

# A Trip to Kenya

by Richard Higginson



Richard Higginson

**Richard Higginson reports on a recent trip to discover more about social enterprises and fair trade producers in Kenya. Although the country has many deep-seated problems, he was encouraged by meeting many impressive Christian entrepreneurs, striving resourcefully to change people's lives and situations for the better.**

In the letter I sent out with Ridley Hall's *Faith in Business* mailing last November, I wrote these words:

*Amidst all the financial doom and gloom, there are actually some very encouraging developments taking place in the business world. We had a glimpse of these in the workshop we ran last May on Social Enterprise. The focus there was on companies in the UK, but I'm also becoming aware of an extraordinary multiplication of business initiatives that are transforming poor and disadvantaged communities in the developing world. Women are being rescued from the sex trade and found alternative employment in Cambodia; rice farmers are benefiting from fair trade arrangements in India; villagers are able to produce better and diversified crops through investment in irrigation in Malawi. The interesting thing is*

*that, when you look closely at these and numerous other examples, it is often people of Christian faith at the heart of the transformation.'*

I must admit that I wrote those words on the basis of reports that I had heard from others. I had not seen any of the projects that I cited first-hand. The desire to see social enterprise in the developing world for myself led me to organise a two-week trip to Kenya this summer. Why Kenya, you may ask? The answer is a variety of reasons. First, I had gleaned the impression that there is a mushrooming of such projects in that country. Second, my friend Allan Bussard, a Christian Canadian entrepreneur based in Slovakia who is engaged in social investment in Kenya, told me that he would be visiting the country in July, and invited me to spend some time with him. Third, I am a Trustee of the Traidcraft Foundation

and a member of Shared Interest, which provided me with plenty of contacts; Traidcraft and Shared Interest share an East African regional office in Nairobi, along with COFTA (Cooperation for Fair Trade in Africa), and these two organisations set up several visits for me in and around Nairobi.<sup>1</sup>

Without exception, I was impressed by the organisations and companies that I visited. They all appeared to be doing good and worthwhile work, striving hard to fight poverty through trade, invest in a fairer world, and play their part in changing people's lives for the better. But I became well aware that the enterprises I saw were – when measured against the huge scale of human need – metaphorical drops in an ocean. I came face to face with Kenya's massive problems, difficulties that I know are duplicated in many other African countries.

## Kenya's Problems

Readers will be aware of the post-election violence that claimed over 1000 lives in Kenya from December 2007 to February 2008. However, because we have such a fickle media, losing interest in a situation once relative calm has been achieved, readers may be unaware of what has happened since. The violence was triggered by a disputed election in which there is a widespread perception, supported by many outside observers, that president Mwai Kibaki 'stole the votes', claiming a victory that should have gone to his political opponent Raila Odinga. Kibaki comes from Kenya's Kikuyu tribe, which has been in the political ascendancy ever since independence, much to the indignation of many of Kenya's other 41 tribes. Tribal resentment and animosity, some of it focussed on disputed land allocation, undoubtedly played a part in the mayhem. The intervention of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan helped to bring about reconciliation talks between Kibaki and Odinga, eventually leading to the formation of a coalition government with Kibaki continuing as President and Odinga becoming Prime Minister. The resulting cabinet has no less than 40 members, both men wanting their supporters to be fully represented. This is an extraordinary situation in which there is much duplication of roles, a united Cabinet view is almost impossible to achieve, and the

costs of ministerial office have rocketed. Nevertheless, Kibaki and Odinga are trying to work together, and the political situation is no longer volatile – but it is far from stable.

The handsome salaries that ministers pay themselves are a matter of public resentment because Kenya still has all too many infrastructure problems requiring sustained financial



■ Richard with Ehud Gachugu ■

outlay. Kenya ranks 148<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries in the UN Human Development Index. Only 61% of the population has access to clean water sources and a mere 43% have access to basic sanitation facilities.<sup>2</sup> The unlucky ones are the urban and rural poor. During my second week in the southern district of Tsavo I saw women and young children walking miles to fetch and carry large plastic containers of (mainly dirty) water. I even saw the pitiful sight of about 50 villagers digging a large hole in the hope of catching rainwater, which was not due to fall for another couple of months.

In slum areas, of which there are many, people live cheek by jowl in tiny overcrowded shacks with dilapidated corrugated iron roofs. The problem is not a technical one: African government has the capacity to bring piped water and decent housing to its people. The rural villages without water were only a matter of kilometres from luxurious safari lodges with every conceivable convenience (I spent three days on safari in that second week). Much though I enjoyed watching the wild animals, of which there were a great profusion, I found myself racked with guilt at this discrepancy, which was only partly allayed by the thought that the tourist industry does employ a lot of Kenyans who enjoy working conditions (and probably pay) well above the norm.

Then there is the endemic problem of corruption. This is not just a political issue; it affects law enforcement agencies as well. I saw evidence of police corruption at first hand. On the way to Nairobi airport my taxi driver was stopped by a needless police check, and the officer requested a bribe to let us through; the driver refused, and it was probably only the fact that he had a white client which dissuaded the policeman from standing in our way. The routine bribing of police means that they turn a 'blind eye' to many things; this reduces the enforcement of legislation pertaining to health, safety and the environment. So matatus, the mini-buses which are the main

form of public transport in Kenya, carry more passengers than they should, with the result that they're ridiculously overcrowded; lorries carry heavier loads than they should, which has a damaging effect on the roads; and trees are felled and burnt to produce charcoal, which is openly but illegally sold by the roadside. The country has an anti-corruption agency, but it certainly has its work cut out. Corruption remains a serious disincentive to Western agencies wanting to invest in such countries. It is a sad indictment on the Christianity taught and widely practised in Africa that it appears to have had such little effect on standards of integrity in public service.

### Kenya's Economy

Kenya has a varied economy. Much of it is still a subsistence economy: people supporting themselves and selling small quantities into a local market. But Kenya also produces several commodities for export, such as cotton, tea, coffee, honey, nuts, fish, flowers and petroleum. I was interested to discover that the work of Traidcraft in Kenya consists not so much in helping individual producers as in seeking to engage with business sectors more broadly, building their capacity and helping producers to organise themselves more effectively on a collective basis. It brings farmers together in groups for better access to technology, markets and credit. This often means trying to reduce both the influence of middlemen and the complexity of the supply chain.

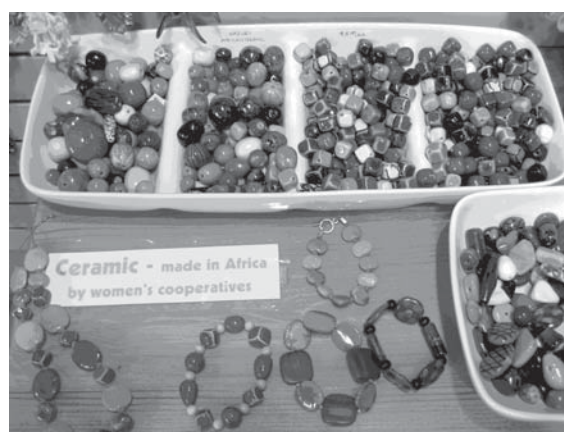
The challenges which the producers face are considerable, because with many of these commodities there is a surfeit of supply over demand in global markets. Kenya produces some excellent quality coffee, but so too does Rwanda and Ethiopia, among many other countries. The general picture has therefore been one of falling prices over the last two decades. The critics of fair trade argue that the raised price actually contributes to the problem by encouraging over-supply. However, this fails to allow for product differentiation: people will pay for different types of coffee, and fair trade coffee has developed its own niche market. Interestingly, fair trade producers don't necessarily benefit individually from the higher price made by Western consumers. This is because the 10% social premium paid by fair trade organisations goes towards improving the quality of life in the communities to which producers belong.

In the tea sector, Traidcraft is seeking active involvement with the Kenya Tea Development Agency in bringing about a more cooperative approach between tea farmers and tea factories, negotiating an improved deal for farmers. Edward Wambugu and his colleague Rosemary Mbogo mentioned recently certified factories at Iriani and Kiegoi, 300 kilometres north of Nairobi, as examples of encouraging work in progress.

### Three Crafts Manufacturers

When fair trade products were first marketed in the West, sale of handicrafts from African and Asian countries loomed large. While the focus has shifted increasingly towards food and drink products, and exports have dropped in recent times (jewellery and woodcarving can seem like expendable luxuries in a recession) crafts still feature significantly in the fair trade repertoire. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of member organisations of COFTA are crafts manufacturers. In Nairobi, I took the opportunity to visit no less than three – and was fascinated by the different position in the market each occupies.

The first was what appeared to be the market leader in the sector, Kazuri 2000. Kazuri is Swahili for 'small and beautiful'. This company was set up by a British



■ Kazuri beads ■

woman, Lady Susan Wood, in 1975, employing a few women making beads in a shed in her back garden. The business expanded rapidly after Mark and Regina Newman bought the

company in 2001. It now employs 340 people, mainly single mothers who are bussed in from the poorer areas of Nairobi; the factory itself is situated in the leafy suburb of Karen.<sup>9</sup> I spent a fascinating hour watching each stage in the making of necklaces and potteryware: the moulding of clay, the firing, glazing, painting, threading and clasping. Kazuri provides free medical care for employees on site, and pays for 80% of medical care off site. Its caring paternalistic approach reminded me of the great Quaker firms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Kazuri has become so successful as to achieve a brand name. It advertises its varied and beautiful products in the Kenya Airways Magazine, under the slogan 'Be happy. Be beaded. Be you'. Although a certified fair trade company, and one of the first members of COFTA, it is no longer dependent on fair trade outlets, having penetrated the global mainstream.

Safaribead, which is also located in Karen, is at a different stage of development. It has 15 regular employees, mainly Maasai women, but provides work for up to 50 when demand requires. It was founded by Lisa Barratt, who

emigrated north after being evicted with her husband from their farm in Zimbabwe by Mugabi's men in 2002. Specialising in hand-made beaded products, Safaribead does a good line in beaded sandals, and also runs a recycling business, turning discarded flip flops into toy

Ethical Fashion Forum, but they don't yet have the fair trade label. This is because the cost of certification with the WFTO<sup>†</sup> (around £1000) is currently more than they can afford. Management is having to make hard-headed decisions about priorities and returns.

### Prayer of Alphonse Omondi, designer at Safaribead, before starting work

Heavenly Father, as I enter this workplace,  
I bring your presence with me.  
I speak your peace, your grace, your mercy, and your perfect order into this place.  
I acknowledge your power over all that will be spoken, thought, decided, and done within these walls.  
Lord, I thank you for the gifts you have blessed me with.  
I commit to using them responsibly in your honour.  
Give me a fresh supply of strength to do my job.  
Anoint my projects, ideas and energy, so that even my smallest accomplishment may bring you glory.  
Lord, when I am confused, guide me.  
When I am weary, energise me; when I am burned out, infuse me with the light of the Holy Spirit.  
May the work that I do and the way I do it bring faith, joy and a smile to all that I come in contact with always.  
And Lord, when I leave this place, give me travelling mercy.  
Bless my family and home, to stay in order as I left it.  
Lord, I thank you for everything you're going to do.  
With much love and thanksgiving I pray in Jesus' name.

*This prayer is posted on the wall in Alphonse's workshop*

Trinity Jewellery is an even smaller business, situated in Kariobangi, a poor area of Nairobi. It is run by Joseph Muchina, who was plucked from the slums at the age of 14 to learn the art of making jewellery. It is called Trinity partly to reflect its Christians origins and partly because Joseph founded it with two young colleagues. Each piece of jewellery is personally designed by Joseph, and made by one employee from start to finish.

For Trinity, fair trade outlets are central in a way that they no longer are for Kazuri and have not yet become for Safaribead. In 1989 Joseph met buyers

animals and cars. Their employees include some very prayerful Christians, notably Alphonse (see panel above).

Safaribead operates according to fair trade principles, and is a member of the international

from two American fair trade organisations, Ten Thousand Villages and SERV International, and started to organise his company according to fair trade principles, which include providing sickness benefit and pension provision. He has sold to those



two organisations ever since, and they have proved faithful, sticking with him through good times and bad.

## Church Projects

While the Christian influence in each of these crafts manufacturers was clear, this became more explicit in two church-based projects that I visited in Nairobi. The PCEA<sup>5</sup> Community Centre is owned by a local Presbyterian church in the run down area of Eastleigh. Director Ehud Gachugu explained its aim as *restoring lost hope*. The community centre is working with people from difficult circumstances, including migrants, Muslims and orphans, and helping them to recover their dignity. Its primary focus is on children, and the Centre runs programmes in child development, community health, community empowerment and skills training. No less than 300 young people, deliberately selected from the poorest backgrounds, are trained in a variety of trades: pottery, automotives, home economics, metalwork, carpentry, ICT, hair and beauty, electricals, and fashion design. Along the way the trainees are taught Christian values such as honesty, stewardship, mutual respect, responsibility and integrity.

What especially impressed me was the holistic nature of Ehud's vision. For him the work of the church and the community centre belong together: they are concerned both for the life of the

world to come and the quality of life in the present world. Maximising wealth for the kingdom of God is closely connected to maximising the potential of Eastleigh's young men and women for starting their own businesses and escaping from poverty through entrepreneurial endeavour.

Equally impressive, and working in an even poorer community, is the organisation Bega kwa Bega ('shoulder to shoulder' in Swahili). Supported by St John's Roman Catholic Church, Bega kwa Bega



■ Former street women making beads at Bega kwa Bega ■

operates in the extraordinarily overcrowded slum of Korogocho (aptly named, because it means 'confusion'), where 120,000 people are crowded into a single square kilometre. Its chief mission is rescuing women from working as prostitutes on the streets of central Nairobi, an occupation from which many die by the age of 30 via a combination of AIDS, botched abortions and alcoholism. It provides alternative employment through the making of sisal baskets, patchwork bags, beads and dolls. The local priest comes in every Monday morning

to pray with the women. Directed by the splendidly named Ignatius Mayero, Bega kwa Bega operates essentially as a cooperative self-help society.<sup>6</sup> Like many other worthwhile enterprises in Africa, it is benefiting from a loan made by Shared Interest, the social investment company based in Newcastle, in this case to buy equipment such as sewing machines.

## Investment Capital

A company operating at a rather different level of society is Fusion Capital. I was put on to Fusion by the UK organisation Transformational Business Network, one of whose lead players, Phil Goodwin, has raised around £1.6m (mainly from individual fellow-Christians in the UK) to invest in small to medium-sized enterprises. In fact, as the Managing Director, Luke Kinoti explained to me, they have recently made a strategic decision to concentrate on the bigger, i.e. medium-sized clients.<sup>7</sup> Companies that have grown and produced a decent return with Fusion's capital include a tentmaker, a drycleaners, a barbershop/beauty centre, an optician, a baker, a rice trader and a uniform distributor. Fusion Capital's strapline is 'Home of Hassle-free Financing'; Luke prides himself on the fact that they are crystal-clear about their conditions and then keep to them. He sees that as a hallmark of Christian integrity.

Allan Bussard has raised capital for investing in East Africa from

a variety of sources, including affluent and generous Christians from Canada and the USA. In 2005 his Integra Foundation established TEN SENSES, which is now Slovakia's leading fair trade company. Along with supporting Children's Garden, a home for orphans and abandoned children on the edge of Nairobi, TEN SENSES' operations in Kenya are focussed on two main projects.

The first is a recently opened macadamia nut factory situated in Thika, an industrial town 40 kilometres north-east of Nairobi. I visited it. Macadamia nuts are one of the culinary glories of Kenya: whether raw, roasted or salted, they're delicious. Allan admitted that the company was having some teething troubles, partly to do with unreliable staff



■ Workers sorting macadamia nuts, Thika ■

and partly to do with the less than satisfactory buildings that they'd inherited, but the business clearly has great potential. They use nuts from two different farming communities, one in the north of Kenya and the other in the south; and since fair trade

certification requires approval of conditions at the farms as well as the factory, entailing additional visits, they were having to make a considerable financial outlay to secure this. The second project is an eco-tourist lodge which is currently under construction in the Taita Hills, an area I visited when I was on safari. This is being built on eco-friendly lines including solar energy, bricks made out of baked earth without cement, and furniture made out of local wood which elephants have already knocked to the ground. I will definitely be wanting to stay there if I ever return to the area!

### An Overwhelming Experience

So – this is my account of one week's experience of social enterprises in a country in the developing world. I cannot judge how typical or representative a sample this is. What I can testify is that during that week I met numerous friendly, helpful, hard-working people, driven by the highest of ideals, often inspired by their Christian faith, and doing their utmost to serve the people with whom they were working. The needs of the country in which they live remain immense. But one by one, little by little, bit by bit, these men and women are in the business of restoring hope. They are worthy of our support. ■

*Richard Higginson is Director of Faith in Business and a co-editor of this journal.*

### Website addresses of organisations mentioned:

[www.traidcraft.co.uk/  
international\\_development/  
overseas\\_programmes/east\\_africa/](http://www.traidcraft.co.uk/international_development/overseas_programmes/east_africa/)  
[www.shared-interest.com](http://www.shared-interest.com)  
[www.cofta.org](http://www.cofta.org)  
[www.fusioncapital.org](http://www.fusioncapital.org)  
[www.pceacc.or.ke](http://www.pceacc.or.ke)  
[www.kazuri.com](http://www.kazuri.com)  
[www.safaribead.com](http://www.safaribead.com)  
[www.cofta.org/en/en/  
members\\_details.asp?memberid=57](http://www.cofta.org/en/en/members_details.asp?memberid=57)  
(Trinity Jewellery)  
[www.begakwabega.com](http://www.begakwabega.com)  
[www.tensensesafrica.com/](http://www.tensensesafrica.com/)

### Notes

1. I am particularly grateful to Edward Wambugu, Regional Director of Traidcraft East Africa, for his helpfulness in this respect.
2. See [www.watercan.com/  
wherewework/kenya.htm](http://www.watercan.com/wherewework/kenya.htm). The figures for Uganda and Tanzania are similar; for Ethiopia they are a staggering 22% (water supply) and 13% (sanitation). The UK advanced beyond these primitive conditions 150 years ago. This delay on such a basic human provision contrasts with the alacrity with which Kenya has developed mobile phone services – including M-Pesa, the money transfer service.
3. So-called because the Karen Blitzen of Out of Africa fame lived in the area. The house in which she lived is now a museum; I visited it.
4. World Fair Trade Organisation, the new name of what was IFAT (the International Fair Trade Association). The re-launch took place at a conference in Kathmandu in May 2009.
5. Presbyterian Church of East Africa.
6. I also heard about (but did not have chance to visit) Beacon of Hope, a similar organisation working among women in another low-income area of Nairobi, Rongai. See [www.beaconafrica.org/](http://www.beaconafrica.org/).
7. Luke's focus with Fusion is complemented by that of his wife Mary Kinoti, a Methodist minister, who runs an organisation called Riziki, offering micro-finance to women living in the Kibera slum who want to start small businesses.