

IMPACT OF AVP WORKSHOPS IN KENYA By Aletia Dundas, NSW RM

'Violence is the root cause of poverty' said Martin Oloo, an AVP participant. 'If AVP can bring peace, it can help people to help themselves and choose nonviolent ways of solving problems'.

Martin was one of many Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshop participants Aletia Dundas interviewed as part of an evaluation of the AVP programme in Kenya.

Aletia, of NSW RM, spent a month at Friends Peace Centre, in the country's western province, conducting this evaluation, and found that Martin is not the only one with high hopes for the spread of AVP as a peacebuilding tool in Kenya.

Through the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of Friends Peace Teams, AVP has been running workshops in Kenya since 2003. Already small AVP communities exist around the country, and they are crying out for more workshops, more facilitators and more funding. In order to test the impact of AVP in Kenya and determine strategies for the future, 40 workshop participants were interviewed from a variety of geographical locations, age groups, and occupational backgrounds. Men and women were equally represented. This evaluation was made possible through funding from AGLI and the grant Aletia received from Australia Yearly Meeting's Peace and Social Justice Fund.

AVP is an experiential workshop process that encourages participants to resolve conflicts at the individual, family and community level. AVP began in 1975, when a group of inmates from the Greenhaven prison in New York city asked a local Quaker group to provide them with nonviolence training.

Out of this request was born the three-day workshop which exists today. The process develops skills in affirmation, communication, building community, cooperation, trust and conflict resolution.

Through the course of the evaluation, it was found that AVP has had an impact on both individuals and communities.

Countless testimonies were given as to how lessons from AVP had been applied in the home, where physical and emotional violence is common. AVP had also helped people understand and deal with emotions and trauma in their lives.

'Before the AVP workshop my anger could not be relieved without beating somebody but now I have developed a friendly heart', said Noel Wanyonyi, a young lady who attended the workshop.

Those who deal with violence or conflict in their work, particularly pastors, prison officers and social workers indicated that the principles of AVP had not only given them useful tools for approaching conflicts in these workplaces, but has also led to suggestions and initiatives that will foster dialogue and support in the future.

'I realized that it's not through violence that we can change prisoners' said Arthur Agiza, a prison officer. People also made suggestions about ways to improve the workshops, and the organization in general, and these tended to be things like 'make the workshop longer', 'get more funding so we can hold them more regularly', and 'focus on areas where violence is entrenched'.

When discussing the 'cultural' impact of AVP, issues of gender and age were at the forefront.

In Kenyan culture women are denied a chance to talk before men and indeed men feel superior to women. Young people are also not encouraged to offer advice to older people.

'In African culture, men are very difficult' said Peter Serete, a young male facilitator. 'They cannot apologise easily. This disadvantages women. Women have no permission to look into their husband's eyes and tell them what they think. That is a bad tradition'.

AVP, on the other hand, equalizes people, as one participant said. AVP plays a key role in raising awareness about the different consequences of violent traditions and empowering traditions. It was also suggested that more men should join the facilitation teams, thereby providing positive role models for other males.

After so many years of confusion and violence in Kenya, the AVP community is working hard to reach as many of those people affected as possible. In addition to continued AVP workshops, the local partner Friends in Peace and Community Development (FPCD) has organized specific peacebuilding initiatives including Healing and Rebuilding our Community (HROC) workshops that bring together community leaders from Mt Elgon, a region ravaged by violent conflict in Kenya's west.

They are also training conflict mediators and this service has been greatly valued so far. People are hopeful that these initiatives are all contributing to greater peace for Kenya's future.