

THE CrossFit JOURNAL LIVE AND LEARN

By providing water and schools, CrossFit is changing lives in Kenya—and you can help. Mike Warkentin explains.



BY MIKE WARKENTIN

Functional fitness is on full display in Kenya. Except it isn't about PRs and Fran times. It's about clawing out an existence in a country where many people can expect to earn far less than \$1,000 US a year.

Here, tires aren't flipped. They're repaired and resold in hopes of making enough money to buy life's necessities. Sleds aren't pushed to build strength and power. Rather, rickety carts are dragged over rough roads, and many of them are carrying the most precious cargo of all: food and water. Jugs, baskets and bowls are carried on heads while limbs are loaded with bags.

Large loads are moved quickly here, but they're moved with a sense of desperation that has nothing to do with the whiteboard.

But CrossFit is in Kenya, in the village of Dzendereni, just outside the crowded port of Mombasa on the Indian Ocean. In Dzendereni, children learn in the CrossFit school, a building filled with desks and equipped with a system to collect rainwater to replace the muddy river water students once had to drink.

According to CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman, CrossFit's presence in Africa is about more than learning to squat and deadlift.

"We'll bring fitness here, too," he said, "but there are some fundamentals that are going to have to come first."

CrossFit's famous pyramid bases sport, weightlifting and throwing, gymnastics, and metabolic conditioning on nutrition. It's a blueprint for elite fitness. But in many parts of the world, the pyramid looks very different and contains additional layers at its foundation.

"Below nutrition would probably be 'not succumb to disease or starvation or dehydration.' There are some pieces (of the pyramid) missing that we take for granted," Glassman said.

But CrossFit is supplying those pieces, and from May 28 to June 1, Coach Glassman took CrossFit staff to see the company's work in Dzendereni and take the message back to the global affiliate community.

"We're just starting," Glassman stated.

THE HARD ROAD

Along the roads of Mombasa, slight men and women are pushing or pulling two-wheeled carts loaded with bricks, stakes, logs, fruit and just about anything else you can imagine. Some of the carts are loaded with water, and its delivery is literally a matter of life and death. People are living day to day, and it shows.

A van packed with Kenyans is stuck in a pile of muck, its front bumper plowing a furrow in the

roadside mud as a team of men rock the vehicle back and forth in an attempt to free it. The van looks like it's about to roll off the road and onto the men.

The roads are clogged with cars, and no traffic lights govern the chaos. Huge trucks headed to the port play chicken with old vans and trucks, motorbikes, and small vehicles that look as if they'll disintegrate into rust at the slightest bump. There are no lanes, and traffic resembles a writhing mass of snakes as vehicles weave in and out and buzz pedestrians, roadside stands and untethered animals.

The potholes are many, and they're deep, even on the main roads leading to

According to WorldBank.com, a Kenyan earned about \$780 US in 2010. Salum Muruthi, a Tanzanian who works for CrossFit in Kenya, says it's less than that in the villages, where people might make \$1 a day.

The World Bank also says about 25 percent of Kenyans have access to the Internet, and that's a huge improvement over 2008 numbers below 10 percent. In the United States, the number is 74 percent.

According to Water.org, just over half the rural population of Kenya has access to improved drinking water, but it isn't the safe, sparkling liquid that flows out of North American taps and

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—GREG GLASSMAN

the airport and the port. The vehicles shake from side to side, and occupants take care not to let heads bounce off windows if they're lucky enough to have air conditioning. Most don't.

Further along, a man is rocking a cart loaded with small logs over a bump as he tries to cross bumper-to-bumper traffic. He's building momentum for a well-timed push that will send the cart shooting through a gap in traffic. A poorly timed push and someone's going to be impaled.

“Do you see how anything could be valuable to these people? Even a pen,” filmmaker Sevan Matossian says. He's been to Kenya before to see CrossFit's efforts.

“Our Western world isn't hard anymore,” Jeff Martin of CrossFit Kids says as he watches the struggles being fought around the vehicle.

Indeed, Martin is right. Though life can be challenging in the slums of any city, the Western world is easy for many when you consider that most have food, clean water and the opportunity for education.

bottles. It might be untreated, collected rainwater, but even that is a huge improvement over the cloudy water that comes from shallow wells, dirty streams and tiny lakes that are often contaminated with human waste that has nowhere to go in the high water table.

As the CrossFit convoy leaves Mombasa's gnarled traffic for the cratered, treacherous roads of rural Kenya, the nation's struggle intensifies. Out here, there are few vehicles. Who could afford them? The wilderness is vast, and the roads are bumpy, rugged and unpaved. Just a few weeks before, a bus accident left many dead.

No lions or wildlife are seen. All that's long gone. *The Ghost and the Darkness* was set close to here, but the descendants of the lions that terrorized the construction of the Uganda Railway in the late 19th century are on the verge of extinction. Less than 2,000 remain in Kenya, driven away from expanding human settlement and agriculture.

Once in a while, we pass small clusters of mud huts or shacks and a few villagers moving small herds of goats or cattle along the road.



Matossian marvels at how green everything is. It's the rainy season, and the sparse vegetation looks amiss to those who have seen the area when it's dry.

Villagers are also carrying water in jugs or pulling carts filled with water. Some will travel hours every day to get enough water to sustain life, and that time could be spent in school, working fields or finding some way to generate income.

CrossFit is going to help with all that.

CHANGING LIVES

Mnyenzi is the headquarters for Koins for Kenya, a group that's been working since 2003 to improve the lives of Kenyans via the construction of schools, desks, cisterns and anything that will make life better. At the Koins center, CrossFit's Dallin Frampton explains some of the projects that have been developed.

Self-reliant agriculture is a practice where chickens are cooped and fed

properly instead of allowed to run wild. Self-rotational gardens are set up by analyzing how many people need to be fed and allocating the right amount of land. Soil analysis is done, and the gardens are set up to produce a harvest every two weeks of something other than corn, a staple of the African diet. Greens are on the list, including spinach-like sukuma wiki, as well as tomatoes, cabbage and more.

Another project involves building a chicken coop over a two-foot-deep

hole measuring six by six feet. The hole is filled with water and tilapia, which are fed by the chicken droppings that fall in the water. The gestation period is about eight weeks, and the fish will be a valuable source of protein.

Frampton explains that there's a lack of knowledge because of desperation. For example, fruit trees are cut down to make charcoal. You can eat fruit, but you can sell charcoal, and the dilemma isn't an easy one to resolve.



“Every clean glass of water is a victory”

—GREG GLASSMAN



CrossFit is hoping to connect the affiliate community with projects like this, where CrossFit will help affiliates select projects and raise money. A garden requires about \$3,000. A fish pond goes for about \$3,500, as does a cistern to collect rainwater. For \$10,000, affiliates can build a schoolroom. The village residents kick in 10 percent of the cost, giving them investment in the projects.

It's an endeavor that's close to Coach Glassman's heart. After meeting Frampton and hearing about the efforts in Kenya, Glassman and CrossFit built a schoolroom. After Glassman came and saw it, they upped the ante to four rooms and two buildings, plus a rainwater system. More projects are planned, and with the help of the global affiliate community, the effects can be tremendous.

“This is the cradle of civilization,” Glassman said. “Mankind started here. You've got a high water table, fertile

land, good growing season, and untold suffering. Let's see if we can make a difference. I know we have in the short term and for a small population, and every clean glass of water is a victory.”

Glassman says members of the affiliate community are already on board to help with the project, and more will join the work soon enough once they see the difference they can make.

“If you get everyone to see the before and after, you'll realize that education's not just about getting a good job. It's a matter of life and death,” he said. “These kids have a life expectancy absent of education in the mid-30s. They get to university someday and that figure becomes 50s.”

He continued: “What do we want to do in CrossFit? We want to give

everyone a chance. There are some prerequisites to the training program, and one of them would be adequate food and water, the basics of life to grow and develop. In the dry season here when water is scarce, workouts aren't possible. Their lives come to a screeching halt, and they sit in the dirt and look at each other. Think of what that does to education.

“And again, it's directly in the way of them having a better life. If we can assert ourselves here—and it's hard to get further away from home than this, it's hard to find a people more appreciative and in greater need of little things we can make a difference with—if we can do it here, we can do it everywhere.”

Everywhere is next. Dzendereni is first.

EDUCATION, WATER, FOOD

After another rugged drive from Mnyenzi to Dzendereni, the CrossFit convoy rolls up to a school come alive. The children are out in their brown shorts and shirts, and hundreds of people are there to greet Coach Glassman. Musicians in colorful clothing play instruments and dance, and head teacher Seif Mwachanyika greets Glassman at the car with a hug.

On a dry patch of dirt beside the old school—a broken-down building made off mud and sticks—the school-children do a workout involving skipping, push-ups, bear crawls and handstand walks. On command, a group of kids flip upside down and walks on their hands across the dirt as if it were second nature. It's magical.

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—ANTHONY YAMA





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There's poverty here. That's obvious. But there's also joy—and hope. You don't have to look far to see the changes in the village. The old school is in disrepair, and at the height of maintenance it wasn't much to behold. It's rough and dark. The walls are made of mud. There are no desks. It's about as far from a classroom as you can get.

Just up the hill is the cistern, which can collect about 35,000 liters in 20 minutes of hard rain. Mwachanyika, Muthuri and another local CrossFit employee named Anthony Yama show exactly what the cistern means to the school.

Mwachanyika turns on the tap to release clear water while Muthuri pours out cloudy river water beside it. The two streams couldn't be more different, and the simple demonstration is more effective than any words.

Past the cistern is the school, where kids sit at desks branded with CrossFit's logo. The rooms are bright and airy, clean and dry. Kids are learning and thriving.

In fact, the school has the highest scores in the district and recently sent

a Grade 8 graduate, Loice Mwaka, to a national high school in Nairobi. The significance is immense: it had never happened before. But it will probably happen again now that people know it's possible. The children promise Coach Glassman that they'll work hard to do well in school.

"They don't make a dollar per day, but everyone knows to be free from poverty, you must get an education," Yama explains.

Yama himself comes from a family of 15, and his father sold everything and took loans to get Anthony to school. He eventually became a teacher and now works for CrossFit.

"Our life is a life of struggle," Yama says. "But what are our priorities? Education, food, water. ... I am what I am because of education."

As a reward, the school's four top students will be going to the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games with Yama and Muruthi, where they'll inspire the assembled community to help Kenya. Yama and Muruthi are going to receive a host of CrossFit training so they can instruct fitness classes back in Kenya.

Yama is clear that CrossFit's involvement is making a difference in lives, and he's thrilled to see what the future will bring.

"To see (Coach Glassman) getting involved in this and giving it a priority really, really motivates me and excites me," he said. "He's literally changing lives. ... Everybody wants to be embraced by CrossFit. Every village."

He continued: "What Coach did was a demonstration of the power of one that can change the lives of a community. CrossFit affiliates are going to get involved, and you can be sure lives are going to get better. Many people are going to get empowered, and lives will change."

"WE'RE JUST STARTING"

Outside the schoolroom, Coach Glassman is teaching children to squat.

CrossFit's founder pushes his hips back and down, and the kids imitate. He guides them up and down and spots those who roll forward onto their toes. With gestures, he cues them to push their knees in line with their feet and keep their chests up.



Mike Warkentin

“They’re asking me if I need a translator. I don’t need a translator. Get your heels down!” Coach laughs, pointing at one kid who immediately shifts his weight back to his heels.

“Tell him to practice that every day and teach the others,” Glassman says. “If they practice that every day, it will make them very strong.”

Abruptly, it starts to rain, and everyone scatters indoors or to vehicles. The rain ends the visit, but it fills the cistern. Just a few months ago, that wouldn’t have happened, and the sound of clean water running off the roof and into the concrete cistern is the sound of change.

As the CrossFit staff leave Dzendereni, they talk about the amazing experience and how they can get others to understand what’s going on in Kenya. All feel as if they need to share the story in hopes that others will want to help with the project. All have plans to get their affiliate communities on board.

As the cars roll out of Dzendereni and back to Mombasa, Glassman’s words echo through the minds of everyone who’s seen what a few thousand dollars can do for an African community:

“We’re just starting.”



For more information on how you and your affiliate can help the CrossFit efforts in Kenya, email Dallin Frampton: Dallin@CrossFit.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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