoys a dance with inmates and prison warders. (BELOW) Prison's top officials at the event. (BELOW RIGHT) Agnes Wambui shows off her certificate of recognition.



helped rehabilitate suspects and convicts in the facility.

During the graduation ceremony, he was awarded three certificates in paralegal and human rights, agriculture and HIV/Aids testing and counselling.

"I am happy my family has stood by me, giving me moral support. The biggest challenge is that at times, some family decisions require my presence and advice, but I have given my blessings to do whatever is for the good for the family," says Maina.

Mwangangi says condemning ex-convicts creates more problems than good.

"They need love, support and understanding. If proper investigations were done today, almost everyone would end up in jail. Everyone must have committed some crime, prisoners were only unlucky to have been caught and convicted," says Mwangangi.

"By their behaviour, I can attest that most inmates are here by mistake, others committed petty offences not worth jail terms, issues that would amicably have been solved. It doesn't make sense to incarcerate a petty offender, to spend time with dangerous criminals. He will have converted to dangerous criminal by time he leaves prison," he says.

He says the police and community contribute to re-offending by victimising and sidelining ex-prisoners.

"No employer or government can offer a job to an ex-prisoner, that is discrimination. Why should we have prisons rehabilitating people yet they can't be given equal opportunities when they leave prison? Prisons must be respected and uplifted to rehabilitation centres not punitive dungeons," adds Mwangangi.

Community participation

Expressing similar views, ROD-Kenya executive director Kihoro Ngunjiri says: "We must promote and embrace conflict resolution mechanism at community level. Courts can help promote dialogue and reconciliation within the community, or just give a warning to first offenders in petty offences."

On victimisation, Ngunjiri says: "When a crime is reported, ex-prisoners at the scene are normally the first suspects. On hearing that the suspect is an ex-convict, the courts give severe sentences without considering whether the crime has any relationship with the previous offence. It becomes easy to fix an ex-convict in an insult offence for a murder charges."

Mwangangi says police earmark

PRISONS REHABILITATION

To eliminate the problem of congestion in Kenya prisons require a broader perspective which include taking into account how the other actors within the criminal justice system such as the police, the Office of the Attorney General, Prosecution, the Judiciary, Children's Department, and the lawyers contribute to the problem.

These other actors in the criminal justice system should be streamlined so that they do not negatively affect rehabilitation of offenders in prisons due to congestion.

Congestion is caused by the large number of prisoners who have been sentenced to death over the years but have not been executed.

The Advisory Committee on the Prerogative of Mercy whose task is to advise the President as per Section 28 and 29 of the Constitution, should advise on what to be done with these offenders, and the county decides on the way forward as concerns the death penalty given that since 1985/1986 no executions have been done yet prisoners on death row in their thousands, significantly contribute to the prison congestion currently experienced.

Stamping out drugs in prisons will surely enhance rehabilitation of offenders.

SOURCE: INTERNET

