

# THE KOCHIA CHRONICLES

*Systemic Challenges and the  
Foundations of Social Innovation*

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# #8

## The Fisherman's Sweet Fate

"I have not heard from my brother Phillip since the last fourteen months," Paul Otieno agonized. "Peter and I have searched for him everywhere."

"We have asked all his neighbors, all the fishermen in Ngegu, and even the fish mongers." Peter Omondi's voice trembled as tears welled up in his eyes. "We have checked with the police and inquired with the morgues, all the way up to Kisii and Kisumu."

"Mr. Obongo," Paul pleaded, "we have come to you for assistance because my brother Phillip spoke very highly of you. He told me that you knew everyone in Nyanza and could help us."

"Pole sana," Obongo commiserated, "I have not heard from Phillip in a very long time either. He used to be very active in our Empower Kochia Group. Everyone liked him. Then he just stopped paying the monthly dues and coming to the meetings. I tried to reach him several times but he was nowhere to be found. You might remember I visited you in Homa Bay once when I was trying to locate him."

"Yes. That was just a few weeks after he disappeared. I thought he would come back in due time. He has disappeared for a few weeks in the past but he always come back. I thought he might have gone to Nairobi to spend some time with our elder brother, Paul. People said that he had been seen often with a Kikuyu woman. So I thought he must have gone with her to central Kenya. But now, it is over a year and we cannot hold back any longer. Please do whatever you can to help us find Phillip."

"I am happy to help you," Obongo offered, "but I am not sure what I can do. You have already asked everyone about Phillip and..."

"Just come with us," Peter cut in. "Your presence will help us get

more information. My brother has a car. Twende<sup>1</sup>. Twende.”

“Right now?” Obongo was a little surprised.

“Yes, we cannot wait any further.” Peter pressed Obongo’s hand. “Paul has to go back to Nairobi tomorrow evening to resume his duties.”

“You waited fourteen months to come here and now you can’t even wait for some tea?” Janet walked in from the kitchen with three cups of hot chai on a white plastic tray.” Have some chai and then you can proceed.”

“Yes, we should have come here earlier. Days became weeks and weeks became months. You know how it is.” Peter smiled politely as he picked up the tea. “Erokamano<sup>2</sup>.”

“Phillip is the youngest in our family and has always been very impulsive and unpredictable,” Paul remarked. “What is most surprising to me is that on one hand, he loves Ngegu and fishing so much, and then he just disappears like this. In my heart, I am very sure that Phillip is alive and well.”

“Amen,” the group chorused.

Everyone stood up for a brief prayer led by Janet. The brothers and Obongo then jumped into Paul’s tiny car and started off on their quest.

“I think we must go to Ngegu first,” Obongo proposed. “That is where Phillip lived and all the fishermen knew him well. We can follow his trail from there.”

“I talked to them last week,” Peter said. “They insisted that they did not know where he was.”

“Instead of asking whether they have seen Phillip, we should delve into the circumstances around his disappearance,” Obongo suggested. “Let us assume that he is fine and has left Kochia by his own free will. We need to find out what compelled him to leave and where he might have gone. Like Paul said, Phillip really enjoyed fishing. So, he is likely to be somewhere along the shores of the lake.”

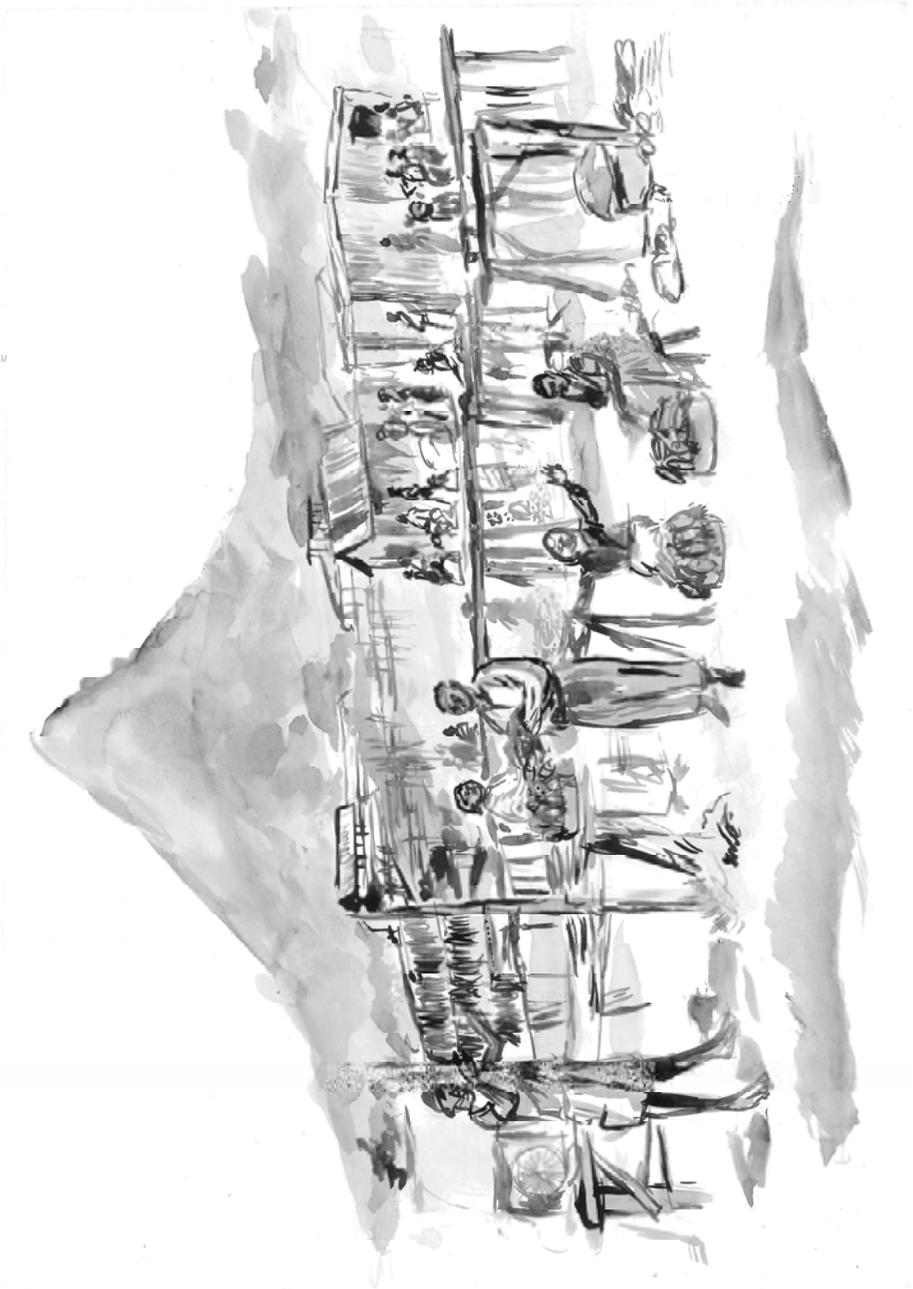
A twenty-minute ride on the bumpy roads of Kochia followed by a very brief and smooth drive on the newly-completed highway brought the trio to the small fishing village of Ngegu. Peter and Paul looked over the placid waters of the majestic lake, the second-largest freshwater lake in the world. A few fishermen were sitting by the shore sorting their morning catch of Tilapia and Rockfish. They recognized Obongo immediately and struck up a conversation. A quick round of introductions followed.

“Phillip was a good man. He lived right here,” a fisherman said,

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<sup>1</sup> Twende = Let’s go (Kiswahili)

<sup>2</sup> Erokamano = Thank you (Dholuo)



**Fishmongers in Homa Bay**

pointing to a tiny shack overlooking the beach. "His home has been empty ever since he left last year."

"The door is open. Where are all his belongings?" Peter asked.

"I think he left with some of his personal belongings. There is a bed, some clothes, cooking utensils, and other miscellaneous things still lying inside. Just the way he left it. We are very proud people here. No one will take something that does not belong to him," the fisherman assured.

"Phillip liked fishing and was very good at it. Could he have gone to a different place where there are more fish?" Obongo asked.

"Actually, he did not come fishing with us. His fishing friends were all in Homa Bay and he sold his fish there because it fetched more money," a fisherman explained. "What I find very surprising is that his boat is right here. The green one named 'Nam Lolwe Queen' is his. It is actually a very good boat – worth more than 30,000 Shillings."

"That is odd. Why did he not take his boat or sell it?" Paul wondered, "Do you think he left on his own free will or was there foul play?"

"We don't know. We have heard rumors that he got into trouble with the fisheries officers in Homa Bay. Also, he was often seen with a Kikuyu woman. She even came here and lived with him. They seemed happy together. But she was still a Kikuyu who stole a Luo man's heart. You can call it foul play if you like." The fisherman chuckled.

"Was he making good money fishing?" Paul's simple question seemed to fire up the fishermen.

"We don't know about him. Right now, all fishermen are unhappy. The water hyacinth has come back again. It grows very very fast and chokes our boats and also the fish. It takes us at least 45 minutes of hard work chopping the vegetation to reach the open waters. By the time we get there we are already so tired."

"The Nile Perch are also becoming very difficult to catch. We barely get one or two big ones in a week. Until six months back, we would go out and come back with 2-3 big Nile Perch every trip. But now, they are all gone."

"The fisheries people are making things very difficult for us. There are always new rules on the nets we can use and what fish we can catch. Yaai yai yaai!"

"Several of our colleagues have abandoned their work and now they are doing small jobs in Homa Bay and other towns. Maybe Phillip took up an office job somewhere too?"

"We should go to Homa Bay and speak to Phillip's friends right away," Obongo suggested. They thanked the fishermen and rushed out to the car. Thirty minutes later, they were talking to a small crowd of



**A Fisherman Mending his Nets**

fishmongers at the market in Homa Bay. These women, young and old, purchased fish from the fishermen, cleaned it, deboned, gutted or filleted it as necessary, and sold it on the makeshift tables at the marketplace. All the women recognized Phillip immediately, either by name, as the owner of the Nam Lolwe Queen, or from the photo that Paul was carrying with him.

“We haven’t seen him here for some time. He was such an honest man. He would always sell us fish at a good price and not expect anything in return but the agreed sum of money.”

“Some of the other fishermen know that we depend on them for our livelihoods and survival. They make us sleep with them before they will sell us their fish. But Phillip was a good man. If the Kikuyu woman would not have won his heart, I would have surely taken him as husband.”

“Phillip helped us all by lodging a police complaint against the corrupt traffic police. This policeman would arrest us when we were transporting the fish to the market by claiming the fish were immature. We had to give him 200 – 300 Shillings every day as a bribe. There was little profit left for us then. We are poor people. Now there is not much Nile Perch either. Once Phillip lodged a complaint with the police, this corrupt man was transferred.”

“He had some problem with the fisheries people. I think you should talk to other fishermen or just go to the fisheries office. It is very close – just five minutes on the road to Kisumu.”

Paul spotted a young fisherman mending his nets by the lakeside. He was eager to talk and expressed that he would himself like to know what became of Phillip.

“He is my friend. We often went out on the lake together,” the fisherman informed. “Then last year, the fisheries people came and took away his nets. They said that the nets were smaller than the prescribed size. Phillip went to the fisheries office and spoke to everyone but they would not listen to him.”

“Tch, Phillip was very honest since he was a child.” Paul protested. “I cannot believe that he was breaking the rules. I grew up here and I know the fisheries people are very unfair. They can even impound your boat. Phillip is not the kind of person who would do something so stupid.”

“Aye,” the young man raised his chin and affirmed. “The fisheries people decide what to do. Sometimes they will let you go with a warning and sometimes they will take your nets or even take away your boat. They take you to the judge. You have to pay a lot of money in bribes or fines to get your nets back. Every few months, they burn the nets and

everything else they have confiscated from the fishermen. Some people even end up in prison. Have you...err checked in the prison, just in case?"

"My brother cannot be in prison," Paul growled. "Phillip owned a good boat. If indeed he was in error, he could have paid the fines and extricated himself from the problem."

"Indeed," the young man agreed. "Most of us here actually just work on someone else's boat and get a small portion of the catch in return. Phillip's boat was very good. After his nets were taken away, he was trying to get a loan to buy a new net. I could not help him because I did not have enough money."

"How much does a net cost? What amount was he looking for?" Paul inquired.

"He never said. The regular net costs 720 bob and lasts five years. The Chinese one costs 400 bob but lasts only two years. Even if he selected the Chinese nets, it would cost 8,000 Shillings. We need to go deeper into the lake nowadays and need to tie at least 20 nets together."

"He would certainly have to go to a bank or a fishing cooperative for that amount," Obongo remarked. "We can go and inquire there."

"I think you must first go and talk to the fisheries people," the fisherman suggested. "After his nets were taken away, I saw him 3-4 times. He went to the fisheries office many times. Then he just disappeared. No one knows where he went."

The trio thanked the young man and headed to the fisheries offices. They felt energized and much more confident in their search now.

"Yes, I remember Phillip." The elderly gentleman at the Fisheries office leaned back in his chair. "Our officers conduct regular inspections of the fishing boats and the nets. The net size must be larger than 5 inches for Tilapia and 8 inches for Nile Perch. Phillip and his friends were using a 4 inch net for Tilapia. We warned them about it twice and then the third time, we had to impound his nets."

"What difference does it make whether the net is four inches or five inches?" Paul asked angrily.

"A very big difference! We don't want to catch the small fish. We want them to get bigger, spawn a lot of eggs and then get caught once they are mature. This is important to ensure a sustainable supply of fish from the lake."

"All the fishermen we talked to insist that it is getting difficult to catch fish," Paul retorted. "So what are they supposed to do?"

"Follow the rules." The officer smiled. "We are here to help them in the longer-term. Our fishermen don't understand the harm they are

causing by using finer nets and catching the fingerlings. Some of them use chemicals like methylene and propylene to intoxicate and kill the fish. The poor fish go blind and float on the water. Then they collect them and take them to the market. Then people eat these fish and fall sick. Some fishermen use monofilament nets. These result in a higher catch but they are very cruel to the fish. If only they follow all the rules—”

“How much is the fine? Did Phillip try to pay the fine and get the nets back?” Paul interrupted the officer's lecture.

“The fine is about 30,000 Shillings or six months to two years in jail,” the officer said. “Phillip tried to aggregate the funds for the fine but he did not succeed. I told him that—”

“Does it mean that you sent him to prison?” Paul asked.

“No, we don't put people in prison unless it is a very extreme situation. The fishermen with the monofilament nets – we have sent some of them to prison. Every month we get about 20 such cases and we just confiscate their nets and burn them in a big bonfire.”

“Why do you burn them? That does not help anyone!”

“If the nets are here, then the fishermen try to bribe our people and that creates more problems for us. So, we just burn them. It works very well. We have very few repeat offenders.”

“Surely – if you take away their nets and boats and burn them, the poor fishermen will never be able to fish again or offend again,” Peter protested.

“So, when did you see Phillip last?” Obongo asked.

“He came the day we burned the nets and pleaded to me. He said that he had these nets for a long time and when the rules changed, he did not have the money to buy new nets as per the new rules. He was very sad but he talked to me very nicely and apologized several times. I felt sorry for him but I was helpless. After that, I did not see him again.”

“This seems like a dead end,” Peter sighed. “I don't know where to go next, Mr. Obongo. There is no point talking to banks since Phillip was not successful in getting the funds to regain ownership of his nets. Even if he talked to the banks, they would not know where he is now.”

“We are grateful for your time, Sir,” Paul addressed the officer, “and we apologize on our brother's behalf. We understand that what he did was wrong and hurts everyone.”

“There is no need to apologize. The fishermen are suffering due to various problems and we are here to help them now and in the longer term. Sometimes we have to be harsh but...” The officer started rambling again and then got up with a start as his eyes fell on his watch. “I am already late for a meeting at the lakeside. The entire beach

management unit will be there. Some of them, I believe, are good friends with Phillip. They were all caught together with the small nets. You are welcome to come with me if you want to talk to them.”

“Let us go,” Obongo said. “We can all fit inside this humble car.”

Ten minutes later, the four of them alighted from the car at the end of the drivable road and started a fifteen-minute walk to the beach.

“Do you see the water hyacinth?” The officer pointed to the dark green vegetation enveloping the lake. “The fishermen are troubled because it blocks the beaches and makes it difficult for the boats to go into the water. It grows very fast. Even after all that hard work of pushing the boats through the thick growth to get to the water, the fishermen come back almost empty-handed.”

“Why is that?” Obongo was intrigued. “Surely the hyacinth is not eating up the fish!”

“Actually it is,” the officer explained. “The fish need the oxygen dissolved in the water. The hyacinth saps oxygen from the water, making it difficult for the fish to survive. The other big problem is that the nets get entangled in the vegetation and are destroyed. The poor fishermen then have to buy new ones or borrow nets from friends. But now, you see, so many nets have been lost that fishermen have started migrating to the cities in search of jobs.”

“Yaai yai yaai! I remember we had a similar crisis several years back. How was the problem resolved at that time?” Obongo asked.

“No one is completely sure but we think that the biological solution worked the best. A certain kind of weevil was set free into the hyacinth and this weevil population gradually consumed the weed.”

“That seems like a very cost-effective solution. But what if the weevil starts eating regular crops?”

“That is something we are always worried about with biological solutions. It is the better of the bad options. Earlier, we used chemical solutions like pesticides to eliminate the weeds but they pollute the water and cause various diseases in the long-term. The weevils also pose a small risk but they are much better than pesticides.”

“Can the weevils also propagate any illnesses?”

“Not the weevils...but the water itself is a problem. The hyacinth impedes the flow of water and the stagnant water then becomes a breeding ground for mosquitos, snakes, and other marine organisms. In some other parts along the lake shore, there has been a rise in the incidence of malaria, filaria, bilharzia, and even typhoid because of the water hyacinth.”

“I was aware of the problem but did not realize how it deeply

impacts the people's livelihoods as well as their health," Obongo remarked. "We only have a small portion of the lake. It must impact Uganda and Tanzania even more than us. Are you coordinating with them?"

"The only Ugandan I am coordinating with, is my wife." The officer laughed. "And, believe me, it is very difficult at times. I hope that the ministries are coordinating but it is a very complicated problem. It impacts many different ministries and departments – agriculture, fisheries, trade and commerce, water resources, transportation, rural employment, health, environment and even the military."

"That is good. So now all these ministries are trying to solve the problem and putting their resources to good use."

"On the contrary, now no one is sure what problem they need to handle and what the correct communication channels are. When internal communication is so difficult, international coordination, I am sure, will be even more so."

"Maybe, they need to form another ministry for water hyacinth," Obongo joked.

"Surely. The ministries are like our matatus. They have a common motto – there is always room for one more," the officer retorted.

"How do you plan to solve the problem this time?" Obongo asked. "Will you be releasing the weevils again?"

"We have been notified by the central administration that American scientists have found a particular weevil in South America which is perfect for our purpose. American and Kenyan scientists will be coming here in two weeks to make the final decision and take action."

"So you are meeting with the fishermen to inform them about how you will solve the problem?" Paul joined the conversation.

"Not exactly. We have a small problem here. All the fishermen want to have this hyacinth removed immediately. They see it as a threat to their survival. But these two people insist that the weevils should not be used and they have lodged an official request with the beach management unit. It is beyond my understanding why they are taking such a foolish stance," the officer grumbled. "They are just wasting everyone's time."

"What is a beach management unit?" Obongo asked.

"It is a community-based system for resource management of the lake. Every beach has its own BMU consisting of representative fishermen, boat owners, fish traders, boat builders, net menders, net sellers, fish processors, etc. and it is coordinated by the fisheries ministry. The BMU is responsible for educating all the relevant stakeholders about their interaction with the lake. They also make all the rules and enforce

them. If someone has a problem, they report it to the BMU. There is a discussion about the problem and then the entire unit makes a decision. My job is to make sure that the decisions align with the relevant laws. I am also responsible for coordinating between the ministry and the BMUs.”

“That is certainly a very different approach. Does it work?”

“Earlier, the fishermen did not like us too much. In fact, during the post-election violence, they completely burned down our offices and all our records. But community-based management works much better than traditional policing models. Now the BMUs understand the realities that drive our decisions and they educate the rest of the people about the importance of following the rules. This approach has been very successful for all of us.”

A few minutes later, the officer and his newly-formed friends were greeted by the BMU at the beach. Twelve members of the BMU had come over for the discussion on the hyacinth issue. After a round of warm handshakes, they settled under the shade of a small tree. Sensing Paul and Peter’s anxiety about finding their brother, the fisheries officer started the meeting with a query about Phillip’s whereabouts. Everyone indicated that they knew Phillip well but had not heard from him since he disappeared a year back.

“I am very sorry that there is no good news for you,” the officer turned to Paul and sympathized. “Why don't you give me your phone number and if I get any new information, I will contact you immediately.” Peter dictated his phone number to the officer. The officer entered it into his phone and gave Peter a missed call. Meanwhile the head of the BMU had called the meeting to order, welcomed the group and urged a young man to put forth his grievances without further delay. The scorching sun, the high humidity, and the series of disappointing news had taken their toll on Peter, Paul and Obongo. They turned around and scanned the tiny huts on the shore for a soda shop. Finding none, they looked at each other and slowly started their walk towards Peter's car.

“My name is Benson. I have been sent here by my boss, Mr. Phillip. He spoke to the chairperson of the BMU last week and requested...” the young man's words trailed off as Peter ran towards him with extraordinary energy.

“Hey!!!” Peter shrieked, “you just said that you don't know Phillip's whereabouts. And now you are talking about him.”

The young man, visibly shaken up by Peter's sudden rush towards him and angry demeanor, blurted out, “I know five different Phillips.

There are very many of them in Rongo. If you come there with me, I will surely introduce you to all of them.”

“So, you are from Rongo?” Peter asked.

“Yes, I grew up in Kericho but now I work in Rongo.”

“Where is Mr. Phillip from?”

“He is from Rongo. Everyone knows him there.”

“OK” Peter sheepishly stepped back. “We are just trying to find my brother. Sorry.”

“Phillip is a very common name around here.” Obongo agreed and then looked at Peter and Paul. “If you gentlemen don't mind, I would like to stay here for a few minutes to learn about this issue.”

“Sure,” Peter shrugged, “Paul and I will wait over there in the shade. It is very hot here.”

“We must proceed,” the chairperson of the BMU suggested. “Some of us have to go back to work in the afternoon. Please, Mr. Benson.”

“So, I was saying that...,” Benson drawled, “my boss, Mr. Phillip spoke to the chairperson yesterday and requested that your BMU be kind enough not to deprive us of the vegetation...”

“Hey!” an old fisherman roared, “Did you say deprive? Is that what you said? This vegetation is depriving us of our food and our livelihoods. If we don't find a solution, we will perish. Our children, our women, will all die. We are the ones being deprived because of this hyacinth.”

“Please calm down, baba,” the chairperson intervened. “Mr. Benson, you must appreciate the time and opportunity we are giving you. Can you please get straight to the point?”

“I want your permission to remove the vegetation and take it away from the lake,” Benson requested.

“Who are you? What are you saying? This is a lot of vegetation. All the way up to there.” The chairperson stretched out his hand towards the horizon. “How will you take it and what will you do with it?”

“Our fisheries officer will confirm that pesticides will harm the fish and pollute the water. It will also harm your sukuma crops when you use lake water for irrigation. Your families will fall sick when you drink the water. The biological solution with weevils is better than pesticides but it also has its own problems. Instead, we will bring our trucks over here with eight to ten people to physically remove the vegetation and take it away. And we will do it without any cost to you. Totally free.”

“But, what will you do with it?”

“Don't worry about that. We are solving your problem.”

“It will take you months or even years to remove it physically. We cannot wait so long.”

“Actually, we will carve out a way for you to reach the lake in just two days. We have a boat that can go out in the water and start chopping off the hyacinth. In one month, over half of the hyacinth will be gone. If you don't believe me, I can put you through to the chairperson of a BMU near Kendu Bay. Our trucks are there right now.”

“When will you start?” the puzzled chairperson inquired.

“It is 12:30pm right now. We will have one truck here at 2 PM to start the work. From tomorrow onwards, there will be two trucks and about fifteen people working all day.”

“By the time you remove it, more hyacinth would have grown.”

“No problem. We will keep clearing it quickly and only keep the minimum as suggested by the fisheries people.”

“We don't want any of it. Not a single plant,” the old man declared.

“Actually, Benson is right,” the fisheries officer jumped in. “The water hyacinth is also helping us in a few ways. If the hyacinth were not there, the lake would be covered with algae, which would consume all the oxygen and destroy the fish. Also, the hyacinth helps various species of cichlids grow and it protects the small fish from the Nile Perch. So we must actually preserve some of the hyacinth.”

“And the marshy areas where the hyacinth grows is also where a lot of Tilapia are born. We don't want to disrupt their lifecycles or that will be the end of our Tilapia supply,” Benson chimed in.

The chairperson turned to his group. “This is certainly a very unusual situation. I am not sure what to think about it.”

The old fisherman turned to Benson again. “Even for a moment if we believe you, that you will take the vegetation away, why don't you tell us what you will do with it?”

“Why do you worry about that, baba? You will be able to go to the lake again. That is all you should care about. Just trust me,” Benson reassured.

“Officer, what do you think? Do we have the mandate to let this gentleman take the hyacinth?” the chairperson turned to the fisheries officer.

“Indeed! It is your lake. I don't have any objection whether you give him the permission or not.”

“But, what is your personal opinion?”

“I think there is no harm in letting Benson do as he says. As of now, we must be realistic. We really don't have a solution in the short-term. Benson has promised to start work very fast. Our scientists will come here in two weeks. But they have said that twice in the past. I have been told that they have a very effective biological solution. When they come,

if the vegetation is still here, we can let them implement their solution.”

“OK, then,” the chairperson proposed, “before we proceed to vote, does anyone have any questions?”

For the next thirty minutes, another round of questioning on what Benson would do with the hyacinth followed. Benson repeated his stance three times while Peter and Paul came back and settled down next to Obongo. They found the discussion fairly entertaining.

Finally, the frustrated chairperson forced a vote on the topic. The BMU voted 7-5 to let Benson commence his work. Five individuals voted in the negative because Benson refused to clarify what he would do with the vegetation. The meeting thus ended around 1:30 PM and the BMU members went their separate ways.

“I hope you find your brother soon. If I hear anything, I will certainly call you.” The officer promised Paul. He shook hands with everyone and started walking towards the main road.

I must inform Okello about this hyacinth issue. But, first I need to find out more, Obongo thought to himself. He stayed back to talk to Benson. “Hello, Mr. Benson, Obongo is my name. I am the head of the Empower Kochia Group. I want to talk to you more about your hyacinth project.”

“It is nice to meet you Mr. Obongo. However, let me tell you – there is nothing more I can share.”

“Whom can I speak to about it?”

“The only person who can provide you more information is Mr. Phillip himself.”

“Why don't you give me his phone number and I will call him right now. That way I can also find out if he knows anything about the Phillip we are looking for.”

“Mr. Phillip is in an important meeting with the engineer until 3 PM. If you give me your phone number, I will pass it on.”

“What if we come with you to Rongo in the afternoon?” Obongo proposed.

“You are very curious people here in Homa Bay,” Benson smiled. “Let me assure you that it is of no use. I will take the truck there in the evening and empty all the vegetation into one big field. Then, there are three workers who take it inside the workshop. Even I don't have permission to go inside there. I don't know what happens there and neither will you. Wambui supervises the operations herself.”

“Who is Wambui?”

“She is Mr. Phillip's wife. And please don't tell me that you want to go talk to her today because she is also in the meeting with the engineer.

Anyways, now I must go.” Benson took Obongo's number and scurried off towards Homa Bay town with his ear pressed against the phone, barking out orders.

Obongo was too excited to wait for two hours for Mr. Phillip to call back. The next steps were very clear in his mind. He turned to Peter and Paul, who were now getting ready to abandon their search and head home.

“Gentlemen, I propose that we immediately go over to my friend Okello's house. He can give us the best advice on what to do next.”

“I think we are just wasting time and petrol,” Peter sighed. “I think that we must search for Phillip in Central Kenya now. We must try to find out more about the Kikuyu woman.”

“On the contrary, I think we are back on his trail and should be able to find him soon. Didn't you hear Mr. Phillip's wife's name? Wambui is a very common name amongst Kikuyus.”

“I like your optimism Mr. Obongo,” Peter said, “but why would Phillip go to Rongo and never come back. Rongo is barely an hour away. Also, I don't think he will get involved with this hyacinth business. That cannot be. But if you insist, we can talk to your friend.”

“I insist. Okello is the best problem solver in Kochia, maybe even Nyanza or Kenya. Also, I would not be surprised if...if...” Obongo's eyes lit up. “Let us please proceed to Kochia immediately.”

The three of them packed themselves into Peter's tiny car and headed to Okello's residence.

“We have been expecting you.” Okello burst into laughter as he opened the door. He stepped aside so that Paul, Peter, and Obongo could be face to face with Phillip.

“My God! Phillip!” Peter screamed as he ran to his brother and held him by the shoulders. “Thank God, you are alive! Where have you been all this time?” Paul incoherently mumbled before he was overcome with emotion. The brothers spent the next ten minutes coming to terms with the fact that Phillip had been found and was in good health. As a bonus, they even got to meet his girlfriend, Wambui, for the first time. Wambui's greetings in fragmented Dholuo were adequate to impress Peter and Paul. They warmly welcomed her to the family.

“Mr. Obongo, you are a genius,” Peter stammered in disbelief. “Not only did you find out where Phillip was, but you even brought us here immediately. How is that possible?”

“Peter and I were with you the entire time, but we completely failed to follow your chain of thought,” Paul joined Peter in thanking Obongo.

“To be honest, I am a little surprised to see Phillip too,” Obongo

admitted. "I was expecting to see only Okello here. But when Benson said that his boss had a meeting with an engineer, there was a glimmer of hope that he might be referring to Okello. We don't have very many engineers around here. But Okello, you said that you were expecting us?"

"Benson, in his characteristic style, sent me a long text message about his meeting with all of you," Phillip informed the group. He passed on Obongo's phone number to me. Okello and I were just talking about the message when you knocked on the door."

"So Benson was lying to us all along?" Paul fumed.

"No, Benson is a very honest chap. He does not know that I come from this area. In fact, only two or three people know about it."

"Okello, surely you knew. You did not bring this to my attention either," Obongo complained.

"Infact, I was shocked, just like you, when I met Phillip a few hours ago," Okello said. "I was supposed to meet a Mr. Phillip from Rongo about some machinery and when I opened the door, it was none other than our own Phillip."

"And you did not even tell your brothers about your whereabouts. We were so worried. Imagine how difficult it was for us to make inquiries at hospitals and morgues. This is most unfair," Paul reprimanded his younger brother.

"I apologize," Phillip replied earnestly. "I am clearly at fault and I am very sorry for causing all of you this heartache. It is a long chain of events and if you give me some time, I can tell you how things unfolded."

"Please tell us right now," Peter urged. "We have been dying to know where you have been."

The three brothers, Obongo and Okello settled around the dinner table while Wambui prepared tea for everyone.

"My problems started when I was caught by the fisheries people for using the wrong size net to catch Tilapia. It was my fault. I was aware that the rules had changed but I did not have the money to buy new nets. I wish the authorities would provide loans, or at least give us some time, to switch over to the new size nets. They just come up with new rules and expect us to follow them with very short notice. The fine amount was about the same as the cost of the net itself. I went and pleaded to the fisheries officer but despite his sympathies, he could not help me."

"We actually met him just this morning and he was very supportive."

"Yes, he is a good man," Phillip concurred, "but he was bound by his duties. Six of us were caught. Three got their nets back by hook or crook and went back to fishing. One went to Nairobi in search of a job and one

ended up doing petty work in Homa Bay. I did not know what to do. Wambui had some savings and that supported us for a few days. Then we decided to go to Wambui's brother's home in Karatina."

"Why did you not mortgage your boat or use one of your friends' boats?" Paul asked.

"If I mortgaged my boat to buy new nets and if the nets got stuck in the vegetation, I would be completely doomed. If I would sell my boat and buy new nets, I would still have the same problem. It takes 45 minutes just to go out to the lake. I would have to borrow a boat for many hours a day to catch some fish. That was not practical either because the boats are all busy at peak times. So, I just decided to keep my boat in Ngegu, go out and earn some money to buy new nets, and come back when I had the money."

"Why did you not contact us?" Peter chided his brother. "We could have helped you. Did you not have enough faith in your own brothers?"

"I am sure you would have helped me but my pride got in the way. How would I admit to you that the fisheries officials confiscated my nets because I broke the rules? Didn't father always advise us to take responsibility for our actions? Everyone in Homa Bay had found out about the issue. I was ashamed to stay here and answer people's questions and stand their jokes and subtle taunts."

"What kind of job could you do in Karatina?"

"Actually, none," Phillip admitted. "With help from Wambui's brothers, I could have become a matatu driver or a tomato farmer. But, how could a fisherman, all of a sudden, become a farmer or a driver? I could have learned over time but I could not bear to spend my life away from my people, my lake and my fish."

"So, you moved again from Karatina to Rongo?"

"I barely lived in Karatina for a week. Then one day, we were having tea at the Starbucks hotel with Wambui's brother, talking about my options when Professor Onyango tapped on my shoulders. He was visiting Karatina for some research project and stopped for tea before heading back to Nairobi. We ordered another tea and started talking. We talked about his project in Karatina, and about the elections, and how things were in Homa Bay and Kochia. Then he asked me if I knew anyone who could help him with a project in Rongo. Before I could say anything, Wambui declared that I was looking for a job close to home. She even told him about the problems with the hyacinth and the fisheries people. I stared at the floor in shame but the Professor was very understanding. The two of them then convinced me to take up the job in Rongo."

“So, what kind of job are you doing? What does it have to do with hyacinth?” Paul was getting a little restless.

“The hyacinth came much later. My first job was coordinating with sugarcane farmers, truck drivers, and Professor Onyango,” Phillip explained.

“Coordinating is what I do as well, but I rarely get paid for it,” Obongo remarked. “Who pays your salary?”

“The Professor. He is a very smart man and he is very well-connected, just like our friend Obongo here,” Phillip continued his narrative. “Through his contacts, he had discovered that there was a large market for brown sugar in Nairobi. Several times, he would come to Rongo to collect the brown sugar.”

“What is brown sugar?” Paul asked.

“If you take sugarcane juice and boil it, the water content evaporates. What is left behind is this brown viscous substance. Then you pour it in vats and it solidifies into brown sugar. The sugar mills purify it further to produce white sugar. The brown sugar is used for cattle feeds, pharmaceuticals, and other industries.

“They grow a lot of sugarcane in Rongo. The farmers can either sell their sugarcane or convert it into brown sugar and sell it at a higher price. The problem is that the price of sugarcane varies significantly in the local markets, as much as 300%. The farmers make a lot of phone calls to determine the prices in the different markets and then decide where to take their sugarcane. They end up spending a lot of money in communication and transportation. They prefer to just stay on their farm and produce brown sugar, which saves them the effort and cost of trying to sell their sugarcane. But the brown sugar has no value in the local market. In Nairobi, brown sugar sells very fast – you get cash-on-delivery. Transportation is very expensive and the farmers are not coordinated well-enough to make the trip to Nairobi themselves. They are farmers and while they are happy to do the value addition by making brown sugar, they generally don't want to get involved in trading it. They want to sell it as soon as they can and collect their money.

“Professor Onyango had some sickness in the family and as the hospital bills went on accumulating, he was looking for ways to make some extra money over weekends. He discovered the market demand for brown sugar in Nairobi and established connections with traders willing to buy it from him. He knew a few sugarcane farmers in Rongo and he traveled there a few times, met with the farmers, and offered to buy brown sugar from them at attractive rates. Every few weeks, the Professor would go to Rongo and pick up the brown sugar. But the

problem was that the farmers would promise certain quantities, and then when the Professor would reach there, they would not have it ready. In a single trip, the small truck could carry about 2,000 kgs but the Professor was barely able to collect 700 to 1,500 kgs from the farmers. He was collecting small quantities from several farmers and hence he spent a lot of money on phone calls – to arrange for the brown sugar, make confirmation calls, and then last-minute coordination. So, my job was to stay in Rongo, coordinate with all the farmers and the Professor and make sure that the entire stock of 2,000 kgs was ready when the Professor came for pick-up.”

“That seems like a very simple job,” Paul remarked.

“It is actually a very difficult job. Working with farmers is very complicated – there is always some problem. Sometimes, the cooperative's sugarcane crushing machine is not working and sometimes it is raining and hence the boiling process becomes very slow. Sometimes the vats are not cleaned properly and sometimes they forget to guard the vats and cows end up eating them. The most important part of my job was quality control of the brown sugar. The farmers don't care much about the product. They just throw the brown sugar clusters on the ground. The traders in Nairobi then refuse to buy it. So, I was responsible for educating the farmers about the need for a high-quality product and helping them standardize their operations so as to make their process more sanitary. There are over 60 farmers that I am working with and it takes away a lot of my time.”

“I see that it is a difficult job,” Paul agreed, “but I am sure the Professor's phone bill is now lower too.”

“Indeed. The professor told me last time that he used to spend about 2,000 Shillings for every trip and now he only spends 200!” Phillip beamed, “So now he has increased my commission.”

“Do you get a monthly salary or just the commission?”

“I get a place to stay and a commission for every truckload of brown sugar I put together. It is actually very good money.”

“But, what happens if the crop fails or something else happens and you are not able to assemble the necessary quantity?”

“Then I don't get paid! I could not have argued with the Professor anyways, but he explained to me his way of thinking and doing business. He said that I will be paid only if I do a good job with everything and deliver goods that he can deliver to his customers. The first time, he reduced my commission because the quality of some of the brown sugar was not good. Now, I am very careful and I make sure that all the brown sugar I buy from the farmers is of good quality. If they have a problem, I

work with them to solve it. Even the farmers are more careful now because if their sugar is not good, I just reject it. They work harder but they also make more money.”

“I think this is a very good system,” Okello added, “because now you are a partner in the business rather than an employee. You have an incentive to work smarter and harder and the Professor is not taking an unnecessary risk.”

“There are a lot of business opportunities here but our people don't pursue them because they are afraid to take the risk,” Obongo affirmed. “We need to find ways of reducing the risk and then our people will engage in new business opportunities and really prosper.”

“But, how did you jump from sugarcane to hyacinth?” Paul asked.

“So, life continued very well for two months. We saved up enough money to buy new nets. I ached to come back home to Ngegu and start fishing again.”

“Wait a minute,” Okello said. “If you saved enough money for full-size nets in just two months, it must be a very lucrative job?”

“Indeed, I was saving more than three times the money in Rongo than I would save catching and selling fish in Ngegu. But I did not like it there. It is cold all the time and the food is different...and I am far from the lake and the fish. Hey – I just wanted to be home.” Phillip laughed. “But then Wambui found out that the hyacinth problem was getting worse and the fishermen were really struggling to make ends meet. Once again, she convinced me to stay back in Rongo. She also preferred it because she was helping me with the brown sugar work and she really enjoyed that. In Ngegu, she would just have to sit around all day.”

“It is all my fault,” Wambui agreed. “I am not used to sitting at home and cooking and cleaning. I wanted to work and earn some money too. Also, the Professor had done so much for us, how could we just leave him and come here? So, I told Phillip that if we cannot live near the lake, let us bring the lake to Rongo. We thought we would start a business selling fish from Homa Bay in Rongo. I went to Homa Bay twice to find out the current rates of fish. But the fish supply had reduced substantially because of the hyacinth problem and as a result, the prices had increased very much. We could not sell the fish in Rongo and make it a worthwhile endeavor.”

“I am glad you are doing well in Rongo but I still don't understand your reasoning for staying away from Homa Bay and all of us,” Peter remarked.

“It was just my pride. I had lost face in Homa Bay when my nets were taken away and I was ashamed of coming back and facing my

friends until I had the money to buy new nets,” Phillips explained.

“I don't think anyone cares about such issues anymore,” Obongo said. “You cannot ruin your life just to uphold your pride. You were not the only one whose nets were taken away. All the fishermen have had some problem with the authorities at some time. You just live with it.”

“So, did you start the fish business?” Paul asked.

“No, as I said, it was not worthwhile. We were so frustrated with the hyacinth problem. Finally, we came to the conclusion that instead of giving us fish, God was giving us hyacinth and we must make the most of it. The next time the Professor came to Rongo to take the brown sugar, I asked him if there was anything we could do with the hyacinth. He was not sure, but he promised to find out and advise me during his next visit.”

“I spoke to several people in Rongo and even went to Kisumu to talk to fisheries and agriculture officials, but no one knew what could be done with the hyacinth. It was three weeks until the Professor came back to Rongo. Meanwhile, Wambui had brought a few plants back from the lake and we had left them outside our home. Most of the plants rotted while a few of them had been crushed during the trip and they started drying up very slowly. The Professor said that we could actually convert the rotting plants into a fertilizer. There was only one problem – most of the plant is actually water and it had to be removed first. I had an idea. There was an old manual sugarcane crusher lying around in the workshop. The farmers used it before they got the diesel crusher from India. So, I tried to crush the plants in the machine and it actually worked. It is very easy. You just put the plant in it and rotate the wheel. The water falls to the floor and you get the crushed plant out. The machine removes over three-fourths of the water. To cut a long story short, the rotten hyacinth makes very good fertilizer for banana trees and other local crops. We can actually sell a bag of rotten hyacinth, I mean the fertilizer, for 100 Shillings.”

“So you are making money from the useless vegetation?” Paul was shocked. “Why hasn't anyone else figured that out?”

“Because most of us just look at the vegetation and keep complaining about how it is depriving us of our fish,” Obongo exclaimed. “And there are others like Phillip who see it as an opportunity for making compost and fertilizer!”

“At my family farm, we have been composting organic matter and using it as a fertilizer for generations,” Wambui added. “But there is not much farming happening here on the lake. People just grow sukumawiki and maybe some bananas or beans or maize. It is only for themselves and not for the market. When I came here, I was shocked that just ten

minutes from the lakeshore people were starving but did not engage in farming.”

“Indeed,” Obongo concurred, “we consider ourselves fishermen and not farmers. When children misbehave, they are sent to the farm as a punishment. So, when they grow up, our young people don't want anything to do with farming. You ask them where the vegetables come from, they will tell you that they come from the market. But they don't know and don't care about how they get to the market.”

“I was one of them,” Phillip admitted. “But I have realized that instead of being fixated on fish, I need to see what all is around me and how I can make the most of what God has given me.”

“Bravo Phillip,” Obongo roared. “Okello, our friend here is following your and Odhiambo's footsteps!”

“Well friends, let us give Phillip an opportunity to complete his story. He still has very many plans up his sleeve. So, Phillip, tell us about what you are doing with the dried hyacinth.”

“Surely. So, the hyacinth takes some time to dry – between one to four weeks depending on the weather and how much we turn it with a rake. But after it has dried, we cut it into small pieces, mix it with a binding agent, and compact it to make fuel briquettes. These briquettes look like a stack of 20 small chapattis. They are a very good replacement for charcoal. The Professor actually analyzed the briquettes in his lab and found out that they provide more heat and produce less toxic fumes than charcoal. They are more environment-friendly and less expensive than charcoal. We are now trying to understand how we can manufacture the briquettes from the hyacinth on a larger scale. If we are successful, we can make a higher profit compared to the fertilizer.”

“I have heard about briquettes but have never seen them,” Peter remarked. “Are people willing to use them?”

“Maybe they will be a little hesitant at first because they are not familiar with them...but after using it a few times, they will realize that it is very cost-effective. They can actually reduce their cooking fuel costs by half. Also, there are health benefits that they might appreciate in the longer term,” Phillip explained.

“Why were you meeting with Okello then? Is he going to join your business?” Obongo asked.

“We would love to have Okello join our business,” Phillip said. “But he is a very busy man. We need about ten machines for compressing the raw materials into briquettes. Our second and more immediate need is for portable machines for crushing the hyacinth. Okello has agreed to start designing both machines for us.”

“Why do you need a portable machine?”

“The problem is that the hyacinth plant is 95% water. The transport to Rongo is very expensive and laborious. Instead of taking the plant as is, if we can crush it and then load it on our truck, we can take about ten times more material in a single trip. So we want a portable machine that can be used by the laborers at the lakeshore.”

“Won't you need many of these crushers?”

“We need ten of them at the earliest but I suspect that very soon, we will need many more.”

“I did not realize how big of a business this is! You have trucks and boats and so many employees!”

“Actually, we don't own any of the assets and we are not even making much money right now,” Phillip confided. “We started with just a 30,000 Shilling loan from the Professor. We hire trucks and people on a daily basis. They are not paid for the number of hours or days worked. We just pay them when the material reaches our workshop in Rongo. Similarly, several youth are out of work and we hire them to go into the lake and fetch us the hyacinth. They are also paid for the amount of material they bring in. Benson's job is to organize the entire hyacinth acquisition operation. He is an honest man and we pay him every day. Wambui personally supervises and pays the truck driver and all the laborers.”

“Don't all laborers expect to be paid on a daily basis for the period of time worked?”

“Yes, they do. We tried it that way but it does not work for us. They work when they like, take many toilet breaks, keep making phone calls. We cannot run a business like that. So, we changed our model. Now, we pay them when they bring the plants to the workshop, or rake the chopped plants and provide us the dried material, or do some other task that will directly help us make money. This model works very well.”

“I don't understand. How do you actually quantify their work?”

“Most of the times, by weight and quality check,” Phillip explained. “For example, the laborers rake and turn the chopped plants so they dry quickly. When they are ready, we weigh the material and pay them 10 Shillings for every 5 kgs dried. If it is not dry enough, Wambui will send them back to dry the material further.”

“I don't think the people around here will agree to work like that. The daily workers prefer to work for four hours or eight hours and be paid at the end of the time.”

“That has not been a problem for us. The unemployment rate in most parts of our country is over 40%. While the lazy ones refuse to

work for us, the hardworking ones end up making much more money than they would in a regular daily job.”

“Don't you need a special boat for removing the hyacinth?”

“Yes, you need a special boat to cut the vegetation completely and remove it. Our laborers just go into the water and pull out the plants. It is not the most efficient way to do the job but we cannot afford a big boat. The manual approach is very cost-effective and it keeps many people employed. Also, it simplifies our business model. After including all our expenses – the boat, trucks, laborers, Benson, etc. it costs us 75 Shillings for a 5 kg bag while we sell it for 100 Shillings.”

“And what about the fuel briquettes?”

“We are not selling them yet – just using them for making brown sugar. It saves us a lot of money. Once we get the machines from Okello, we will start manufacturing and selling them in the market.”

“So Phillip,” Paul asked, “Won't the BMU people be upset when they find out that you are making money from the hyacinth? Why not share some profit with the BMU and keep them happy?”

“That is our biggest problem,” Phillip grimaced. “In fact, in one community, they have refused to let us take the hyacinth. It is not like they planted the hyacinth or own it! We are solving their problem by taking it away and clearing their path to the water. Our margins are very low. The profit of 25 Shillings does not include Wambui's and my salary or the cost of the machines or any other incidental expenses. They wanted 25 Shillings for every bag of compost we were selling. How can we do that? It will completely ruin our business.”

“But you know our people,” Paul insisted. “They will find out that you are making money and they will stop you from taking the hyacinth. Why don't you charge your customers a little more and then pay the community some money?”

“That is not possible. We have considered it but our customers are unlikely to pay a higher amount.”

“Paul is right,” Obongo concurred. “You need to find a way to keep the communities happy or your business will come to an abrupt end.”

“But we are solving their problem,” Phillip protested. “How can they expect money from us? We are actually saving them a lot of time and money.”

“No, my friend,” Okello chimed in. “Saving money is not valued as much as making money for someone. And, at least in this case, saving time does not even count. If you ask the fishermen what they value more – two hours or 50 Shillings, most of them will tell you 50 Shillings. They have all the time in the world, or at least, that is what they think.”

“Have you seen all the advertisements for water pumps or fertilizers or fishing nets?” Obongo added, “They always advertise how the customer can make more money with the product.”

“I get your point,” Phillip conceded. “We have done some calculations. We can pay the community 5 Shillings per bag for letting us take the hyacinth and not interfering with our business.”

“There are two problems with that,” Obongo pointed out. “First of all, 5 Shillings is a very small amount and more importantly, whom does the money actually go to?”

“It should go to the community,” Phillip said confidently. “Don't you agree that it should benefit everyone and not just one person?”

“I agree that it should benefit everyone,” Obongo said, “But whom will you physically give the money to, and how will you know that it goes towards a cause that helps everyone? Can you give the money to the sub-Chief?...the head of the BMU?...the headmaster of the local school? ...the doctor at the clinic? Most importantly, how do you demarcate the community? Which homesteads are a part of the community and which are not? Who will make that decision?”

Obongo's agitated voice and critical questioning surprised the three brothers and Wambui. The long silence was finally broken by Okello. “I think I understand what my brother is trying to say. The problem he is describing is that we tend to use the word community very freely. In the olden days, it had a specific meaning. People did not travel as much and lived in close proximity like one big family. Surely, they had their arguments and fights, but they knew that they had to survive together. They were all accountable towards one another. But in today's world, that accountability cannot be taken for granted. We need explicit accountability mechanisms – just the way the Professor pays you only when you do your job correctly. He is holding you accountable and you are holding the farmers accountable.”

“Wait a minute,” Phillip interjected. “I am completely confused. First you said that we must give the community some money and now you are saying that there is no such thing as community anymore.”

“Let me explain,” Okello clarified. “I am not saying that there is no community. We are very much a part of one or more communities and we are interdependent on each other. At the same time, we make more individual decisions than collective decisions. Any collective action, just like individual actions, needs accountability.”

“So, Okello, what do you propose?” Phillip asked in exasperation.

“I propose...I propose...” Okello stuttered. “Why don't you give me some time to think about it?”

“No problem,” Phillip smiled. “After all, I am a simple fisherman and very new to this business of doing business.”

“So, Phillip, will you now come back to Ngegu?” Peter changed the subject.

“Right now, Wambui and I are coordinating the brown sugar business for Professor Onyango and we are also working very hard on this hyacinth business. Things are slowly starting to come together and if Okello designs the machines for us, then I am very sure we will be successful. As such, it does not help to move back to Ngegu right now.”

“But, isn't it better for your hyacinth business to be located in Homa Bay or Ngegu?”

“Not really. While the hyacinth comes from here, it is a lot easier to dry it in Rongo because there is less humidity there. Also there is a ready market for fertilizer and briquettes in that area,” Phillip explained.

“Besides, we really enjoy working with Professor Onyango,” Wambui chimed in. “He has been very kind to us. When we suggested that we wanted to work on this second business, he was extremely supportive. He went out of his way to do the necessary research and help us get started. We cannot leave the Professor's work and go elsewhere.”

“I wish that everyone would be just as supportive as the Professor,” Phillip said. “I am so frustrated with the BMU people in the other place. We are solving their problem and on top of that, they want money from us. They don't want to profit from the hyacinth themselves but they will not let us profit from it either, just like the dog in the manger who will not eat the grass and neither let the horse eat it. Obongo, you said that we need to find ways to reduce risk for our people who want to start new businesses. I think that even before that, we need to make people understand how this crab in the bucket mentality is hurting everyone and impeding progress.”

“Phillip, I understand your frustration,” Okello jumped in. “However, I suggest that you don't make this situation an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ issue. Sometimes, we are just as guilty of being on the other side of the fence. The biggest enemy of the crab is the crab itself. We just need to find smart ways to rise above, and help the other crabs rise up too so that collectively, we can all get out of this bucket of poverty and hopelessness.”

“Anyways, I am not here to preach,” Okello winked. “I have a potential solution for you. Instead of making the hyacinth crushing machines portable, why don't we strategically install them at maybe two or three locations along the shore. The fixed machines will be more durable and cost us less than the portable machines. Then, whoever is

interested in doing some work and earning a little money can bring the hyacinth from the lake, squeeze the water out of it and sell it to you! You just sit there with your weighing scale and let the people do the rest of the work.”

“That is an interesting idea,” Phillip agreed. “But what if they crush the hyacinth and take it away without selling it to us?”

“Let them take some of it home,” Okello chuckled. “Their neighbors will nag them until they bring it back to you in a few days. You know it has a foul smell. Most of the fishermen don't have a good application for it. They don't need the compost and making the briquettes is not easy. Besides, as you pointed out, there is hardly a local market for either of them.”

“That is true, and they can take some and crush it manually even now if they want to!”

“Unless they are serious about starting a business, you have nothing to worry about,” Okello advised. “If they indeed start a business and compete with you, it will force you to make your business more efficient. Competition is good for all of us. Either ways, everyone wins.”

“But I don't understand how it solves the problem of community expectations,” Wambui asked.

“I understand it,” Phillip’s eyes lit up. “In the previous case, we are benefitting from the hyacinth and people are expecting a share from the proceeds. But now, everyone in the community has an opportunity to benefit from it. The benefit is very tangible and immediate – they do some work, they walk away with some money!”

“Actually, that is a good thing for us too,” Wambui concurred. “Instead of having 15 laborers, we will have many more. Some of them will tire away in a few days, but others will stay. But what if..”

“No more what ifs,” Okello interjected. “Just do a trial with three machines at one location and see how it works. We can speculate forever but doing a trial is the only way to know.”

“Okello, I like this idea very much,” Phillip said. “I have always wanted to help my friends here in Ngegu and Homa Bay in some way. Now, I can help them in two ways – by making it easy for them to reach the water and also giving them an opportunity to earn a little money while cleaning up the lake.”

“This last year has been very enlightening for me,” Wambui mused. “In my church, my pastor always used to say that instead of giving a man a fish, you teach him how to fish. However, now I have learned that even if a man knows how to fish, has very good nets and a sturdy boat, lives next to a very large lake with millions of fish in it, he could still starve.

There are laws to be followed, norms to be respected, big fish that eat up the smaller ones, hyacinth that colonizes the lake shore – just so many things that separate the hungry man from his fish.”

“Yes, and I have learned that you cannot keep blaming the fisherman or the fish or the nets or the laws either,” Phillip laughed. “Remember I used to joke that the Maasai people think that all the cows in the world belong to them, the Meru people have their miraa<sup>1</sup>, and the Kikuyus have their matatus...just like that, all the fish in the world belong to us, the Luos.”

“Do you mean you don't believe that anymore?” Wambui teased.

“I still love my fish. But I also think that God has given us much more than fish and cows and miraa and matatus, and we must make the most out of everything that we have. If God gives us hyacinth, we must endeavor to make the most out of it.”

“And since God has given us cell phones...” Paul pulled his younger brother's ear. “We must make the most out of them and keep our near and dear ones informed of our whereabouts.”

It was almost sunset when Wambui and the three brothers finally jumped into Paul's car and headed to Homa Bay for a family dinner. They were extremely grateful to Obongo and Okello for bringing them all together. They decided to visit Rongo next morning to tour the brown sugar manufacturing facilities and review the hyacinth operations. Benson was shocked to see all of them together. He really liked Okello's plan of crowdsourcing the crushed hyacinth and making the machines available to anyone that wanted to use them. Over the next week, Okello traveled to Kisumu and bought manual sugarcane crushing machines and re-engineered them to work with water hyacinth. Twelve of these machines were delivered to Phillip in just two weeks. They were installed in groups of three at four different locations and proved to be very successful. The local people would cut or pull out hyacinth from the lake, crush it with the machine, and sell it by weight to one of Phillip's staff persons. Phillip ended up reducing his overhead costs significantly and further boosting his profits.

The briquette making machines took longer than a month to design and prototype. Phillip ran into problems while establishing a reliable supply chain for the binding agent for the hyacinth briquettes. When this chronicle was being written, Phillip was still experimenting with the machine and the composition of the briquettes. Phillip put the briquettes on the back burner because the brown sugar and composting businesses

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<sup>1</sup> Miraa = A flowering plant whose stems and leaves are chewed as a social custom. Miraa is a stimulant and is illegal in some countries. It is also known as Khat or Qat.



**The Fishing Village of Ngegu**

were booming. As word about the hyacinth presses and the composting business got around, Phillip decided to visit his friends in Ngegu and Homa Bay. They were delighted to see him and were surprised and very proud when they learned that he had originated the water hyacinth business that was now providing income to over 100 individuals along the shore.

However, the person who was happiest to see Phillip and learn about his exploits was the fisheries officer. "We took away your nets and see what all you accomplished," he said to Phillip and embraced him tightly. "You are a role model for all of us. I will surely nominate you to the East African Task force for Water Hyacinth that has been constituted and will be meeting in Kampala next month."

The fishmongers in Homa Bay were jealous of Wambui and congratulated her on winning over Phillip's heart. The members of the Empower Kochia Group warmly welcomed Phillip and Wambui back to their community. The elders insisted that Wambui must learn Dholuo so she could converse with everyone, and more importantly, participate in all the celebrations. "We will teach you Luo every evening," the old women promised, "but you must teach our young people how to run and grow a business." Wambui happily accepted the invitation.

Everyone was particularly pleased to learn that Phillip was planning an official church wedding the following month. Wambui was also pleased with all the love and attention she received from Phillip's friends, family and neighbors. Although she had to return to Rongo to resume her work, she promised to come back to Ngegu and meet with everyone at least once a month.

"Now you have a successful brown sugar business and a beautiful wife," Janet teased Phillip. "Surely, a big party is in order to celebrate your sweet fate."