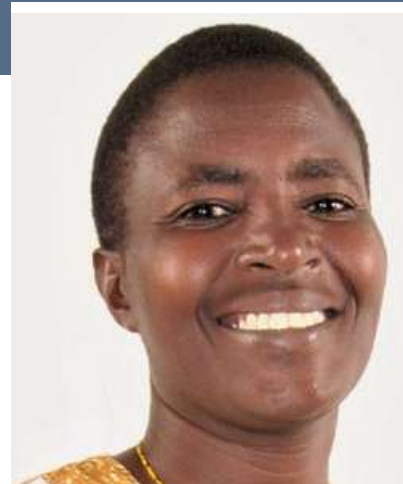




„Listening to the cry of the people“

Elizabeth Kanini Kimau ist das, was man eine „Friedensstifterin“ nennen kann. Vor fast 15 Jahren ging sie in den Norden Kenias, um dort über den Konflikt zwischen verschiedenen ethnischen Gruppen zu forschen. Sie blieb dort und wurde zu einer Akteurin des Wandels im Konflikt zwischen den Stämmen der Rendille und Borana: Sie unterrichtete Kinder, klärte sie über die Wurzeln der Gewalt auf und veränderte langsam das Bewusstsein der jungen Menschen. Sie pflanzte „Samen des Friedens“, wie sie es nennt, und hilft den Stämmen, sich selbst für Frieden einzusetzen. Im Interview mit Amosinternational erzählte Elizabeth Kanini Kimau, wie sie mit Kriegern Frieden schafft, warum die Bemühungen von Nichtregierungsorganisationen oft keine dauerhafte Wirkung haben, wie sich der Klimawandel auf die Schulbildung von Mädchen auswirkt und welche Projekte sie für die Zukunft geplant hat.



Elizabeth Kanini Kimau

Amosinternational: In the year 2009 you were a student of peace studies and came from the eastern part of Kenya to the north to do research on the conflict between the seminomad groups Rendille and Borana. You stayed to bring peace. What happened?

Elizabeth Kanini Kimau: When I went there first with a team of the Justice and Peace Commission from Tangaza University College, what we found there were over ten different ethnic groups living there, competing over the question where the border is. There was a lot of violence there and people dying. The Bishop of that area told us: “The situation is very challenging and people are afraid to come here because of insecurity. Or they ask for money to help us and we don’t have money.” I told the bishop: “I would like to come here and offer my services to support

the diocese.” Then I went to stay there for two months. There was so much violence everywhere, so I focused on the conflict between the Borana and Rendille. I stayed in a very small village at first. The primary teacher ran away and told me to run away too because of all the insecurity. But I started teaching the children. When I told them to draw, they drew people killing one another. They knew only violence. When we talked about this topic, some started to cry, saying things like “My brother was killed here.” Going around the school, they were showing me bullet holes. Later I started living in the village, sleeping where the people slept, eating the same food. When I was sitting outside, many children came to me and cried: “Please teach us!” Out of this experience, I decided to stay. They deserved my service and my skills. That is how I began to stay

there: listening to the cries of the people and the cry of the bishop.

What was the root cause of the conflict, violence and destruction between the Rendille and Borana? When and how did their conflict start?

This is a protracted conflict. Initially, there was a conflict between the pastoralists communities. They were raiding each other, but never used to kill anyone. They used speers and arrows. Women and children were not killed. But the conflict prolonged. Climate change came and some of the area became desert. Both the Rendille and Borana live on the foot of Marsabit mountain, the only place in that area that can be cultivated. So the initial reasons for the conflict were pastures and water as well as cows – for to get married they need to possess cows and

steal them from the other tribe, their “enemy”. Nowadays there is a commercialization of raiding. Business people raid cows and take them to Nairobi for slaughtering.

In addition, politics are part of the conflict now: In temporary conflicts, the enemies are close to one another and fight because of their long legacy of hatred and enmity. Politicians use this kind of prolonged conflict as their campaign tool.

The conflict is now one that has been handed over from generation to generation. If the father of a man from one tribe was killed, the tribe is supposed to revenge that by killing someone from the other tribe. Young boys are brought up by social norms like: “Your father was killed, so when you are grown up, you are going to practice revenge.” This “revenge mission” triggers violence again and again.

Then there is hatred and enmity. Children growing up already know the other community is “the enemy”. In that way of thinking, when you kill an enemy, you become a hero. People just attack one another. The trauma that comes with this kind of contributes to the violence as well.

A toxic ideal of masculinity seems to fuel the conflict. It seems very hard to change these ways of thinking. What is the role of the warriors, the “Morans”?

Morans are usually found in the Borana and Samburu communities. They are young boys who spend all day long fully armed in the bushes. Morans do not interact with women, they are not allowed to eat food cooked by women. They don’t go to school, cater live stocks and plan raids as well as actions of revenge. I call them “the forgotten people”, because the government and NGOs hardly manage to reach them. I started creating a relationship with the Morans. During the night I started teaching the so-called shepherd girls and boys. These girls are usually given to the Morans as their wives and are

the ones who praise them as heroes. When the Morans heard, that these girls are learning to read and write, they came looking for me and said: “We also want to learn.” Therefore, I also started to teach the Morans at night after they had brought back the livestock. By doing this, I was able to build a relationship with the Morans and especially their key fighters. I looked out for them and they became my friends. Then they took me to the other Morans in the bush. They started to trust me. With the help of a friend, I trained the Morans. This really helped them to change their perspective. Because I managed to enter their environment and create a relationship with them, even though being a woman they accepted me. They started coming secretly to me to tell me who the key killers are. We came together, without me ever blaming them for what they had done. This way we managed to get to a point where they even started preaching peace to other Morans.

How long did it take you to reach to that point?

You cannot do this process in hurry. This kind of peacebuilding is very powerful. It is a very slow way of bonding with the people. If you rush, you leave them behind. NGOs have money and are given a timeline. They are told to deliver a report by the end



Peacebuilding takes time. If you go slowly, you walk with the people towards their own transformation

of the year. Because of that they try to do things very quickly. This often does not work out. If you go slowly in working with the people, you walk with them towards their own transformation. Their world is very different from our world; that is why many things take a long time. I went there in 2009 and today I am still there, but most changes took place in 2015 and

2016. Change takes time but when it happens, it is incredibly powerful.

In what way do politicians fuel the conflict?

The ethnic group will elect someone who knows how to fight, so that that person can support them in fighting their enemy, e.g. with guns. They want someone so powerful who can give them back a piece of land that had been stolen by the other community. This fuels the conflict. I tried to create awareness among the tribes so they realized: The more they are fighting, the more people die. I remember something very powerful: One Moran told me he was called by the Morans in town and told to kill the Rendilles. But he had already been part of a budding relationship between the two communities and refused. Therefore he replied: “No. Why are you telling me to go and kill the Rendille? If you want them dead, kill them yourselves!”

You are not a member of the Rendille or the Borana tribes. How did you manage to build trust in your relationship with them? How did you get them to listen to you?

In the beginning, I did not go there to talk about peace. I started to build relationships with the grassroots people. When the priest was celebrating mass, I always went with him to greet people. The women as the ones who go to church started to know me. I told them: I am willing to teach your children, if you give me the food you eat and a place to sleep. They went to inform their elders. The people trust and respect the church but doubted that I was able to teach their children. The priest told them: She teaches big groups of people, even in South Sudan. Then they accepted me and I stayed where they were staying, slept where they were sleeping, and ate their food. When I was still with them after a couple of months, they noticed I was different from other people who



Elizabeth Kanini Kimau im Gespräch mit den Stammesältesten.

had tried to work with them. I became close to them and they started accepting me. That kind of acceptance enabled the people to trust me. Talking to them, even when addressing the elders, I used a method of talking in analogies and asking questions.

The seminomadic lifestyle is long overcome. What alternatives are there for the Rendille and Borona and how do you teach them those?

Education is key. It increases the choices in life. In the beginning there was only one girl in school, now there are hundreds. I talked about the importance of education and that motivated more and more to join the classes. I tried to convince the parents that education can support their children and help them in the future. Because depending only on livestock is a very fragile way of life. I also started teaching them agriculture and how to use the fertile land at the foot of the mountain. There was so much joy after I planted some tomatoes and spinach. We had a very rich harvest. They even started selling the vegetables. I also took some Morans who never went to school and did not have any education

for driving classes, so they could make money by driving. That is how slowly they started changing.

How does your faith help you in your work and influence your endeavors for peace? How do you teach the young generation to strive for peace?

Everything I do is based on my faith. Without faith, I don't think I can survive even a day. When I first heard the cry of the bishop about people dying, when I went to that village and found children crying, they were human beings who needed my help, my brothers and sisters.


I was born into a very poor family and was the only one of my siblings who went to secondary school. Misereor and Missio payed my school fees. I said to myself: Education has lifted me from poverty. So with the help of education I also can change the lives of others.

Rebuilding relationships is very powerful in peacebuilding. I asked the Rendille children in the beginning: What are you going to do or be when you are grown up? And the answer was: "I am going to kill Borana." After I brought the councils of the elders to-

gether, I also started bringing children from the two different ethnic groups together to play with each other. By this, they were able to build relationships. Now they started activities even in my absence. They pray, eat and play together, so step by step the enmity is shutting down.

Can you tell us about the Gadaa system that the Borana people use?

The Borana community is organized the way a government is organized. They have a president and different levels of leadership down to the grassroots. If there is any problem or mistake within the community, e.g. theft or murder, there is a punishment. If the leaders on the grassroots level are not able to solve a certain problem, it goes up to higher authorities until it can be

 If people as agents of change work for their own peace, it will be continuous

solved. The highest authority is the president who lives in Ethiopia as the majority of the Borana does. If you do not listen to the higher authority, you are not a Borana anymore and never will be again. This way of solving conflict applies only to the ethnic group of the Borana. The Rendille have their own different way of solving conflicts. There might be some similarities. The funny thing is: Killing is forbidden in both communities. Even if you kill an enemy, there are some cleansing rituals which you have to undergo to meet with the rest of the community again. But because of the enmity they have continued to kill.

How can you make sure that your achievements in bringing peace to the Rendille and Borana will be long-lasting and permanent?

This conflict is protracted and going on for a very long time. The only thing



I did was planting seeds of peace in that region. Now I am working on educating members of the tribes to be “agents of change”. If people work for their own peace, it will be continuous. NGOs come for a limited period of time to plant seeds and then leave. And because there is no continuation, everything dries up. But when people take responsibility and start working for their own peace, this peace is sustainable. Now, even in my absence, people continue to work for peace for themselves. They even started to teach the NGOs how this approach will help to bring peace. It was not me doing the work, I was only creating a space where they could do it themselves.

The majority of people are grassroots people. They are the ones who suffer under the violence and kill one another. They understand many things. But for many years they had been taken as illiterate. People come and start training them about peace instead of listening to them. The grassroots people are the experts for peace. If we create spaces where they can work for their own peace, it will be sustainable.

In the last years, there were massive killings in the Marsabit region. They were the result of a conflict between mostly the tribes of the Borana and the Gabra. One chief said one day: We cannot continue like this! So they sat down together in the bushes and started working for peace among themselves. Without money, without NGO. And they stopped a big violence which has killed a lot of people when neither the government nor the NGOs were able to. Just by having several meetings, eating and talking together. The other chiefs started to do the same in their own villages. That is how the Marsabit region came out of this episode of massive killings.

You are the founder of a grassroots peace forum. What exactly do you do there? What impact does civil society in Kenya have when it comes to peacemaking?

I founded an NGO in 2016. I actually had no intention to do so in the beginning. After some time I noticed, some NGOs were coming to North Kenya, writing proposals and getting a lot of money. One NGO started to support me with little money for one year and then wanted to make my work their project. But the people wanted to work with me, not with them. After that I decided to found my own NGO to put my work on a legal foundation and to avoid some of these problems I was facing.

The organizations of civil society are contributing a lot to peacebuilding. However, I observed some of their challenges: They work with a time line, but this kind of peace work is not compatible with a timeline. I noticed that they get a lot of pressure from their donors. Some NGOs ask things of people they are not ready for, like going for a meeting or digging a well. But they need to spend the money and give a report by a particular date. As much as they are willing to make an impact on the grassroots level, you might find that some of them also come with a methodology. We must be aware that the type of conflict in Africa has changed. Nevertheless, international institutions have continued to use old methodologies. That is not making an impact. Another problem is that some people have gone to university and have gotten top-level positions in NGOs but are disconnected from the grassroots people. They only perceive them as recipients of information and think: “If we teach them peace, they will stop fighting.” That is not how it works. The theories learned

in university have to be “translated”. That is a big challenge civil society is facing. If you force only methodologies on grassroots people, it might calm down the conflict for a short time until it flares up again. For the peace to last it is important to listen to what the grassroots people themselves have to say.

What are your next concrete steps on your peace journey?

I want to focus on two things: First, I want to keep working with the Morans and journey with them, especially their key fighters. Because of their role as warriors they are triggering violence and conflict. They are also hardly reached by many organizations because they spend their life in the depth of the bush.

Secondly, I want to work against violence against female children. This is a violence that is often forgotten. For the background: Climate change has killed many livestock. But the life of the pastoralist communities depends on livestock. Girls used to be send to school. But because of the drought inflicted by climate change, the girls were send home again. Their fathers were unable to pay for the school fees and married them off. When the livestock dies, the only hope are raids to restock, or: to give away their own daughter instead of cows, restocking through giving away girls ... Sometimes young girls are married off to old men as their fourth or fifth wife. Recently we rescued a 16-year-old girl from being married. I want to continue saving and educating as many girls as possible.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Schwarz, Münster