

## **In ICA at 23: A Story of Curiosity, Courage, and Community**

**by Henry Ikatukhu Mpapale, June 2025**

It was a warm December morning in 1979. The Kawangware sun filtered through the patchwork of rusted tin roofs, casting dappled shadows on the narrow, dusty footpaths of the slum. I was 23 and had just moved in with my uncle, seeking better opportunities in Nairobi after leaving the village. Kawangware was a bustling hub and its market teeming with shouting vendors, the scent of spices and ripe fruit lingering in the air, and the chatter of city life all around.

That morning, my uncle gave me some money and asked me to fetch vegetables for lunch. I walked toward the market, my mind preoccupied with daily routines and distant dreams. As I neared the marketplace, something unusual caught my attention. Four white men, sharply dressed in shiny navy blue Kaunda suits, walked with purpose into a nearby building. In a place where such visitors were rare, their presence was magnetic. My steps slowed. Who were they? What were they doing here?

Though I carried out my task, their image stayed with me. Their presence seemed to hint at something larger, something beyond my current world. My curiosity got the better of me. Vegetables in hand, I approached the building they had entered earlier and made my way up the staircase. Each step felt like a movement toward something I did not yet understand but felt compelled to pursue.

At the top, I met Daniel Ndolo, a friendly young man, about my age. He told me he was a new volunteer at the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). I asked him what ICA was about and whether there might be opportunities for someone like me. Just then, Maxine Norton, a tall, dignified woman with piercing eyes and an air of leadership, appeared at the doorway. Daniel introduced us, and I was soon immersed in a conversation that would change my life.

Maxine explained that ICA was preparing to launch a Human Development Training Institute (HDTI) in Kamweleni, Machakos. The goal was to train community volunteers across Kenya to lead development from within their own villages. She assumed I was a city dweller and said the rural environment might not suit me. I quickly clarified: I had come from the village and was willing to return. I was not looking for a job, I was looking for meaning.

She paused, and then asked me to write an application letter. I ran back to my uncle's house, scribbled a short note expressing my interest, and returned promptly. But Maxine surprised me. Instead of accepting the letter, she told me to go and bring a plate, spoon, a change of clothes, and bedding. That was my initiation. I dashed back once again, gathered everything I could, and returned, breathless and ready.

She told me to wait for the team heading to Kamweleni that very evening.

## **Arrival in Kamweleni**

As the sun dipped behind the Ngong Hills, casting an amber glow over Kawangware, my stomach rumbled, I had forgotten to eat. Around 8:00 p.m., the ICA team arrived. To my astonishment, I had seen the same group earlier that day. Maxine introduced me to Doug Wilson, David Coffman, Larry Philbrook, and Boivin. Boivin was the only one familiar with Kamweleni; the rest of us were new.

We piled into a vehicle and began the journey. Their English was fast and accented, and though I barely understood them, I laughed when they laughed, nodded when they nodded, occasionally offering a “yes” or “okay” to stay included.

Kamweleni greeted us with silence and stars. We arrived at Kamweleni Primary School, where a modest house in the compound, constructed from red bricks and shaped like a water tank, served as our quarters. It had no chairs. Kay Heyes and Augustine, our hosts, welcomed us. We stood and talked for a while, then sipped strong, unsweetened coffee from large enamel cups. I struggled with the taste but feigned enjoyment, later discreetly pouring it out behind the house.

At bedtime, I was given a large mattress, which Augustine quickly exchanged for a smaller one, likely wanting to show hospitality, but also aware of the pecking order. I accepted it without question. We rose at 5:00 a.m. the next day.

## **Laying the Groundwork**

The morning air was brisk and invigorating, filled with the scent of dew-kissed dust and the distant calls of birds. Though I had been invited as a student, I arrived with the advance team and immediately plunged into the preparatory work.

We started by pitching tents, canvas shelters for the male trainees, tin structures for the female ones. Then we constructed a temporary kitchen and a multipurpose hall for meetings and training. The work was physical and exhausting, but I threw myself into it with zeal. My hands blistered, my back ached, but I felt alive.

One day, while giving instructions near a wall under construction, I noticed something odd: the other students had quietly stepped away. Before I could react, the wall collapsed. Instinctively, I ducked and moved with it. Then, remarkably, a second wall fell and shifted the weight of the first, saving me from serious injury. David Coffman urged me to get a checkup. We waited for transport, but it never arrived. In the end, I never went. I took the incident as a sign, I was meant to be here.

## **The Training Begins**

After three weeks of labor, the Human Development Training Institute launched. Kay Hayes was appointed Dean. By then Kay had acquired two dogs and named them Takataka (meaning “waste”) and Kwisha (meaning, “Finished”) in Kiswahili language. Her darkened kettle was always with the sugarless coffee.

We were over 30 students from different parts of Kenya, joined by trainers from around the world. Godfrey Mugosha from Zambia and Christopher Mufoya, from either South Africa or Namibia, led many sessions. We also had two Kenyans and one South American, whose names I have forgotten.

Training days began at 5:00 a.m. with the “Running to the Future Run” ritual. If you did not rise immediately, you were doused with cold water. From there, nonstop learning, group exercises, development theory, practical work, and singing sessions carried messages of global unity. We had songbooks with pieces from Asia, Latin America, and Africa, reflecting ICA’s global reach.

Meals were strict. We waited for everyone before eating. If someone took too much food, it was taken back and redistributed. Each meal began with a reflective ritual: “Let us eat this on behalf of those around the world who are hungry.” It was a daily reminder that we were part of a larger struggle, one that demanded humility, discipline, and solidarity.

### **The Area Council and My First Assignment**

After seven intense weeks, the Area Council convened as a grand gathering of ICA staff and partners from Kenya and beyond. Delegates from Chicago and other countries joined us in Kamweleni. This ranked as no ordinary meeting; it was a vibrant forum of strategy, report reviews, and new project assignments.

I was appointed to the Kyuluni Kivulusa Human Development Project. Where later, we were welcomed warmly. The local school offered us rooms to live in, men in one, women in another, and gave us access to their kitchen. The community’s generosity inspired us.

In this project, we mobilized locals to clear pathways, plant fruit trees, and improve their environment. Partnering with the public health center, we trained community health volunteers in hygiene practices. The volunteers reached out to households to build compost pits, dish racks, and latrines. First aid kits with painkillers and malaria tablets were kept and distributed by the health volunteers, and for serious medical cases, the health volunteers made referrals and arranged visits.

These initiatives, though modest, sparked powerful change. The villagers’ energy, combined with ICA’s methodical approach, transformed lives. I realized then that development is not about imposing ideas but cultivating the will and capacity of people to transform their own futures.

### **Chororget: The Challenge of My Life**

Months later, development leadership scheduled another Area Council in Kamweleni. Reports showed progress but also highlighted hardships, delayed stipends, and staff burnout. A new group of HDTI graduates stood ready for assignment.

I was reassigned to lead a new HDP in the Rift Valley. At this point, I was filled with great doubt. I felt too inexperienced. I needed more time to be able to lead such a project. My urge to quit was real. Instead, I was sent to Nairobi to help plan the project. There, working

alongside Joe Slicker, Doug Wilson, Stephen Poulanic, Darlington, and others, I regained my confidence.

Our journey to Chororget began at night. Government leaders, including a minister believed to be close to the president, were invited to join us for the launch. At 10:00 a.m. the next day, Joe introduced the project. Then, unexpectedly, I was called to speak. The next day turned very cold. My cloths proved inadequate for the event. Cold and unprepared, I stepped up. I do not remember what I said, only the warmth of applause that followed.

We spent the next five days in deep consultation with villagers, collecting social, economic, and cultural data. We visited homes, schools, and farms. From housing to health, from road networks to local leadership, we gathered it all. When we presented the findings, the village erupted in celebration. We heard their needs: additional schools, a health center, and road repairs. And within the first year, with community effort and ICA support, those needs were met.

### **Legacy of Service**

Looking back, I see how one curious moment in Kawangware reshaped my entire path. A question became an opportunity. An encounter became a calling.

Joining ICA at 23 was never about earning a wage, it was about finding purpose. It was about serving people, learning from them, and building something meaningful together. I learned that leadership starts with listening, that real development is rooted in dignity, and that courage often begins with simply saying “yes.”

To this day, I carry the spirit of Kamweleni and Chororget with me. That same fire, lit by curiosity, fanned by service, and sustained by shared humanity, has touched every project I have undertaken since, every community I have served. And it all began with a trip to the market.