

SLUM BOYS' TRADE THAT IS A 'DEATH' ARMOUR

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By **Patrick Githinji**

Eight years ago, Peter Mwangi and Joseph Ndinya stared at death. Mwangi was walking to a football pitch to join his friends in preparation for an upcoming football tournament when the police arrested him.

The policemen, he says, alleged that he was among the gang that terrorised motorists in the area - a claim he denied.

"They pointed a gun at me and I thought I was going to die. I was later released. They didn't have evidence against me," Mwangi recalls.

He says police have shot many young men in Dandora on similar allegations, some totally innocent. The deadly incident completely changed the lives of the two from slum idlers to businessmen.

The duo is members of White Charcoal Youth Group located in Dandora. The youth group makes eco friendly charcoal from waste paper and saw dust.

Mwangi is the group chairman while Ndinya is the secretary.

Before the group came to life, Mwangi and Ndinya both orphans were idlers in the vast Dandora slum.

"We would wake up in the morning and watch people as they went to work. We would sometimes do menial jobs, but they were hard to find," Mwangi says.

When the area catholic parish priest heard the young men's story, he convened an urgent meeting to chart a way forward.

Father Mario, Mwangi says, asked them to think of a business idea that would shape them to respectable people in society.

Unique Business

"When the meeting ended, we sat as a group and decided to look for a unique business that was not crowded and one that would not damage the environment," Mwangi explains.

By that time, Mwangi says there was an Italian student attached to

United Nations (UN) who visited them regularly. He was working on a research paper about the dumpsite.

"We turned to him for advice. He told us about briquette making. We thought it would be a viable idea. Later, we presented the same to the priest who funded us," he said.

Briquettes are log like eco-friendly cooking charcoal made from waste products such as papers, bagasse from sugar cane, palm leaves and sawdust.

"With this alternative fuel, we are preventing an environmental crisis caused by massive deforestation," Ndinya says.

Ndinya adds that the group settled on the idea due to the proximity to raw material - the dumpsite. But lately, they don't get raw material from the dumpsite given that a year ago, they signed a partnership with the Chandaria Industries, to be offloading their factory wastage at the plant.

At the beginning, the plant had a capacity to produce 35 briquettes but later with the help of Late Prof Wangari Maathai, they received a grant to acquire a machine, which was capable of producing 350 briquettes a day. Ndinya says that a while back, they received a donation from the former US Ambassador to Kenya them get new equipment that produce 3,500 briquettes a day.

The charcoal is sold locally to institutions, households as well as hotels.

Mwangi says that a sack of charcoal goes for Sh300 compared to tree charcoals, which cost Sh1,200.

He says, "a sack of tree charcoal doesn't last long compared to ours."

Citing a recent survey they conducted, Sh14 briquettes can heat food for six hours without regular top ups.

"For the other charcoal (black charcoal) you have to top up after very 45 minutes. To avoid all

these inconveniences, we offer an eco-friendly and cost effective way of cooking," he explains.

However, Ndinya says that many members left the group because the machine is manually operated.

"They didn't want to get tired. They would complain everyday so they had to quit," he says. Ndinya cites lack of confidence by the buyers as the main challenge they are dealing with as well as lack of professionals to run the business. To overcome the challenges, the group is working closely with a Kenyatta University engineer, whose work is to ensure quality of the charcoal churned out.

The group intends to employ professionals to run the business. Although, they can't disclose profits, they maintained that the business gives the group good money.

Daily wage

On a daily basis, the young men take home Sh250 as their wage.

Ndinya says the wage has uplifted him to achieve several goals in life. Despite both of them dropping out of school at form two, their meagre wage has enabled them to enrol for computer and driving classes.

Mwangi lauds the project since it has transformed the lives of many young men in the slum.

"Many boys have been transformed and those that haven't just can't be shaped at all. It is their nature," he says.



Shoes made by White Charcoal Youth Group. The group's chairman lauds the project since it has transformed the lives of many young men in the slum. [Photos: Patrick Githinji/Standard]



Peter Mwangi (left), chairman of White Charcoal Youth Group and Joseph Ndinya, the group's secretary. [Photo: Jonah Onyango/Standard]

Since they get raw material from Chandaria, they have extra time to focus on other business ideas. On afternoons, they make beaded open shoes with tyre soles.

"We thought it was good to diversify in order to widen our revenue base," Ndinya says.

He says the aim of the group is to transform Dandora from a robbers' den to a safe and eco-friendly slum.

"Our mission is to change the world by encouraging citizens to carry out eco friendly activities."

Currently, the group is benefiting from free financial training offered by the KCB Foundation.

The eight-week programme dubbed 'Out of School Youth training programme (OOSY)', aims at harnessing the inherent business skills among unemployed youth and to engage them in income generating activities.

"We are telling the youth that formal employment is not the only option of earning income.

Secondary school leavers and those who have dropped out can easily use their talents and through this training become successful entrepreneurs," said Pauline Ndonga, the KCB Foundation Administrator.

The Youth Entrepreneurship week is part of the Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW) activities.

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