

Nyamira Centre for Leadership		
Nyamira County Council of Elders		Patron: Dr Matunda Nyanchama matunda@matunda.org

Our Collective Role in County & National Development¹

We have an opportunity of a life time!

Accept our greetings from Canada where, unlike Kenya at the moment, we are in freezing winter temperatures. Like Mogusii said: *'ngongo n'ibere*.

I am glad that you have convened in the name of our recently formed county, one among 47 mandated in the recently promulgated constitution. I join you in this journey of development and hope that as we lay foundations for the future of our county, these foundations will be based on collective common good for us all in Nyamira, Gusii and our country Kenya.

Your commendable efforts are similar to those of our youth, working towards a Nyamira County Youth Forum, which will be a voice for the young people in the development of Nyamira, Gusii and our country Kenya.

I congratulate you for this effort. I know that many challenges lie ahead of us but with focus and determination, we will succeed as we move ahead.

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As a county (and indeed as a country Kenya), we stand at a crossroads with respect to development; we can choose the path of progress and a better future for us all; we can also choose the other obvious path of stagnation and retrogression. The choice is ours as a people of Nyamira and Kenya.

I will explain.

At independence, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta asked Kenyans and the government, as a matter of priority, to tackle poverty, ignorance and disease. More than 47 years later, we are faced with the same problems as we faced at the time, this is despite the great strides made, efforts invested and amounts of money poured into tackling these issues. We have rampant poverty, disease that could be manageable continues to debilitate families and communities; and we wallow in a lot of ignorance about how to do things, despite the number of people we have educated and the amount of money that has been poured into the education system.

Why?

I posit that it is because since independence, we have done things one way or the other, the results of which we live today. Those results include poverty, ignorance, disease, unemployment, corruption, tribalism, clanism, crime and many, many other ills.

Of these ills, my view is that ignorance has a disproportional weight. It is ignorance that tells us to discriminate against each other on the basis of clan and ethnicity, the latter breeding tribalism; it is ignorance that teaches us to focus on unproductive competition for resources (even killing each other as happened in the post-election violence of 2008) when the world out there is larger than can meet everyone's needs. It is ignorance that tells us to vote the same way we have voted since independence and hoped that results will be different; it is ignorance that keeps us divided rather than realizing we would be much stronger when united; it is ignorance that ..., fill in the blanks.

Someone has defined insanity as *doing the same thing over and over, the same way, and hoping for different results*. And I know we are all sane and hence must not be seen to repeat the mistakes of

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yesteryear over and over again, hoping that things will turn out differently; we must take responsibility for our destiny in our hands and work to make the future different.

We have experimented with ways that have resulted in the current mess of poverty, ignorance, unemployment, corruption, tribalism, clanism, crime and many, many more ills.

It is time said enough is enough; we deserve better! And as Mogusii says *gakiaborire 'nchera rogogo kerigerie 'nchera maate*. The choice ahead is clear: we continue on the same path we have followed since independence and we get the same results (perhaps worse!); or we do things differently in order to realize different and better results in the future.

Those better results we seek include good education for our children in Nyamira and across the country; better access to hospitals, medicines and medical care for our people; good infrastructure that allows us ease of movement our produce and other goods to markets; security that leaves us at peace so that we can conduct nation-building in a peaceable, secure manner; jobs for schools leavers and college graduates (and yes meaningful jobs that offer good returns that can support families); better prices for our produce like tea, maize, coffee, ...; better outputs of our produce like tea, maize, coffee, ...; name it! We all want things to work better for all of us.

As elders in Nyamira County, let's understand how best these problems can be tackled so that we can achieve better standards of living for our people. To do so, we need to understand the root causes of our current challenges.

For example, what causes an entire county to take fewer students (barely 100!) to university than one school does as happens in some instances? Why do our children schooled in Gusii fail at a higher rate than in other parts of the country?

Experts tell us that some of the root causes lie in clanism, for example where we protect teachers because they are our own – *'kebe 'nkiya monyene*, we say; forgetting that those that fail are also ours. Religion is yet another: we protect and defend those from the same religious organization as us to work in schools sponsored by that organization. Thus good teachers may be rejected just because they don't profess in the religious organization sponsoring the school. We are also are building too many schools with too few students, making meaningful competition nought! We forget that *eng'areka nero yagerete bokayia*; in the process we end up with wasteful use of the meagre resources at our disposal.

Parents also need to be more dedicated to supporting teachers in the education of their children; indeed, as a community we need collective commitment to educating every child we are blessed with.

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As with education, I would like to challenge us all today to reflect on each of the problems we face and their root causes. Then, in our plan for the future, we can tackle these causes systematically and ensure that we don't remain in the same spot we have been all these years.

We need to understand why poverty persists even when we have some of the best land and many, many people to work the land; we need to understand why ignorance persists despite the many educated people we have and the many channels of information there are; we must understand the causes of unemployment even as the economy keeps expanding and could expand even more; we must ask why clanism and tribalism are our mantra in Kenya, even when it hurts us all as a people and nation (for example: a clansman in parliament does not guarantee our development nor does a

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tribesman in State House); we must ask why today in Gusii crime is rampant and getting worse than it has ever been, and more so, why this degree of violent crime; ... and so on.

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Today, we in Nyamira County, like the rest of the nation, are lucky that we live in times of global flow of information. The government no longer has the monopoly of information and cannot control its flow; thus we can seek the knowledge we deem necessary, including how other countries have managed to stay ahead economically and allowed for their people to prosper, resulting in high standards of living. Today, we can learn without impediment about other democracies across the world and how it works for the people of successful nations.

We are also lucky in another way: we have a pool of educated people, many of them seasoned professionals, many that have traversed the world and have a wealth of experience that we could tap into. We are lucky that many of them still treasure our origins and are willing to share these experiences and knowledge in the development of our county and nation.

We are also fortunate in yet another way: we are blessed with a large healthy population that forms a large pool of labour for anything that we may wish to do, even as Mogusii says that *abange 'mbaya 'mbariete 'kiane 'nkaigwa bororo*. Many hands are good, although it also means that there are more mouths to feed. It is better when they are working for they can feed off what they produce as opposed to the current situation where they need to be fed when there is NOT enough for them to do! Now imagine that everyone in this county and across the nation gets fully engaged in working! In other words every man and woman, able-bodied and disabled, were able to be properly employed and giving their best? Just imagine!

There is more: in Gusii we have some of the most arable land that, used properly, can feed more than several provinces in the country; we just need to be a little smart about how we use the land to increase its productivity. That is yet another blessing we can count.

We also live in better times! What with the recent promulgation of a new constitution, of extended liberties and decentralized decision-making!

These are opportunities galore! We must not waste them!

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Our challenge as elders is to lead the way; we must demonstrate our understanding of where we have come from, where we are and where we would like to go. We must learn lessons of the past and ensure that these are applied to the way we conduct ourselves for the sake of posterity. We must be good examples for the youth and those around us so that we can positively influence their thinking and decisions. (In this respect, we must shun, in word and deed, ills like corruption, nepotism, clanism, ... etc.)

As we think of the future, remember, no challenge that we face is impossible for *what man has done, man can do*. The development we seek has been achieved by others in other parts of the world; we can learn from them. These lessons include how to run a good education system; how to run an effective healthcare system; how to run matters democratically; how to suppress discrimination, be it based on clan, gender, ethnic, etc.; how to create employment so that our youth are gainfully employed and not living lives of crime and extortion; how to mobilize resources for business and economic

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development and removing the dependence on donors and central government; how to ensure transparency in public affairs, devoid of corruption and embezzlement; ...

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We have an opportunity of a life time - let's make use of it for the better of those coming after us. And when we finally come to the end of our journey, we can look back with pride and say: we left a legacy and a better county and country for future generations.

The journey ahead is long and we must continually compare notes to make sure we are on the right path. The meeting today is in line with that process. And it is through such interaction that we can banish ignorance; it is the ultimate civic education for us all even as we embark on educating others. Civic education is the ultimate cure for ignorance!

I leave you with the words of John F. Kennedy

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country!"

Let's continually do what we can do for our country and people rather than keeping asking the country and others to do things for us.

As I said to the youth in sports forum a few months ago, remember that:

"If you have the will to win, you have achieved half your success; if you don't, you have achieved half your failure." David Ambrose

Signed

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