It is often rightly said that experience is the best teacher. But this may well be an understatement if such an experience involves a journey into the “unknown”. When you throw knowledge-exchange into the mix, then perhaps the person who said “education and travel are the best teachers” was more accurate.

This rang eerily true for 15 HKU students who set out last summer to a deprived rural village called Kogacho in Homa Bay County, Kenya. The village is unique in many ways. For one, it is home to some of the most jovial people we have ever met. However, its poverty levels are north of 90%, and it has an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of over 14%, easily one of the highest in Africa. In this village, nearly everyone has lost a relative to HIV and countless more to malaria and other illnesses. We are connected to the village in a special way; it is home to Erick K’Omolo, a PhD student in the Faculty of Law. Erick is also the first person from his village to ever acquire a university degree. Erick had told us that in Kogacho there is a desperate need for clean and convenient water, and that the women have to walk 2-5 kilometres a day to fetch water.

So armed with no more than a conviction that every step counts, we committed to a 12-day trip during which we would construct what would be the village’s only safe water facility, and give a donation of books to several community schools that support HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable orphans.

First, we had to overcome our biggest hurdle – mobilising funds. We divided into two core teams; the first team focusing on the water project and a second team for the education part. We went knocking on door after door for financial support from HKU professors, a few hospitals and, you guessed it, major companies. We quickly learnt that fundraising is, perhaps, the toughest challenge for young people armed only with ideas. Although the companies ignored our e-mails, we raised HK$25,900 primarily from individual donations. With HK$15,000 from the HKU Service 100 Fund, we set out to change a village on a very limited total budget of HK$40,900. All participants agreed to meet their individual expenses and Erick would host us in his village hut!

After arriving in the capital Nairobi, we journeyed 360 kilometres by road to Kogacho where we were met by the darkness of the African wilderness.
Building an *aora siala*

Next morning we visited the water site where the whole village has gathered, including Erick’s ageing dad who we realised had suffered a debilitating stroke two years back and had lost the ability to speak. The pride in his son was evident and they are clearly very close.

It was our first look at the water well, locally called an *aora siala*, and we saw that was a natural spring but with a stagnant collection point. With the assistance of a local engineer, we designed a five-day programme to desalt it, rearrange the filtering stones, and install a safe cover for the top.

As we were also building toilets and bathrooms, we hired some local youths to help out.

But we were not just there to help with the water supply. We visited some local schools and donated some story books. At one primary school, we helped to put in windows to protect them from the strong afternoon winds but it was clear this was just a drop in the ocean.

Supporting educational dreams

We also met 15-year-old Jackline who lost both parents eight years ago to HIV. She and her seven siblings are cared for by her 83-year-old grandmother. Jackline had been the best student at her school in the national exams but her family could not afford the secondary school fees for her to continue her education. Just as in China, going to secondary school then college, makes big difference here in a family’s future. Jackline was lucky though; Erick has been paying her fees using his stipend from HKU with intermittent support from friends. We gave her enough money from our donations for one year’s tuition but wondered how many like her miss out.

Over the following days we visited two secondary schools. Kachar Girls we learnt was established a year ago to rescue girls from early pregnancies and marriages, and give them a future. There is only one government teacher; the rest are local volunteers. The 32 girls enrolled here have nothing beyond their meticulous uniforms and our two boxes of books were the start to their library.

Kenya is a beautiful country with a rich culture and we departed it with a heavy heart. We had learnt that to truly bridge cultures, we must mix people.

The team will return to Kenya in summer 2014.

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