

Title of Project: **Nimechill Initiative**
Country where project took place: **Kenya**
Sponsoring College: **Cornell University**

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Section I: Narrative

Project Goals

With sex education being a taboo topic and a social stigma in Kilifi County schools, 'Nimechill' initiative aimed to raise awareness about early pregnancy cases in Kilifi County. 'Nimechill' is a (Swahili-English slang meaning "I have chilled" or "I am abstaining"). The strategy here involves making abstinence a "cool", smart and responsible choice and highlighting the effects of irresponsible, teenage pregnancy among girls.

Funding

Apart from the Davis Project for Peace grant, we did not receive any additional external funding for this project. We were supported by our families, friends and well-wishers who were very hospitable during our stay in Mombasa.

Our project budget was well within the limitation of the grant, leaving us with some extra funding. Through thorough research in the Mombasa area and with our contacts in the Education Ministry, we came in touch with a young entrepreneur: Ziyaan Virji. His initiative is a project called Affordable and Accessible Sanitation for Women, and it aims to create awareness about menstrual hygiene in areas of Kenya, such as Kilifi county, where this discussion of this topic is considered taboo. They create and distribute organic and reusable sanitary products, and host workshops in various schools across East Africa and India. We contributed some of our budget to his project and requested that it be used in efforts to reach students within Kilifi County.

How the Idea Came About

Contextually, sex education is a taboo topic within most homes, and the lack of awareness regarding this issue becomes prevalent in schools. This presents a challenge for girls who are between the ages of 14 and 18, who are mostly unaware of the consequences of situations they might find themselves in. Therefore, we thought of having a youth-run event that would be for our peers in Kilifi County. By encouraging conversation between similar age groups, we would create a platform where there would be an increased chance of understanding, freedom to raise questions, and an environment where we could learn about ourselves without any fear of judgement from other members of our community. In efforts to tackle stigma of HIV and issues regarding sexual reproductive health earlier this year, a report and plan of action targeting adolescents and young people. Honorary Koitaba, the a county Health executive in Mombasa claimed that: "strengthening the capacities of stakeholders in education will be of paramount importance in addressing stigma and discrimination while improving access to information and treatment." We thought that empowering students, and encouraging the teachers to be part of future discussions regarding reproductive health could help encourage students to seek help when necessary, and to learn to be safe in extenuating circumstances.

Why This Issue Exists

To the best of our understanding, deeply-rooted cultural beliefs have placed a blanket of stigma over discussions about reproductive health. It is not uncommon to hear of families who do not speak of menstrual cycles or pregnancy with their female children, let alone sexual intercourse. Tied in with the widespread illiteracy of the adult generation, this issue is a very challenging matter for youth in Kenya who are struggling to understand themselves, but do not have the liberty to ask questions or talk about it. The general lack of awareness about the importance of creating safe environments for girls to ask questions, and to discuss their priorities and goals, leads to societies where the youth have no guidance, and may make poor decisions.

Why We Chose Kilifi

We chose to work in Kilifi because it is one of the most affected regions in the coastal part of Kenya. Most cases of early teenage pregnancies in 2016 were reports from Kilifi, so the county government called upon any organizations to help with the sensitization process among the youth. Latest statistics from the County Children Department in Kilifi, Kenya indicate that over 13,000 girls between 15-19 years are expecting babies, while some, from as young as 14 years have already given birth. Shockingly, during the 2018 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, many expectant girls sat for the national exam while others in the hospitals before and after delivering .

What it Was Like

Kilifi county is one of the most beautiful areas in Southern Kenya. It was amazing to experience a new environment, different people, with slight differences in culture that we have learned to appreciate. In some parts of Kilifi, the homesteads are spread out and far from one another. We got to experience and learn the importance of village elders and the administration networks within local communities. Because they knew the area so well, they helped mobilize the youth from around the county by making phone calls, spreading the news through word of mouth at community gatherings and through announcements at religious congregations in local mosques and churches. Our most valuable contacts included: Mr. Benson Sylvester, Mr. Rashid, Mr. Matano and a select group of *bodaboda* (motorcycle taxi) businessmen that were very helpful in the whole process.

The Moment When We Doubted our Success

The Kenyan government has a rigid stance about not having any meetings or events at public schools during the school break. Unfortunately, that included a large chunk of July and August, so there was a point when we thought that the project was not going to happen. The principals that we were dealing with were also hesitant to host our workshop and discussion at their schools, because they would be held responsible for breaking rules. Although they supported our cause and wanted us to run the project in their schools, they were unwilling to bend the law, justifiably so.

Because of the gap in time between our efforts to mobilize the youth in Kilifi county, and when school reopened, we were worried about a low turnout for the rest of our awareness campaign. In addition to that, the county is rather large and the communities we were going to be working with in Rabai, Kilifi area are spread out and live far from one another, posing another possible logistical challenge. We were able to condense the sessions into the first week of school, in late August.

Challenges with Communication

Our biggest challenge was bringing together the youths and students from around Rabai, Kilifi area because schools were closed for the second term break. Because of this we had to advertise and use different elders and bodaboda workers to help mobilize the youths around the area. Noting that the government wasn't willing to allow any functions to take place in the school compounds, we were also forced to make changes on the location that we were going to run the events. To add on, there was a lot of delay in the completion of the Query/suggestion boxes that we were going to give out to the intended schools.

How We Define Peace

To us, peace is a state in which people are understanding of each others' differences; where there is goodwill and harmony in the society. Peace is not only a state of being with an absence of violence or hatred between individuals, but also a mindset of understanding and acceptance of one another.

How our Project Contributes to Peace

Because every Kenyan society is interconnected, our different values and lack of acceptance of those who are dissimilar to us can affect the harmony of a society. We wanted the girls to think of themselves as a support network for each other, not only despite their differences, but in spite of them. We wanted them to remember to draw on each other's strength and talents to collaboratively work towards a positive lifestyle for themselves. We hope that they were able to understand that although there has been a history of social stigma behind sexual and reproductive health, that they are poised to change that for themselves, and for the younger generations in their community. Hopefully we have successfully reminded them that seeking help or advice from teachers and health professionals will not result in them being isolated within their village, or create disrespect for their family, but will actually be helpful in solving their personal distress, or confusion.

How This Project Impacted Us

This project has helped us understand that each person can take a step to impact his/her community positively. We were deeply touched when many of the elders approached us to let us know that they were happy to learn about our sessions. They were proud that local youth were taking initiative to educate each other on matters such as adolescent challenges, early teenage pregnancy, the importance of education as well as the importance of placing personal value on our physical well-being. This project has helped us understand that when we come together we are likely to help find solutions to the problems we face. We learned about typical family discussions in Kilifi, how they would differ from discussions we have engaged in, and were grateful for all the knowledge we were exposed to from our schools and communities.

Personal Statements and Valuable Lessons

"As young people we should start taking responsibility for our actions and not wait to be told what to do, if we see a rot in our society, we should always aim to change the situation."

- Asterix Hassan.

The Nimechill Initiative helped remind me that as youth, we have a valuable stake in our community. We are at an impasse in life where we can begin to make decisions for ourselves, form our own opinions and set goals. We can always benefit from sharing ideas and learning from one another to make informed choices that reflect a better society.

Section II: Photographs

