

Nonviolent Communication Training in Kenya 2008

Report 1st week (30.6. – 6.7.2008)

Dear all

Here is my first report on my stay in Kenya.

We (that is Christiane Welk, Heike Laschinski and Isabell Peters) arrived well and tired on July 1st in Nairobi where we were welcomed by Erick from “Carens Garden’s” (a charity dealing with HIV-diseased women, girls and widows), as early as 5.30 am. He is going to organise trainings together with Catherine, working for “Better Chance Africa” who is also the secretary of the Nairobi NVC supporters. Then in the morning we continued our trip to Kisumu, where Evance of the Badilisha Ecovillage Foundtion welcomed us. They invited us to the training. Our first step was to get copies of the training material, at noon we took the bus to the Ferry for 3 hours. As we were delayed we crossed the Gulf with a fishing boat (45 minutes).

My / Our first touching experience was to witness the signing of the contract for buying farmland, to which a generous friend of mine had contributed by a big donation. The next step was buying the material for the fence. A fence is necessary because of free gazing goats. When the material was unloaded it was big joy. The area chief supported this by providing a shed to store the material until today when they start to build the fence. The intention for beginning to grow cereals and vegetables is to feed hungry orphans from a nearby school.

Yesterday I had my frst training especially designed for teachers, together with Christian, who is a teacher in Germany. There were 2 participants, because there were several funerals at the same time. Hopefully today there will be some more. Anyway it was a very inspiring session.

We quite soon got to the topic of discipline. One of the teachers asked how he should be able to maintain discipline as corporal punishment was not allowed any more. In his times the children “belonged” to community and everybody was entitled to punish a child when they did something wrong. Now the kids belong to the family and only the family is entitled for corporal punishment. So how can he maintain discipline when he is only entitled to blame a child or make them clean the yard.

I asked him if he could remember how he had felt back then when he was punished. His answer: ”horrible”. Then I asked him if he thought o revenge at that time. He laughed and said “Yes”. My next question: would you like your students to think of revenge after you punished them. Then we all laughed because it as quite clear that this wouldn’t meet anybody’s needs.

I also already treated some patients, a baby with severe bronchitis, some women with diarrhea, a boy with asthma. I am happy I know acupressure and acupuncture, so I can support people without much chemical medicine which is not available easily.

That’s it for today. Writing this and considering who is going to read it met my need for connection and contribution.

Warmly Irmtraud

Report 2nd week (7.7. – 13.7.2008)

Now the 2nd week is over and I experienced many moving situations. One important issue was the distinction of empathy, sympathy and pity. One of the participants shared a situation when his wife died some years ago and the friend of his son stayed with the family several days after the burial and they even shared the bed. He wanted to know if this was sympathy or empathy.

We ended up in considering this being both: sympathy because he as lost someone who was dear to him and empathy, because he connected with their pain not trying to fix their pain. This example moved me deeply because I experience a very different approach to death in my culture and often feel sad when I see that people try to avoid grief and mourning because my need for community and wholeness is not met. In our daily closing round I hear from the participants that they feel happy to be part of the training because it meets their need learning and growing because they want their lives to become more happy and peaceful. One of the participants said that with NVC he can live more peaceful with his family and then can spread this within the community and from there to Kenya and to the world and thus he wants to learn more about NVC. I felt really warm hearing this.

I also experience frustration, especially around money. We are often requested to donate money, by hungry children, by a husband who can't pay the hospital fee for his wife's delivery. I feel frustrated because I have a need for contribution and am not in a position to meet their need for food and at the same time I have a need for recognition, that means I want to be recognized as a human being and not as someone white with a big purse to pour out the money (which I don't have anyway).

I am so fulfilled and overwhelmed by my experiences here that I don't know where to continue.

We visited two schools and a Pre-School. In general I can say that there is a military discipline. Students have to get up and sit down on command. They recite what teachers tell them in a chorus. Especially in the Pre-School we were welcomed with songs and recitations that didn't seem appropriate for their age (like "we thank our parents for sending us to school"). I had the impression this was made up to get donations from us. I felt sad in this moment because I really want kids to be respected as human beings and not being trained to impress white people to donate money. At the same time I know that I am here only a short time and am not in a position to change things myself.

We took a break for one day to go to Ruma National Park where we saw Giraffes with their young ones walking across the savannah. It was really different to watching them in a zoo!

Coming back to the trainings:

In the beginning we heard from many participants who were already attended last years training that knowing NVC has transformed their lives. I requested them to share an observation of a situation when they reacted differently. I want to share 2 examples I heard, they all are documented and I will transcribe them. This is for me part of measurement for the impact of NVC.

1. one older participant shared a situation during the post-election violence, when he was at a meeting with the chief. There were rumours that groups from other parts of the country would be coming to Rusinga to engage them in demonstrations and building barricades. Even as he felt angry because of how of the votes were counted he suggested not to engage in the demonstrations, because of the violence that might start on Rusinga and building barricades would cut them off too. This contributed to the fact that there was no violence on Rusinga. He stated that before the NVC training he would have acted differently.
2. One woman (a single parent mother) shared a situation with her daughter for whom she had dreamed of a bright future after finishing school. Then the daughter got pregnant and she as considering to bring her to a hospital for an artificial abortion. Then she remembered the NVC training and sat down with her daughter and talked compassionately with her. Then they decided that the daughter would get the baby and then go back to school to finish school. We saw baby at the training.

On Saturday we had another training for teachers. The main issue was about punishment – punishment when students don't do their homework. The next day he would punish again because the pupil didn't do the homework. He shared that he feels somewhat lost about what to do. This was the opportunity to talk about needs, the needs of the teachers for contribution and the needs of the students for autonomy. And to get clear that needs are the cause for all actions – independent if we like them or not. We agreed on the importance of checking the needs when students come without homework. In the closing round one father said; that he now also can see that teachers also have needs, that this session has changed his relationship towards teachers and that in the future he will also check his children's needs. One teacher said: "Now I know children are not born as fools" and the next one said: "we teach them to be fools" . At that point I found important to say that this wouldn't mean to blame himself, that in our domination system we are brought up to live in this consciousness, that he did the best could do in the given situation. A third teacher said, now she understood that NVC can also be lived with children, after the first training she thought this was only to be for adults. Repeatedly I heard: "We Africans.....punish" in a way of blaming themselves, like "we are not so good....."

Hearing this I feel sad because I need connection. I try to empathize and then to explain that the system of punishment and exclusion is part of the domination system in which we live all over the world.

Report 3rd week (14.7. – 20.7.2008)

This report is delayed because there were so many challenges with internet access no broadband anyway, and then I tried to get access for hours and was not successful. I needed a lot of self-empathy, and sadly computers don't seem to react on empathy! I travelled twice to Mbita, the next town, one hour by motorbike, driving slalom around holes in the street (no tarmac), to increase the chance for sending emails. But also there it took me two hours once. So I get to send this report after the end of the 4th week. Last week I was so busy that I didn't get to writing.

Report 3rd week

We continued the training. The main subject during this week was punishment. Can we live without punishment and punishing, how can we keep discipline with out threatening and punishing? The participants realised that it is important to be aware of the needs of both sides and to find solutions concerning the needs. Especially that the party that has more power also expresses their needs instead of demanding.

During the training of the following day one of the participants told us about her experience with one of the orphans she cares for. The young woman is expected to clean the house and especially the kitchen. Repeatedly she didn't do it and when asked again for doing it, she answered that she would do it the following day in the evening nothing had happened. Coming home from the seminar she sat down with the young woman and explored the needs of both of them, especially those of the young woman. There was real connection; they were able to recognise each other with their unmet needs. Today the kitchen was clean. On another day the experience of one of the participants triggered us - the issue was about parents kids – contribution – autonomy. She shared that the stepmother of her husband had not accepted her for years as daughter-in-law. She had told everybody she was too old for her husband (she is maybe some years older than he is); she refused to talk with her She wanted to know how she could react empathetically in a situation like this. We went into a role-play and she was satisfied.

This was a trigger to talk about challenging situations in families. One participant shared that his parents had forced him twice not to marry a woman he loved, even the one with whom he had a child. Even after he had married the women they had presented him, they keep criticising him.

In a role-play we tried to find out how he could have empathised with himself and his parents in this situation. He could see their needs and at the same time he was still deep pain and grief because his need for autonomy had not been met, his need for integrity (reliability) concerning his partner and their child.

In the end he said that a marriage should bring happiness and celebration to the family and that therefore it would necessary that all members of the family would consent. And he had learned that it is possible to learn to love someone in the course of time. Wednesday the 16th of July was the official launching of the office of Badilisha, the organisation that had invited us. Many people from the surrounding villages and also from Mbita, the town next to Rusinga Island had come. Kids from the schools on the island performed plays and songs. We were introduced to the auditorium. There were many speeches. The Area Chief and even the District Officer (both appointed people with administrative functions).

I will finish here to get the report out.

Report 3rd week (21.7. – 27.7.2008)

Andreas arrived from Darmstadt, Germany (my hometown) to document the training and the life of people on Rusinga. Marian had arrived from the US the week before; she had been here last August with Jan van Koert from the Netherlands, and she had been in ongoing contact with the group on Rusinga. She had especially cared for and supported orphans in a pre-school. We had planned a good-by-party for Friday with both groups, the beginners and the advanced learners. Participants of the beginners group had bought and prepared food, bought beverages, and decorated the room. I appreciate very much how they handled it; they had sociocratically elected the people in charge of each task, and these had looked for supporters. Using sociocratic election had brought much appreciation for many of them.

My most vivid memory of this week was the sociocratic election of a Representative who would accompany Heike and me to join the NVC training in Nairobi and make contact with the NVC enthusiasts there to start a hopefully ongoing networking effort in Kenya. We started Thursday afternoon after the training. In the first round, many voted for James. Then, in alignment with the sociocratic election process, I asked if someone wanted to change their vote after having heard the others' arguments before going into the consent round. All but three voted for James. One person, Ruth, said when she voted she didn't know it was possible to vote for herself, so she changed her vote and named herself.

I proposed James for consent because he had also proposed himself, and I guessed from the earlier votes that participants would consent to his election. There were three paramount objections. Then I proposed Ruth because a man had been elected in the beginners group, and I thought it would be helpful to also have a female representative. I told the group that I was confident that any of the remaining candidates had adequate skills to meet the responsibilities of this role.

James and Solomon still had paramount objections. James based his argument on the fact that Ruth had already committed to several projects on the Badilisha Board (the organisation that had invited us), and he was concerned that adding the responsibilities of the Representative might be more than Ruth would be able to do with ease and joy. He explained that she was to go with some other women to Kisumu, a town three hours distant, on behalf of the Badilisha Women Empowerment Project to explore how the women of Rusinga could generate an income; she had arranged accommodations for her group and had already connected with some women who were making and selling their handicrafts. In addition, she was to run the HIV/AIDS department of Badilisha. Solomon agreed with the arguments James made and added that James, too, was already a member of the Badilisha Board.

So I gave it another try and proposed Maurice; I repeated that I was convinced that any of the three would be able to fulfil the responsibilities of the role. Again there were paramount objections, mostly from the women in the group who wanted to elect Ruth. I felt helpless and expressed it; it was getting late and dark. (There are no street lamps, and they had no torches help them see the way home.) So we agreed to continue the process during our meeting on Friday. I asked them again to be aware of all three being equally skilled candidates and to consider a different vote for the next day.

On Friday, we abbreviated the training somewhat because we had planned our goodbye party. Before we resumed the election process, I explained again what is meant by paramount objection. As I was starting the election process, a young teacher named Meshak asked how it came to be that I decided about which objection would be a paramount objection since I wouldn't be a member of the group. I invited him to facilitate the election process; he and the group consented. He asked for votes, we listened to the arguments, and Meshak proposed Ruth. The consent round ended again with three paramount objections. Then James withdrew his vote for himself, and the other one who had named James changed his vote to Ruth.

In the next consent round there was still one paramount objection from Solomon. He repeated that he would value more sharing of the work. The facilitator of the election felt helpless, and so did I. Some mentioned that the group members who were on the Badilisha Board seemed to be using power over, and they wondered why we had even suggested an election. They wanted more autonomy for the group.

I feared that the whole group would start to fight with each other and that I would create enemies instead of contributing to peace. Then I remembered NEEDS. I asked Ruth and Solomon for the needs they were trying to meet by staying with their votes. Ruth explained that she had been working with Badilisha from the very beginning and that she saw serving as Representative as the opportunity to contribute to the growth of the group that she had been longing for. Solomon expressed concern about maintaining a balance of power between Ruth and the other members of the group.

After I heard these needs, I was able to come up with a solution. I thought perhaps Solomon would consent to Ruth as Representative if she had fewer other responsibilities. I asked Ruth if she could agree to hand over the leadership responsibility for the Women's Empowerment Project during the trip to Kisumu so that someone else could report back to the Badilisha Board about their findings in Kisumu and she could continue on to Nairobi with the NVC group. She agreed to this solution, and so did Solomon, so Ruth became the Representative with unanimous consent. I felt deeply happy and relieved to have found a solution to this challenge based on needs! And so did everybody else.

Eventually we had a great good-by party!