



Zizi Afrique  
Foundation

# Zizi Impact

Issue 6: May 2024



## Greetings from Zizi Afrique Foundation

---

In this edition of Zizi Impact, we are delighted to share with you how we continue to build on our past work for greater impact in ensuring all children learn and thrive, through the research and evidence, advocacy and partnerships, and innovations for improved practice pillars. Under the research pillar, we introduce to you two new projects i.e the Future of Work (FoW) and Early Childhood Development (ECD). Under the innovations for improved practice pillar we also introduce the Learning Journey with Schools (LJS) Initiative. We also share updates on how Zizi Afrique Foundation (ZAF) shaped education conversations at the global level.

We are also glad to share with you some exciting news! Our 2023 Annual Report is out. In this report, we reflect on how we unleashed the power of collaboration to enhance collective impact in education in Kenya and beyond. As we enumerate our achievements in 2023, we look back with pride and gratitude that your unwavering support and commitment has been the foundation for our success and progress.

Lastly, we introduce the staff who recently joined the ZAF team and a new series on staff profiles, where we will feature one staff per edition. In this edition, we feature ZAF's Executive Director, Dr. John Mugo as he shares his story 'From *Ndiruku* to the world'.

Thank you for your continued support and we look forward to more impactful collaborations and partnership.

Happy reading!

**Sam & Victoria**

## In this edition of Zizi Impact, read about.....

How ZAF is collaborating with partners to establish a dynamic labour information system for the youth in Mombasa, Kenya.	3
How the Greening TVETs initiative is creating opportunities for women and youth through value-chain training.	3
Unlocking data for more data users in Education.	3
Using community engagement and involvement as a catalyst for improved transition to secondary school.	3
Taking ALiVE to the classroom: Teacher-led Assessment Tool Development in Kenya.	4
Towards improved Teacher Educators Curricula in Kenya and Tanzania.	5
ALiVE celebrates strengthened partnership with Government Institutions.	5
Harnessing the power of co-creation to foster life skills and values in Kenya.	5
Building up on the gains of Parental Empowerment and Engagement (PE&E) work to ensure no child is left behind.	6
Keeping the children of Kirinyaga reading.	6
My village project registers 250 youth to support children in literacy and numeracy.	6
ZAF learning on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) space.	6
ZAF continues to influence the Whole Youth Development Agenda.	7
ZAF hosts Tenda Wema initiative scholars for a mentorship in Nairobi.	7
ZAF continued to shape global conversations by participating in various conferences.	8
New Staff	9
Recent events in photos.	10
Upcoming Event	11
Embracing Wellness: A Glimpse into ZAF's Sports Initiatives.	13
Staff Profile	14

## How ZAF is collaborating with partners to establish a dynamic labour information system for the youth in Mombasa, Kenya.

The Future of Work (FoW) initiative aims to set up a surveillance mechanism that produces and uses data instantly to bolster youth's access to jobs and skills. Piggy-backing on the on-going work by the Global Development Incubator (GDI) and the Swahili Pot Hub, the initiative will (a) prioritize a few promising sectors that have the potential to produce hundreds of thousands of jobs in Mombasa (b) set up a research mechanism, and (c) use data as a connector between youth, employers and the broader policy and training ecosystem. The outcome of this initiative is threefold: 1. youth will access information and seek skilling in areas of relevance, 2. employers will access youth with the right skills, and 3. the training institutions will access information and support to continuously upgrade training based on skills demand. This initiative kicked off in March 2024, and is currently undergoing process of locating, collating, and using available data to create models to inform the process.

## How the Greening TVETs initiative is creating opportunities for women and youth through value-chain training.

During this quarter, a series of impactful activities were undertaken under the Greening TVETs (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) Initiative. This ranged from conducting a midline study, to engaging stakeholders and participating in global events. ZAF's commitment to empowering individuals with sustainable skills and knowledge is truly inspiring, and her involvement in the national curriculum validation, highlights her dedication to enhancing vocational training across Kenya.

## Unlocking data for more data users in Education.

The Unlocking Data initiative is part of the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, (KIX) Project, which aims to revolutionize the utilization and accessibility of data within education systems in Kenya, Malawi and Cameroon. It also identifies critical data gaps, addresses pressing research questions, and fosters vibrant communities of learning. The initiative's aim is to empower policymakers and researchers by enhancing their capacity to access and utilize Foundational Learning data and to champion for equitable and inclusive data practices. Despite being in its preparatory phase, the initiative has made significant strides through the establishment of National and Pan-African communities of learning and knowledge mobilization.

In unlocking the potential of education data processes, the initiative seeks to drive positive change and innovation within education systems.

Through the initiative ZAF is partnering with three organizations to improve education quality around the world. These organizations include the Centre for Education Research and Training (CERT) at the University of Malawi, Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA), EdTech Hub, and Effective Basic Services (eBASE) located in Cameroon. Our joint efforts will focus on developing innovative solutions and strategies to enhance educational experiences of students, teachers, and administrators.

## Using community engagement and involvement as a catalyst for improved transition to secondary school.

In September 2022, ZAF entered a collaborative initiative with the Ministry of Education (Directorate of Secondary Education) to strengthen evidence-use and community accountability initiatives for 100% transition to secondary school. Quarter one of 2024 marked a significant milestone as the initiative got to test a community accountability intervention, targeting the strengthening of 100% transition drivers.



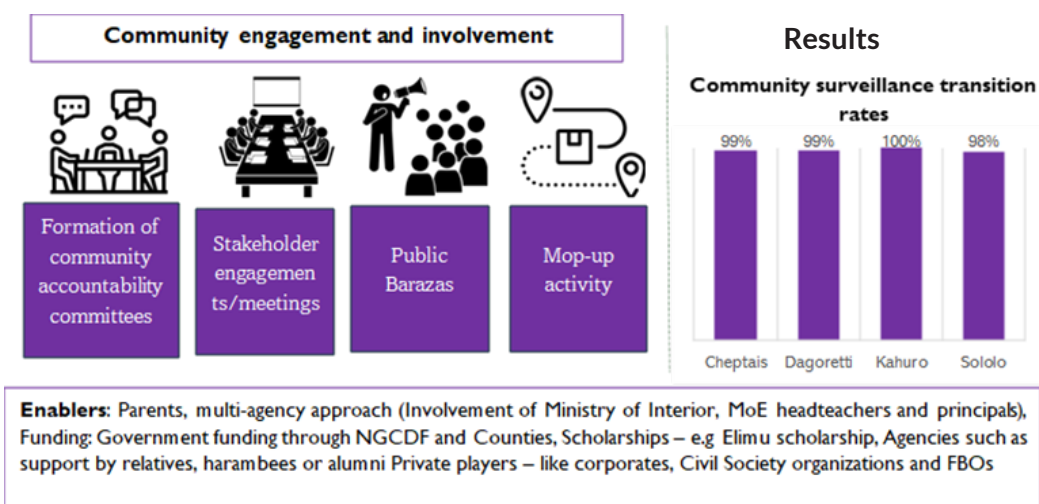
Community engagement on the 100% transition in Sasur sub-location (Cheptais) in Bungoma County.

The initiative has been engaged with local communities, fostering a collaborative environment to amplify efforts influencing the transition from primary to secondary education. A key step in this endeavor was the formation of Four Community Accountability Committees, strategically placed to ensure inclusive participation and to facilitate robust partnerships for effective knowledge and information sharing among the different stakeholders within the community.

Additionally, the initiative convened four key stakeholder meetings across 4 sub-counties namely: Kahuro, Sololo, Cheptais and Dagoretti, drawing over 200 participants. These meetings served as catalysts for establishing transition champions, raising awareness, and fostering commitment to supporting transition guidelines among stakeholders. Notably, they provided a platform for assessing the current transition status and refining mobilization strategies.

The initiative’s commitment to community engagement was further enhanced by conducting 31 public barazas across the 4 sub-counties. These well-attended public barazas facilitated in-depth discussions on issues such as, the importance of education, scholarship opportunities, substance abuse, early marriages and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

A key achievement of the initiative was the successful tracking of 13,707 learners (which marked 99% transition in Cheptais, 99% in Dagoretti, 100% in Kahuro, and 98% in Sololo), by March 15, 2024. This was realised through a combination of direct and indirect methods, including leveraging the National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) and community structures.



### Taking ALiVE to the classroom: Teacher-led Assessment Tool Development in Kenya.

In February 27, 2024, under the Action for Life Skills, and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) Initiative, we piloted tools in Kamahindu, Westlands and Ngurubani Primary Schools, located in Kiambu, Nairobi and Kirinyaga Counties respectively to assess life skills (collaboration and problem-solving) and one value (respect) among learners aged 6–12 years. The tool was co-created by teachers in Kenya and experts from the ALiVE Academy.

The pilot was conducted among grade 4, 6 and 8 learners on the two lifeskills and value which had been intergrated in Environmental Activities in Grade 3, Science and Social Studies in Grade 5, and Integrated Science, Social Studies, and Creative Arts and Sports in Grade 7.

*“We see that whatever is not assessed is not taught. The same way we teach and assess towards improving teaching on regular academic subjects, is the same way we should treat life skills and values. Assessing these core competencies is a complex task but we must embrace it. Otherwise, we will not be able to know whether our education system is producing what we have promised the society,”* said Dr, John Mugo, the ED of Zizi Afrique Foundation, and a Principal Investigator for ALiVE.

**READ MORE [HERE](#)**

## Towards improved Teacher Educators Curricula in Kenya and Tanzania.



The ALiVE team has been collaborating with teacher education institutes and universities in Kenya and Tanzania. In Kenya the team first held a joint induction and co-creation workshop with teacher educators from Machakos and Eregi Teachers Training Colleges (TTCs). This was followed by a training on introduction to core competencies and assessment approaches with the two institutions. The ALiVE team also visited Mandera TTC on a fact-finding mission as to why the TTC has continued to register low learning outcomes over the years. From this visit three priority areas related to the TTC were identified, (1) Support training of the deployed teacher educators, (2) Initiate Assessment, and Remediation of the teacher trainees, and (3) Support urgent improvement of the infrastructure, including the capacity for ICT and e-Assessment. During the quarter, a follow up meeting on the integration of life skills and values in the curriculum was held with faculty members from the School of Education, Department of Educational Psychology, Kenyatta University.

Similarly, in Zanzibar the ALiVE team worked with Teacher Education Institutes and the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA), to improve assessment systems. They continue to work together on integration of life skills and values into various teacher education courses. Recently, the SUZA and ALiVE team consisting over 40 senior lecturers, quality assurers, and three ALiVE representatives spent 10 days in Bagamoyo, Coastal Region. Their focus was on developing course outlines for new education courses, specifically on teaching pedagogy and methodology. As a result of this meeting life skills elements have been incorporated into courses such as Guidance and Counseling.

**READ MORE: [HERE](#)**

## ALiVE celebrates strengthened partnership with Government Institutions.

A significant milestone, under the ALiVE initiative was the formalization of its collaboration with curriculum institutions in Uganda and Tanzania through the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). These agreements underscore a shared commitment to advancing the following objectives:

- Enhancement of the definitions of prioritized skills within the curriculum across Tanzania mainland, Zanzibar, and Uganda. Detailed unpacking of prioritized skills to inform the process of nurturing and assessing these proficiencies.
- Formulation of a comprehensive life skills framework.
- Development of teacher guides designed to equip educators with effective methodologies for seamlessly integrating life skills into their instructional practices.

In Uganda, the ALiVE initiative has forged a partnership with the National Curriculum Development Center, culminating in the signing of a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding). This collaborative endeavor seeks to refine the definitions of prioritized skills within the secondary school curriculum, co-create a capacity-building roadmap for defining and deconstructing these skills, and ultimately inform their assessment and nurturing. Additionally, the MoU sets the stage for the development of an assessment tool tailored for assessing life skills and values among 6-12-year-olds.

## Harnessing the power of co-creation to foster life skills and values in Kenya.

Learning Journey with Schools (LJS) is an initiative that intends to co-create a model to foster life skills and values among 4 to 12-year-olds in Kenya. It is led by the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI)'s Values and Life Skills (VaLi) members in collaboration with government actors such as Teachers Service Commission (TSC), Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC), Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), and the Ministry of Education (MoE). LJS started with a two-day immersion exercise held on March 13th and 14th in four counties - Migori, Narok, Nairobi and Machakos. The exercise aimed at understanding how life skills are nurtured among learners aged 4-12 years. Data collection for the exercise focused on teachers, parents and learners through 52 classroom observations and 87 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 124 learners and 79 parents. The immersion report found that there are gaps in the current approach to nurturing life skills, and a more consistent and explicit approach is necessary.

## Building up on the gains of Parental Empowerment and Engagement (PE&E) work to ensure no child is left behind.

Parental Empowerment and Engagement (PE&E) is an initiative that aims to explore how parental engagement in schools and communities can lead to better foundational learning outcomes for learners. This work is spearheaded by ZAF in collaboration with RELIAfrica. Together, they developed a PE&E framework that aims to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions that promote PE&E in education across East Africa. The framework is rooted in four key pillars: Communication, Collaboration, Capacity Sharing, and Leveraging of Community Resources. The initiative is now repackaging the framework into toolkits that can be adopted by schools, teachers, and parents to improve parental empowerment and engagement. KEPSHA partnered with this initiative to implement it in three counties: Bungoma, Marsabit, and Kilifi. The National Council for Nomadic Education in Kenya (NACONEK) and other actors are being explored to implement it at scale.

## Keeping the children of Kirinyaga reading.

Through the *Napenda Kusoma initiative*, that is government-led and was launched to respond to low literacy rates in Kirinyaga County, Kenya, ZAF envisions that all children in Kirinyaga can read and comprehend by the end of Grade 3 by 2026. The initiative employs a multi-faceted approach to literacy development, including assessment-informed instruction, quality learning materials for teachers and learners, encouraging and promoting parental engagement in learning, retooling teachers on pedagogy and classroom management, and offering a remediation and Catch-Up Program for learners lagging behind. The initiative also advocates for a smooth transition process from ECDE (Early Childhood Development Education) to Grade 1 to ensure there are no learning losses. ZAF has recently contributed towards the development of the *Napenda Kusoma* manual.



ZAF staff with Education stakeholders in Kirinyaga County

## My village project registers 250 youth to support children in literacy and numeracy.

The 'My Village' (MV) project aimed to improve foundational learning outcomes in three counties in Kenya – Bungoma, Kilifi, and Kitui - in the period of 2022 to 2023. MV implementation began with a baseline survey, followed by learning camps, and assessments. ZAF engaged with communities and schools in Bungoma, Kilifi and Kitui Counties, where efforts to bridge the literacy gaps have benefitted over 15,000 learners in 98 villages. ZAF extended these lessons to support an emerging movement of university learners volunteering to improve foundational learning outcomes in their communities. During the period, ZAF supported the training of partners, learners, and faculty team members at Strathmore University, as they embedded foundational learning support into their Community Service Model (CSM). As a result, the students volunteered in 11 schools, and reached 351 learners.

## ZAF learning on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) space.

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiative introduces a new working area for ZAF. This stems from the realization that achieving success in foundational learning necessitates an early start. For this reason, ZAF is supporting a learning process to understand the drivers and barriers to unlocking the nurturing care framework in Kenya. In addition, ZAF seeks to understand the political economy of the children aged 0-3 years and the question of power, policies and institutions at national and county levels, and promising innovations that could move to scale. By the end of 2024, the learning process will yield adequate information to establish if ZAF's advocacy experience would be needed, and how this would support the early start to foundational learning in Kenya.

Among the activities conducted include; learning sessions with Kisumu Medical & Education Trust (KMET) and ECD-Network to establish a work plan, an implementation roadmap and inception report have been developed, meetings held with stakeholders in Siaya, and mapping and mobilization of key stakeholders for a national forum have been completed.



ECD Stakeholders forum in Nairobi

## ZAF continues to influence the Whole Youth Development Agenda.

In a world where youths face numerous challenges, the Values and Life Skills (VaLi) initiative is dedicated to equipping young people with the necessary life skills and tools to navigate the complexities of modern life. As the secretariat of the VaLi working group, ZAF organized 6 forums to further its work in this area including; The VaLi-Safeguarding workshop in March 2024 which emphasized the integration of safeguarding practices in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, and gathered insights from stakeholders to support implementation.

We also did a follow up to evaluate the impact of our work in 2023 with the Ministry of Education State Department for TVET and other partners to consolidate seven communication strategies into a National Integrated TVET Communication and Advocacy Strategy (NITCAS). The evaluation results showed that the campaign achieved significant increases in student enrollment across several TVET institutions, with some reaching percentages as high as 160%. However, the monitoring exercise also revealed that, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient resources, and inadequate qualified instructors persist. Addressing these challenges is vital to sustain and enhance the campaign's impact. The innovative strategies of the #FormNiTVET campaign have proven highly effective in raising awareness and changing perceptions about TVET within local communities.

In recognitions of ZAF's work in the TVET sector, ZAF was invited among other CSOs, to participate in the National event of the official lighting of a torch for celebration of 100 years of TVET in Kenya and the opening of the Nyeri National Polytechnic Jitume ICT Hub and ODeL centre. The event was presided over by H.E The President of Kenya, Dr. William Samoei Ruto. ZAF is part of the follow up campaign which is going on for the next 3 months to highlight the success of TVET in Kenya.



H.E The President of Kenya, Dr. William Samoei Ruto presides over the celebration of 100 years of TVETs

## ZAF hosts *Tenda Wema* scholars for a mentorship forum in Nairobi.



Since 2021, ZAF has been implementing **Tenda Wema**. The initiative is supported by ZAF staff members and friends. Its aim is to ensure that the under privileged children and youth access education regardless of their academic abilities.

In April 2024, the Tenda Wema Initiative convened a 2 day mentorship forum with over 50 scholars. The aim was to give the scholars a different worldview with the key highlights being an opportunity to interact, learn and visit the Thika Road Mall and Kenyatta University.

The initiative has so far enrolled 106 scholars in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. We target to support 200 scholars by 2025.



A mentoring session in progress



ZAF Staff and one of the *Tenda Wema* Scholars from Sanye Community in Lamu-Kilifi County

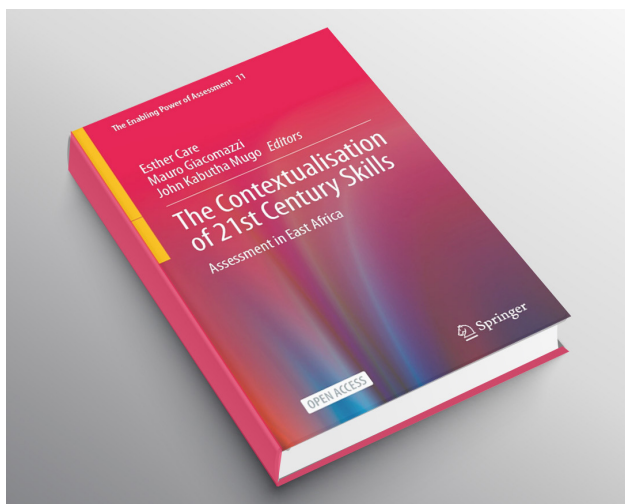


## ZAF continued to shape global conversations by participating in various conferences.

Zizi continued to strengthen its positioning as a local organization with global influence by contributing to and shaping global education conversations and debates.

- **ZAF at CIES 2024:** The Comparative & International Education Society (CIES) 2024 conference on "The Power of Protest" in education brought together experts to discuss current educational needs, including ALiVE who presented seven papers and launched a book with more than 17,000 downloads so far. They also held discussions and attended two high-level meetings, organized by Prof Dan Wagner of the University of Pennsylvania and Rachel Hinton and the What Works Hub, to share their research and initiatives in education. Read more [here](#).

- **ZAF at the Daara retreat:** Daara is a learning community for organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) working on Foundational Learning (FL). The retreat focused on using and generating evidence in FL, building pedagogical excellence, and moving successfully to scale when implementing FL interventions. Virginia Ngindiru (Director-Innovations for Practice) presented on the Accelerated Learning Program to the Daara Partners as an example of a successful remediation. She encouraged Daara partners (FundaWande, TEP center, and eBASE) to explore FL interventions that can be implemented in SSA.



**ALiVE Book**



Daara partners pose for a group photo during the retreat in South Africa.



Some of the ALiVE book co-authors and Mr. Khamis Abdalla Said, Principal Secretary Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), Zanzibar.



Virginia Ngindiru (Director-Innovations for Practice) and Esther Gacigi From Zizi Afrique Foundation Attending the Daara Retreat in South Africa.

## New Staff

The ZAF family is growing. In our endeavour to build a global organisation, we continue to regularly update our pool of talent and expertise and nurture a culture that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion, increase creativity and innovation, nurturing talent, developing leadership skills, and onboarding interns to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to succeed. Please meet our new staff members.



**Josephat Lugendo**

Digital and Admin Assistant  
Advocacy and Partnership



**Seline Wanjiku**

Program Assistant  
Co-Impact



**Charles Gachoki**

Research Manager  
Evidence use and synthesis



**Elizabeth Owiti**

Senior Program Officer  
Assessment and Advocacy  
ALiVE Initiative



**Vollan Ochieng**

Manager-Innovations



**Erick Muturi**

Program Assistant  
Knowledge Management and  
Technology



**Cyrus Wakibia**

Program Officer-Data



**Catherine Ngatia**

Administrative Officer  
RELI-AFRICA



**Joshua Magero**

Research Manager  
Future of Work project



**Lydia Oyugi**

Program Officer  
Early Childhood Development  
(ECD)



**Victoria Kioko**

Communications Officer



**Erick Kinjabi Kibigo**

Advocacy and Engagement Officer

## Recent events in photos.

### 1. Women's Day 2024

On March 8th, ZAF joined the world in celebrating The International Women's Day 2024 with the theme "Invest in Women, Accelerate Progress." This day has been used to recognize the accomplishments of women globally.



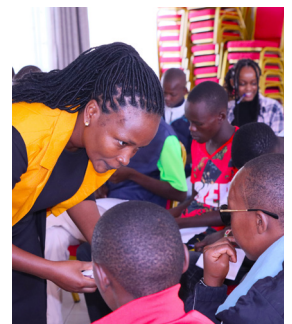
### 2. Executive Director's 50th Celebration

Dr. John Mugo celebrated his 50th birthday surrounded by family and colleagues.



### 3. Tenda Wema Mentorship Forum

Tenda Wema Initiative convened the first 2-days mentorship forum with over 50 scholars.



## 4. ZAF impact partners workshop

ZAF launched the Mutual Growth with Impact Partners initiative which aims to strengthen the capacities of partners.



## 5. Co-Impact Design Phase workshops

Design Phase workshops were held, to induct key educational stakeholders from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania on systems change methodology.



## 6. Girl Education convening

The Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) Africa in partnership with Jaslika Consulting convened stakeholders drawn from the gender and education space to engage with data and evidence focusing on girls' education in East Africa.



## Upcoming Event

1. August 12th-15th 2024: Under the RELI Africa Network, ZAF is working with partners to cover the Inaugural East Africa Community Regional Education Conference. The event will also be part of the commemoration of the Africa Union (AU) Year of Education. Click on the [link](#) for more information on how to get involved.

**THE INAUGURAL EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY  
REGIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE  
COMMEMORATING THE AU YEAR OF EDUCATION**

**“Educate an African Fit for the 21st Century:  
Collective Action for Quality, Inclusive and Lifelong  
Learning in East Africa”**

**August 12th to 15th, 2024  
Arusha, Tanzania**

## Embracing Wellness: A Glimpse into ZAF's Sports Initiatives.

At ZAF, we value wellness and fitness to help our staff lead fulfilling lives. We believe that a healthy body and mind are the foundations of success, and we are passionate about helping our staff achieve that. We have been busy with a bunch of activities aimed at fostering physical and mental well-being, including invigorating Zumba sessions, friendly matches with our partners, chess lessons, and hiking sessions. We love shaking off stress and calories with our high-energy dance workouts, and our friendly matches provide a platform for healthy competition and mutual respect. Our chess lessons are a great way to sharpen our minds over lunchtime, and our hiking sessions allow us to disconnect from the daily grind and reconnect with nature. We are also thrilled to be preparing for the 6th Sara Ruto Cup, a tournament that celebrates athleticism, sportsmanship, and the indomitable spirit of teamwork. We are so proud of our staff members who have embodied the spirit of wellness and fitness and inspired their colleagues to join in the sessions. We would love for you to join us on this journey towards holistic wellness and sporting greatness. Come along and have some fun with us!



## Staff Profile.



**Dr. John Mugo at 50**

### From Ndindiruku to the world.

In this edition, we start a new feature where we will be profiling different staff and board members. We begin with our Executive Director, Dr. John Mugo, who recently celebrated his Golden Birthday. Through written pieces and chit chats with colleagues, he let us into the story of his birth, growing up, career and what it being 50 means to him. Here are some excerpts!

#### **Can you describe the events surrounding your birth on that Easter Monday? And how did the heavy rain on the day of your birth impact you as an adult?**

Exactly at 4:30 am, the nurse on duty at Mwea Mission Hospital was woken up from a nap by a loud noise coming from the maternity ward. Initially, she thought it was just the sound of the heavy rain hitting the iron sheets, but upon closer attention, she realized it was something else. When she arrived at the ward, she found a healthy 4.2-kilogram baby, crying in his mother's arms. The birth happened so suddenly that another patient had to assist while the rest watched anxiously. There was joy in the maternity ward that dawn. Outside, the rain poured down heavily, muting the loud exclamations of the women. It was the arrival of Father Camillo, the parish priest, that reminded everyone it was Easter Monday. He came to give Easter blessings to the patients at the hospital and to pray with them. Back at home, Eliud Mugo, the biggest dairy farmer around, woke up early to check the compound and inspect his cows. In the absence of Mom, he woke up my only elder sister, Wambui, and instructed her to prepare morning tea. Unusually, two cows had calved that morning. After ensuring everything was in order at home, Dad hopped on his bicycle (ngari) and raced to the hospital, carrying a container of warm porridge. Not seeing his wife among the women outside, he untied the container and rushed into the hospital. Seeing the baby, the porridge nearly slipped from his hands. It was a beautiful sight of a brown, hairy baby boy. The urge to hold him and thank God overwhelmed him. "He will be called Kabutha, my brother!" he announced in elation. To date, I sleep best when it is raining, and the mystery of water falling from the skies never ceases to amaze me.

#### **As you say, it is not easy to tell one's story, however what inspired your love for stories and reading, especially in your early years?**

I love stories. I love short stories. When I trace back, this love budded at the evening fireside sessions with my mother. She would tell us stories after eating the evening meals, until I would fall off my seat, asleep. The sessions thus ended up not so well, with, *'wee, ukira niukugua mwaki-ini'*, translated, you, wake up. You will fall into the fire. The love then sprouted with the ability to read stories. Like learning how to walk, learning to read was my next best excitement. The illustrated stories of the early grades took me to the moon and back. I never stopped reading, anything I found around. Unfortunately, though, there was not too much to read, and I easily got it done. Later in Upper Primary, I benefited heavily from Mr Ngigi's library (the James Hardley Chase series). This outstanding teacher opened his personal library to us. I would borrow a novel every Friday and return on Monday, having read cover to cover. I had the advantage of the herds boy career. When you took cows to graze, it lasted the entire day, and you did not eat with them. So, rather than just gaze into the skies and invent all forms of self-entertainment, I read Mr Ngigi's books. Countless of them.

#### **You once faced the challenge with stammering how did it affect your daily life and interactions with others?**

English became my worst subject. Although Safari Book 1 had really interesting stories, like "Stone Soup" and "The Seven Days of Mr. Makonde," English was difficult because we had to read aloud one by one. It always started from the front, and we would each read a paragraph until the end of the story. I sat somewhere in the middle and would quickly allocate the paragraphs, estimate mine, and start rehearsing. The more I rehearsed and the closer my turn came, the more nervous I became. When my turn came, everyone turned to me, ready for entertainment. Then the expected would always happen. I would start reading well, but when I reached a word beginning with the vowels a, e, or i, I would hang on that vowel, and my sustained stammer would be drowned by laughter. Sweat would mingle with tears and roll down my face, wetting the book. Then I would hear the teacher shout, "NEXT," and my neighbor would take over.

## And how did the reactions of your family and classmates impact your confidence and emotional well-being during this time?

During one lesson, at the height of laughter, I heard a sharp shout from the back in Kikuyu: "STOP IT!" It was Janet Muthoni, standing up. "Why are you all laughing at him? Don't you know that John thinks faster than he can speak?" As people consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s, Mother Teresa's, or Obama's speeches the best, I consider Janet's the best speech I ever heard. She lectured the class confidently, making claims too hard for psychologists to confirm. In summary, she claimed that my thinking speed was too fast for my mouth, and hence the stammer. Everyone went quiet, even the teacher, keenly listening to Janet's address. Then she sat down. Somehow, everyone believed her, including me (momentarily). What made us believe was the fact that despite the inability to read aloud, I never got anything less than 95% in the tests. Later in graduate school, I took a course on stammering and therapies that help, but Janet's theory was not listed. But whenever I am called to help with a case, I use a modified version of Janet's theory to create a positive view of stammering, since the less tense one is, the more the vocal muscles relax, and the less the stammer.

## From Ndiriruku to the world... What was it like studying and living in Germany?

There was one major problem in Hildesheim. This being a small town, there were very few foreign students. I was approached by the University during the 3rd week of the semester to feature in the University magazine. I was happy to brand the University as an upcoming destination for international students. Life was also somehow hard. I experienced severely racism on the streets, and even at the University. One day while in town with Beata and Noemi, as we waited for the lights to turn green for pedestrians, someone approached from behind and pushed me onto the streets, to speeding vehicles. I fell on the tarmac and luckily, the oncoming vehicle managed to stop right in front of me. There was commotion. A few Germans came in and confronted the 'criminal', and even tried to call the police, but it was too late. The atmosphere was cold for me, I had difficulty connecting to people in my class, and the lecturers spoke too fast, that I hardly understood. I was so frustrated that I decided to shift to another University. When I called Dr Scheidtweiler, he encouraged me but reminded me that I had only 2.0 years left on scholarship, giving advice that movement to another University would jeopardize my studies, and would not be allowed. In any case, I would have to get to the University by myself. Somehow, what I heard from him did not bother me. I was sure that I was not doing well, and I needed to move. I woke up the following day and boarded a train to Hannover, the next big city and capital of the State of Lower Saxony. I inquired at the information office about how to get to the University's College of Education, and Education and was directed. Luckily, I was fluent in German. I secured myself the University admission for the Summer Semester, and even strangely, to study special education. This flexibility puzzled me, recalling how rigid the Kenyan education system was. Given that I didn't have any foundational course on special education though, I would have to study a minimum of 22 courses instead of 16. I felt fine with this.

## What strategies did you employ to maintain a balance between your work and personal life?

In 2022, one of my funders, Imaginable Futures, supported me to join a global leadership wellbeing program, the Wellbeing Project established by Ashoka. The first retreat was held in the Tuscany, Italy. It was here that I met 24 other leaders like me, who were working day and night to change the world. We were not allowed to talk about what we did, where we worked or where we studied. We were only expected to talk about our inner selves. This inner work thing threw me off balance. Examining childhood trauma, identifying our points of weakness in personal well-being practice, spending an entire day focusing on the inner self, was not just new but also strange. We were not allowed to open our laptops and work for a whole 7 days. We did not know where the rest of the people worked, and no one cared about this. I paid for a massage for the first time, spent hours in the sauna, dived with cheeky CEOs into icy water, and hugged trees in meditative practice. I commenced the journey to change myself, with subsequent retreats in Slovenia and Spain. I now knew what to do to avoid exhaustion and forestall burnout, I rediscovered myself and my childhood, and re-identified things I had lost that caused me joy and happiness. Unfortunately, I had lost these over the years, in a work life where things never stopped. I am not there yet, but the 4 journeys have certainly started. The highest moment of this journey was the recognition that we lead the way we are. If we are broken, we lead with brokenness. Thus, attending to myself and my own wellbeing is not just for myself and my family. Indeed, it is a foundational element of doing my work well and contributes to the impact I want to see out there. I stopped feeling guilty swimming during a break at the office, or asking a friend to, instead of meeting in the office, talk as we walk. I joined a hiking group and even climbed Kilimanjaro in 2023.

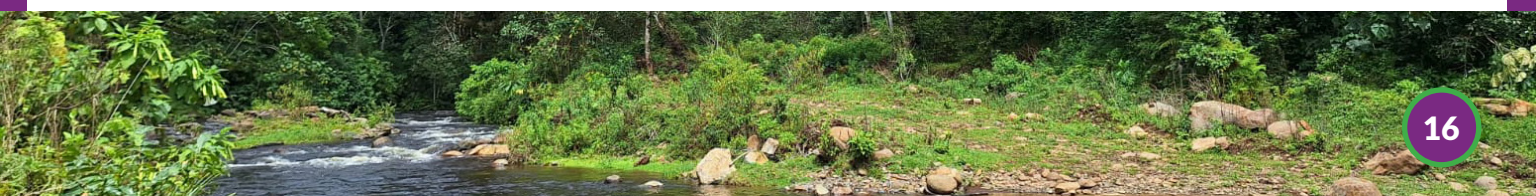




## What is your ideal morning routine? What are the life lessons you have learned this far? #gratitudeisnowmyattitude

This has been a truly nice week of reflection. I was generously hosted by Father Simon Kanji at the Kangaita Catholic Parish, such a beautiful place. I dedicated a section of my 50 years' life to a day. I would begin the day with a spiritual exercise, then take a long walk through the lush green environment, drinking water directly from streams. The highlight was the walk through a section of the Mt Kenya Forest on Thursday, a thick forest, such breath-taking and special treatment. I arrive at 10 main lessons from this exercise. The first eight are the things I have learnt, while the last two are

- 1. My life is in God's hands** -I have learned to worry less and trust in the grace of a higher power.
- 2. The world is imperfect and will ever be**-Expecting or trying to create a perfect world is like chasing the wind. Imperfection belongs to nature and has always been there. I have been a victim of imperfection in many ways, but I accept it and continue with my journey. The only perfection I pursue is what is inside me - my thoughts, intentions, and dreams. What is beyond me, I will accept.
- 3. I am not enough to solve all the world problems**-I am just but a tiny crystal in the cosmos; not so important, yet important. However, the world is too huge, and it has too many problems. Someone recently, after listening to my story, referred to me as 'force of nature'. I did not say anything, as I remembered a Kikuyu proverb: *kuganwo ni kuura* (praise could make one lose direction). I realize that I have been bothered too much by some problems in a way I should not have been. I note that I should not behave like the saviour the world has been waiting for- I am not granted this power. After doing my best for the day, I will retreat with gratitude to continue the next day.
- 4. Burdens are heavy, I should just carry mine**-I recognize that I carry many burdens that I should not - people I need to forgive, and people who should actually solve their own problems. I receive problems from people every day, people who need help. I recognize that these people fall into two categories: those that consciously load their burdens on others so that they are free themselves, and those that genuinely do not know and cannot manage. My role is to say no and encourage the first group and help the second to the extent I can. I leave the rest to God.
- 5. The world needs kindness**-There is a drought of kindness, not just the lack of sharing, but even that kind word, a smile, or morning greeting that might make all the difference. When I help others, I help myself. I have received messages of goodwill for my 50th birthday, recalling how I made them feel. My challenge now is to face this with greater consciousness and intentionality.
- 6. A balanced life is crucial**-It is easy to let important things suffer while chasing less important ones. I need to balance my physical, mental, emotional/social, and spiritual well-being. I understand this now, but I still need to plan better and be honest with myself.
- 7. Rather than be annoyed and hurt inside, tell someone**- I grew up in a quarrelsome and sometimes violent environment, where I was often threatened or beaten for the smallest things. However, I have learned that speaking softly can be more effective. I apply this principle at home and at work, but I need to work on speaking up when I see that my words could help.
- 8. Humour is a precious gift**-I only recently came to recognize and value humour. I always took it for granted, that ability to make the moment lighter. I know theatre has helped me a lot in enhancing this creativity, but it is also a natural gift that we also need to appreciate. My role is to share it and recognize it in others so that I cause encouragement for this gift to the world.
- 9. It will help me to take things easy**-I want to learn to take things easier. I have missed out on missed enjoying life because I have been too serious and worried too much about the future. I have started admiring people who take time to enjoy a meal, chat with a friend, or just relax on a Saturday morning. I want to stop telling people what to do and let them do things their own way. I want to solve the problems I can and be at peace with the ones cannot. I want to make time be available for things that bring me joy and forgive myself when I can't/cannot do something.
- 10. Accepting and receiving Growing up, I received a lot of praise from my family and teachers, but somehow, I've become immune to accepting love and appreciation**-It is like I have a block inside me. One recent example is in December, when I received appreciation from the Zizi Afrique, but four months down the line, I have not even written to the board chair any official appreciation. I felt that I did not deserve it, that it was too much, and have not accepted and received it in my heart. One time a colleague asked me out for coffee as we chatted. After taking the snacks the bill came. I insisted on paying for it and she wasn't was not happy. I used the reasoning, that I was the one who earned more, and it was only fair that I paypaid. I refused to accept and receive. This I hope to learn.





For more information on our work, please visit our website at :

[www.ziziafrique.org](http://www.ziziafrique.org)

For information on how you could get involved, please email us on:

[\\_info@ziziafrique.org](mailto:_info@ziziafrique.org)