



Africa's Biggest Challenge (the sequel)

After returning from Australia, it was an item in Madafu's March issue that caught my eye: '**Africa's Biggest Challenge**'. The author *Karim Kone* spoke of theft and dishonesty in Burkina Faso, as a clear example of a wider malaise that violated a beloved Africa. For me, the article immediately brought to mind similar experiences here in Kenya.

I recall a business in Nairobi, when most of us were distracted by injury to a staff member; one employee however wasn't, and was caught red-handed sifting washing powder into her handbag. She was dismissed on the spot!

My experience of the hire-car business (a trade once tampered with, never to be forgotten!) also supports Mr Kone's view. On one occasion a sub-let vehicle travelled to Garissa. It came back, held together by surreptitious welding under the bonnet.

Once, when living on the fifth floor in Westlands, the almost-completed building next door collapsed, also destroying the main bedrooms in my place. Heavy rains were blamed, but the real reason was skimping on the job, components in the mix diverted for personal gain. If it had happened at night, I would not be writing this piece!

On the coast, I was helping a friend start a café in a poor area of *Shanzu*. There were issues with stolen ingredients, as well as the finished product, but an interesting adjunct was the unjustified jealousy exhibited by local women ("*Don't go in there, the food is bad, she'll steal you man,*" etc.) which eventually caused the business to fail.

In the same area, near Serena, a close friend told me how his house-help actually tried to pilfer money from his pocket, while he was having a power-nap after lunch. The same guy also related a tale of assault by a posse of machete-wielding men, in his bedroom. Locals were well aware that he ran a very profitable business.

Some of all this can be laid at the door of poverty. If you and your family are attempting to survive on less than 2,000 bob a month - with ballooning costs for unga and sugar, and no real safety net to fall back on - then perhaps you do grab any opportunity to put food on the table. (Plundering gangs of course is way beyond acceptable). Add to this a heavy dependence on addictive drugs in some quarters, and the situation is ripe for crime.

But it seems more than that. As Karim Kone says, dishonesty appears practically inbuilt into the African psyche ... and greed for illegal prosperity at any cost, invades our systems from bottom to top, and down again, often largely with impunity. The policeman asking for *'lunch money'*, a four-year-old requesting coins from the mzungu, the teacher absconding on normal duties, so s/he can gain from paid tuition: All small pieces of the very same puzzle. When greed increases, then trust goes out the window!

To fix it all seems an impossible task. It will require strong leadership, better education, and a serious amount of time to narrow the enormous *'poverty gap'* between rich and poor; plus changing the attitudes in areas such as honesty in the workplace and behaviour towards compatriots. We can begin the fight against this sickness today, then support the next generation as they tackle the problem in a holistic manner, tomorrow.

Duncan Gregory

www.whittlinourniche.com

