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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Learning About Hope

Fourteen CrossFit-built Kenyan schools give villagers a chance to escape poverty through education.

By Chris Cooper

October 2013

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All photos: Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

The narrow, crowded streets of Mombasa, Kenya, turn to dust tracks less than an hour away from the port on the Indian Ocean, and leaving the city is like a trip back in time.

Not far from the city of just under a million, families and animals are sheltered together under palm-frond roofs supported by mud walls. Vehicles are rare on the bumpy, twisting roads, and women washing clothes in muddy creeks confirm the absence of electricity and running water.

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If Mombasa itself is a center of trade, tourism and industry, rural Kenya is distinctly agrarian. This agriculture, however, is not the agriculture of the Industrial Revolution but rather smallholder farming mostly absent tractors and irrigation systems. The majority of Kenyans make their living by farming small patches of Sub-Saharan Africa, and most are always but one drought away from both empty pockets and empty stomachs.

The average Kenyan man earns less than US\$1.50 per day, and work is scarce even at that rate. The average woman bears seven children, and most adults are unemployed. According to 2008 estimates on CIA.gov, Kenya's unemployment rate was 40 percent. Poverty is on a different scale than in North America: kids often wear the same clothes every day for several years, and no meal is ever certain. Whereas the poorest of North America might find clean drinking water without much effort, rural Kenyans have no such security. Stats from 2005 on Ruralpovertyportal.org reveal almost 50 percent of rural Kenyans live below the poverty line.

CrossFit for Hope is the action arm of the CrossFit Foundation, and [Hope for Kenya](#) is the foundation's first effort outside the United States. The initiative links the CrossFit community with Kenyan villages where the local leaders decide what projects will provide the most benefit to the area. To instill ownership, CrossFit for Hope

requires a down payment of 10 percent of construction costs and a willing workforce to provide the labor for new projects. Latrines, desks and rainwater collection systems are priorities, as are the schools that provide the possibility of something better for students. Education is the best way out of rural poverty in the Developing World, and the CrossFit Foundation is providing a way for children here to create a future that doesn't involve endless hours tilling the soil before succumbing to disease or malnutrition before 60. According to the CIA, Kenya ranked 180th in estimated life expectancy by country in 2013, and a 2013 [University of Washington study](#) attributed 18.1 percent of deaths in the country to complications related to HIV/AIDS.

"In 2011, we had only 20 children at this school," said Seif Mwachanyika, head teacher at Dzendereni, site of the first CrossFit-supported school. "This year we have 300, with 29 of them qualifying for high school—16 boys and 13 girls."

Mwachanyika's speech was part of a welcome ceremony for the CrossFit for Hope team and their guests, who visited in late September. Dances and poems were offered as tribute, an elder gave his tearful thanks, and then the grand prize—a goat—was carried on the shoulders of a preteen and delivered to the guests' van. It was a celebration of success: the Dzendereni school, launched only 18 months ago, was the first CrossFit school, and it's become the home base for change in the surrounding villages.



*With a cistern collecting rainwater, students at the CrossFit school in Dzendereni can be assured of clean drinking water.*



***Many Kenyan students still sit on rocks in schools with dirt floors, but CrossFit for Hope is making improvements with projects that provide desks and new school rooms.***

The increased enrollment in Dzendereni is a huge win, and older students are beginning to penetrate higher levels of education. For many Kenyans, schooling ends at Grade 8, with only the top students qualifying for high school. Community Education Services Canada estimates only one in five Kenyans will attain a diploma for completing four years of secondary schooling. The Dzendereni school sent its first student—a young woman—to the best high school in Kenya this year, and the CrossFit Foundation covered her tuition, about \$1,200.

"It was the first time the girl had seen an apartment building or a stop sign or even margarine . . . . So the first semester was a huge culture shock," said Leah Njoroge, CrossFit's Kenyan host. The student is now a bright example for the next class—proof that education can equal escape.

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Hope for Kenya has now built 14 schools in different villages in Kenya, and the requirement for investment and labor by the locals has residual effects: villagers who are trained to make desks, pour concrete blocks and weld frames increase their knowledge, acquiring skills that will

perhaps lead to new opportunities. CrossFit for Hope provides the mechanism, and CrossFit gyms worldwide drive the process.

Children at traditional village schools don't have much motivation to attend. Kids as young as 4 are required to carry a heavy stone to their classroom for a seat, or they sit on the dirt floor. Un-galvanized steel roofs first leak, then rust and eventually collapse. Dozens of folded houses are visible along any road. Rains turn the dirt floors of the schools to mud, and summer breezes blow dust through the room nonstop. Some teachers haven't achieved better than a fifth-grade education themselves. And the best outcome for many students? An incomplete education resulting only in a chance to sit in the shade beside an unemployed father.

CrossFit for Hope provides an alternative: a real desk in a school with solid walls, a dry roof and a cistern full of clean water. Children are more likely to attend such a school, and the dramatic increase in attendance at the Dzendereni school is proof.

The quality of their education is also much better: teachers provided by the Kenyan school authority are highly educated men and women who are drawn to the more modern school. Other agencies work with CrossFit for Hope, building gardens and farms to give the whole community a leg up.

"The first step is to set the foundation, to build the schools. The next will be to layer good nutrition and exercise habits on top," said Dallin Frampton, coordinator of CrossFit for Hope's Kenya initiative. He's known as "Ruwa" to local villagers.

Frampton has been witness to the changes in local villages since the CrossFit schools have appeared. It was Frampton who first approached CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman in February 2011 about humanitarian efforts in Africa. Coach Glassman wanted to get involved, and the initiative quickly gained momentum when he called on the global CrossFit community to support projects in Kenya.

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**—Dallin Frampton**

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The Dzendereni school has “become a beacon of hope in the village. There’s hope to get out of poverty, to get to the next step of education or life. The school is a conduit to a better standard of living. I think that’s what CrossFit is all about,” Frampton said.

Giant CrossFit billboards appear on the outside of the schools, linking simple but incredibly valuable structures in Africa to the gym that paid for their construction: NorCal CrossFit, CrossFit Morristown, CrossFit New England and others.

It costs about \$14,000 to build a school in Kenya, and some gyms have made that commitment by themselves, with their communities raising funds to create a Kenyan legacy from a warehouse gym full of chalk and sweat. Other affiliates cover the \$3,000 price of new water cisterns and have their names painted on the tanks. Some donate the funds for a single desk, and desks are useful even in older schools. Every dollar helps.

“A poor child in North America is living a better life than these kids by an order of magnitude. They’re not comparable,” said the CrossFit Foundation’s Andy Stumpf. “We’re obligated to do something because we have the ability to do so.”

With over 7,000 gyms full of sympathetic people and a bit of disposable income, CrossFit has the leverage—and therefore the responsibility—to change the world.

“What the worst-case scenario in the U.S.?” asked Stumpf. “You still have access to the basic necessities of life: clean water, clothing and people who can help. The people in these villages are surrounded by others who have nothing to give.”

“Going from 49 to 50 pull-ups isn’t as big as going from zero to one,” said Greg Amundson, also of the CrossFit Foundation. “Back home, everyone has a head start. Here, we’re going from zero to one.”

### **Momentum**

In Guro village, the atmosphere crackled with promise. The CrossFit for Hope van was met a mile from the school by four small children wearing baby-blue uniforms. The tykes were joined by four more, then dozens, and then hundreds of children were pulling the CrossFit representatives from the van and running, singing at the top of their voices. They were excited for school, excited to welcome their visitors.

Here, CrossFit for Hope has built two new classrooms, complete with desks, on a solid concrete foundation. Outside is another new addition: a cistern to provide clean water from roof runoff.

Some of the kids wore castoff princess dresses, the dress-up leftovers of their Western counterparts. It’s not a best dress or a special dress; it’s simply the dress, the one worn to tend the animals, to cook food, to study. They’ll wear the same dress every day for years. None complain or ask for more.

During the speeches, one student was caught fiddling beneath his desk. Eyes downward, he bore the familiar posture of the surreptitiously texting American student, with one eye out for the teacher. Further examination revealed he was weaving a straw rug, probably to sell or trade for food. He resumed his work as soon as the teacher’s back was turned.

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***Through education, these children have a chance to escape the unemployment, poverty and sickness that affects so many Kenyans.***

Village women, shy at first, were drawn in by the music and soon wrapped their visitors in gifts. Coconuts, pieces of cloth and the most valuable commodity of all—shade—were offered wholeheartedly.

Children practiced their English on the visitors: “What your name?” they asked before giving their own. “Please be welcome here,” they added.

Where technology has been introduced into their pre-industrial culture, local Kenyans have been quick to learn. The wood shop now has two planers and a band saw to cut and smooth the coarse mango tree boards. Concrete masons wearing “Happy New Year 2007!” T-shirts and sandals have borrowed a new block-maker from the federal government. Where once they could make about 120 rough, misshapen blocks per day by hand, they now aim for 800 perfect ones. The workshop wouldn’t pass any safety inspection in the Western world, but local workers appreciate it and take pride in it.

Kenyans are resourceful out of necessity and quick to learn any new skill. Music poured out of scrap metal and battered WD-40 cans, and salvaged clothing was worn proudly. Opportunities are seized, and much is made from little.

Before the Hope team moved down the road to the next school, they were entertained by poems, skits and dances lasting for hours. Though the Hope representatives didn’t know the language, they understood the message: “Thank you for your help. We’ll take it from here.”



#### **About the Author**

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