

**Let's Travel Kenya: Empowerment Through Travel Project**  
**Nairobi, Kenya**  
**Tufts University**  
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The main goal of the project Let's Travel Kenya was to expose participants to people from different cultures and ethnicities, therefore encouraging friendship and building a strong diverse community that transcends tribes and language. The project also sought to equip participants with leadership skills and instill values like independence and courage that would inspire to think beyond their communities and dream bigger than their capabilities. The project was fully funded by Davis Projects for Peace. (b)

The project was inspired by my own experiences living in Kenya, and the exposure I have gained due to travelling and interacting with different cultures. I was born and raised in a rural community in Western Kenya that was very culturally and ethnically homogeneous. I first travelled outside Kenya in high school when I was a Cultural Exchange student in the US. The cultural exchange program enabled me to gain a kind of exposure that made me believe that the world was my oyster. More importantly, I made friends with people who identified with different races, gender, sex, ethnicities and spoke different languages. Let's Travel Kenya was born out of a drive to provide poor, talented and smart Kenyan students with the same opportunities I have been accorded. The project was not only a chance to create diverse spaces and communities that celebrate diversity and encourage peace, but it was also an avenue to provide mentorship and leadership training to the participants. (d)

The 2007 post-election crisis was a devastating result of the tribal and ethnic divisions that can divide Kenya. Apart from the colonial and political history of tribalism, the geographic demographics of Kenya are largely based on tribal lines. Outside of the large urbanized cities like Kenya's capital Nairobi, people are born, grow up, and exist primarily with members of their own tribes. From a young age, many Kenyans are taught to think of "me and my tribe" – an attitude which leads to corruption and continued economic underdevelopment. Leaders and employers select people to fill state institutions and private companies based on tribe rather than skills and experiences. By investing in community projects targeted towards youth and children, they can start to create friendships that bridge the gaps irrespective of geography and current divisive political sentiment. (e)

I chose to work with Alliance Girls High School because of their history and experience working with students from all over Kenya. I am a former student of the school and know that as a Kenyan national school, they typically admit the best students ensuring a balance in admission of students from all Kenyan counties. They displayed a strong commitment to building on, and celebrating the shared attributes of their students irrespective of differing ethnicities, tribes, languages, religions and/or socio-economic status. I believed that Alliance Girls would immensely help my project in our objective of creating a future Kenyan generation that is committed to peace and conflict resolution. (f)

Working in our host site with the student participants was incredibly inspiring. It was evident how much the students were passionate about peace-building, cross-cultural learning and mentorship. Unfortunately, most have been limited by lack of access to resources and proper support systems. In our meetings and conversations with teachers, it was enlightening to learn about the risks facing young Kenyans after completing high school education. We understood the complex community backgrounds these students came from, such as likelihood of being recruited to rebel militia groups or dropping out of school due to financial difficulties. During the project, we had a computer research session; and taught students the basics of computers. About half the participants had never operated a computer before. The session exposed them to the availability of information and resources that exists within the internet and sparked an interest in digital literacy. All the project stakeholders welcomed us and were committed to making the project a success, despite the challenges we faced. (g)

About a week until the main camp began, we encountered a major obstacle. Our host site informed us that we needed official approval from the Ministry of Education for us to carry out any programs with high school students. We were told that the national government had recently changed its regulations and policies. In order for the program to proceed, we would have to submit official written documents and go

through a weeks-long approval process. As I later came to understand, the issues cropped up when the host representative that we had been working with left. During the transition, it wasn't necessarily clear who we would be working with at the host site which led to miscommunication regarding approval for our project. We managed to speak at length with the head of our host site, who clarified matters with all involved parties.

This whole issue was extremely nerve-racking. Everything had been going smoothly before, and we were worried that the project was not going to work as intended. The volunteer team members remained determined, and came up with preemptive options had our host site pulled out. We declared that irrespective of any challenges, bumps or changes, we would ensure the project worked excellently. This whole issue enlightened us about the systematic bureaucracies prevalent in the Kenya. We were reminded how important it is to keep close continuous contact with stakeholders when working on a project like this. (h)

We decided to recruit program participants by reaching out to teachers, parents and guardians via Whatsapp, social media and word-of-mouth. We asked them to identify students who were from a humble background, had limited exposure and who they believed would really benefit from the program. Recently there have been numerous reports of Whatsapp being used to spread disinformation, rumors and other fake news. Unfortunately, our recruiting efforts were also subjected to the same distrustful treatment. Though we reached out to teachers and parents directly and introduced ourselves, some thought that the program was a scam as it did not require any fees. Thankfully, we worked closely with the host site and our networks in Kenya to prove ourselves. During the camp, we had participants from various counties including: Marsabit, Kisii, Machakos, Makueni, Kiambu, Vihiga, and Uasin Gishu among others. Apart from unavoidable cultural communication differences, some students were very shy and introverted at the beginning of the camp. As the week went on, everyone became more comfortable and immersed and there was more cohesion within the group. (i)

I think of peace as a state of societal friendship and lack of violence between different individuals and parties. In a peaceful society, members recognize and appreciate the shared attributes they have as humans. A peaceful society is able to celebrate its diversity irrespective of the differences that may exist in terms of race, language, gender, sex, ethnicities, or tribes. A peaceful society and community recognizes that in order to prosper, every person should be empowered, valued and not left behind. (j)

Our project contributes to peace by creating networks and a friendship cohort that consists of individuals interested in each other's stories and committed to celebrates diversity. Our project consisted of trainings of conflict management and mediation styles that participants to solve conflicts in their families, schools and communities. In the long-term, our project will break the ruthless cycle of poverty by empowering these individuals to relentlessly pursue opportunities that transcend their geographical boundaries. The participants experienced Kenya's beauty and diversity and received mentorship and guidance from people in different careers and institutions. (k)

This project has taught me how important it is to support young people, and equip them with necessary skills to excel in their future lives. Hate and other vices (tribalism, nepotism etc) are not natural human traits, rather they are learned behaviors and a result of nurture. When youth are empowered and exposed, they are able to ensure the growth of society and contribute positively. The project has also reaffirmed the importance of travel and intercultural exchange. (l)

Conducting this project has imparted me with skills on project creation and management, budget management, and empowerment initiatives. Most importantly, it has taught me how impactful it is to give back to society and create opportunities to educate and empower others.

*"By providing young people with the opportunity for travel, we can enable them to learn, experience different cultures and recognize the world that is beyond them. Through my project, I have learnt we can always find aspects that connect us as humans irrespective of our different identities." – Rebecca Musiega.*

