

Securing Homes for the Urban Poor

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JANE WERU, 48, is the executive director and founding member of Akiba Mashinani Trust and has cut her teeth fighting forceful evictions on behalf of poor slum dwellers. She is also this year's Rockefeller Foundation Innovation Award winner.

As a Law student at the University of Nairobi, Jane Weru recalls her professor inspiring her to complete her education so she can live an affluent life; that of a bigshot lawyer.

After college, Jane joined Murtaza Jaffer Advocates as an intern, and for the first time, she was exposed to poor people living in slum areas and in need of legal aid.

She found herself caught up in land tussles between the Government and the slum dwellers, a scuffle that can only be likened to that of David and Goliath.

"Murtaza Jaffer was very keen on legal aid and the labour movement. Working at his law firm shifted my area of interest and I began to appreciate the fact that the law should serve everyone, particularly the poor people," says Jane.

In 1994, she joined Kituo cha Sheria as the head of legal services and was later to rise to be its executive director.

At around that time, Father Alex Zanotelli, an Italian priest who lived in Korogocho, challenged Kituo cha Sheria to look into the fundamental problems of slum dwellers and the fact that they lived as squatters. In that regard, Kituo cha Sheria started a paralegal clinic in Korogocho to offer legal aid addressing squatter issues.

Forceful evictions

Most of Jane's work focused on public interest litigation on behalf of communities threatened by forceful eviction.

"Because of the multi-party politics then, land was used as leverage for political deals at the expense of the poor squatters who were consequently forcefully evicted by the police," says Jane.

In 2000, Jane along with Fr Alex, the Mary Knoll priests and other like minded organisations such as the Kenya Human Rights Commission, founded Pamoja Trust, a

non-profit organisation whose main aim was to secure land tenure for squatters in slum areas.

Pamoja Trust provided technical, legal and financial support to urban poor communities so they could work more closely with organisations such as the Slum Dwellers International, a global federation of slum dwellers, on developing solutions to their housing and land tenure problems.

They also came up with different tools to enable the Government deal with slum dwellers in a humane manner.

Through this, the slum dwellers were able to organise themselves and gather adequate information that would enable them negotiate for services. They mapped their own settlements, surveyed their populations and identified key infrastructure to develop.

Jane mobilised residents to save what they could spare and use the capital pooled to enter into negotiations with the Nairobi City Council. The slum dwellers managed to convince the council to give them land and negotiated for better services.

Starting small

A case in point is that of the slum dwellers in Huruma who started saving small amounts and are now proud owners of decent homes.

"We urged them to start saving as little as Sh10 per day and deposit this into a separate account. Slowly and steadily their savings grew and we managed to plan for 1,500 household units. Of these, 250 are complete and occupied," Jane proudly offers.

This was just the beginning of what would later become a national saving network of slum dwellers — Muungano wa Wanavijiji; the Kenyan Federation of Slum Dwellers.

The federation now includes more than 60,000 households in 400 informal settlements countrywide.

Jane is currently the executive director and founder member of Akiba Mashinani Trust (AMT), a non-profit organisation working on developing innovative community-led solutions to housing and land tenure problems for the urban poor in Kenya.

AMT is the financing facility of the Muungano wa Wanavijiji and Muungano Support Trust. Recently, 2,000 families in the Mukuru kwa Njenga slums were evicted from the railway reserve set aside by the Government. About 17 out of the 2,000 stranded families began frantically searching for a piece of land to relocate to, and they approached Jane and some members of AMT.

Jane and her colleagues encouraged the stranded families to gather several other families and start a saving network that would see them settle in decent abodes.

They began saving and a bank account was opened in November 2007 with only Sh900. Come January 2008, the network had grown and the savings were bountiful.

"All kinds of people crowded the banking hall to deposit their money. They were determined to get out of that status of being squatters and into being legal home owners," says Jane.

In just three months, the account had grown from Sh900 to a whopping Sh3 million. The members found a 23-acre piece of land near Mukuru, which they negotiated from Sh160 million to Sh104 million.

Saving the money and singling out a piece of land was one thing, but it was acquisition that proved difficult as it involved a tussle between powerful politicians who threatened to thwart the group's plans.

Eventually, the group managed to secure a loan of Sh55 million from a local bank and in November last year, they bought the 23-acre piece of land.

The Mukuru Greenfields Housing Project is set to start any time soon and it will comprise of 3,000 housing units. The first 200 units will be rolled out next year.

Due to her humanitarian efforts, Jane was awarded the Rockefeller Foundation Innovation Award in July this year. The Rockefeller Foundation supports work that expands opportunity and strengthens resilience to social, economic, health and environmental challenges. Jane received the award for her original approach to building a movement of self-empowerment and community-led solutions for slum dwellers.

As part of her recognition, the Rockefeller Foundation will give a \$100,000 (about Sh10.3 million) grant to her organisation to support her future innovative humanitarian work.

Jane believes that as Kenya celebrates her 50th anniversary as an independent country in 2013, she will have addressed the issues of urban land squatting.

"As we celebrate 50 years of independence, we can be honest about ourselves and recognise our inequality index and for the next 50 years, we can commit ourselves to make these wrongs right."

The mother of two says her biggest motivation is a high hatred for injustice. She loves to see all Kenyans treated equally irrespective of their tribe, political affiliation or social status.