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A Bridge Over a River

A Tale from over the muddy Lemek waters

By Helen Mukui

Both the famous annual Mara migration and the 300,000 odd international visitors that come to witness this world-renowned spectacle, are about to descend on the emerald plains.

But there have not always been this number of visitors, and may not be so into the uncertain future ahead of us. The Covid-19 pandemic posed an enormous challenge to the tourism industry, visitors to the Mara hit an all-time low of less than 20% of the usual average number per month;

massive layoffs were recorded and, in some cases, camps closed due to low or no revenue at all.

The greater Mara ecosystem has experienced and is experiencing, numerous challenges including wildlife-human conflict, the erection of fences that are cutting off migratory routes, climate change and the uncertainty of seasonal rains, irresponsible tourism, over-tourism and changing outlooks from community members, lodge owners and politicians. These changes do

not only affect the vast herds of wildebeest and zebra that roam the plains, they affect the people who have made this landscape home for thousands of years.

Floods have become a life-threatening phenomenon in the region, as Peter Yiale, a Mara North resident tells us.

"I live near Ngosuani Primary School in Mara North Conservancy, here we are right on the Lemek River. My family need to cross the river every day for buying food, for healthcare

and more. In the past we waded the low water. Back when my children were young, I carried them. As they grew older, we held hands in a family chain so that we could cross safely. If the waters were flowing quicker, we would join this chain to other families. More people were always safer. Yes, we risked our lives but we had no choice."

Isaac Koonyi, the Chairman to the Board of Management at Ngosuani Primary School at Mara North Conservancy, says that over 45% of the school-going children used to miss more than 50% of their learning time at the school when the rains were heavy as they could not make it past the river.

The impact of the swirling waters ran even deeper. Market sellers, men and women who depended on sales to survive, were unable to cross the dangerous waters.

Peter and his community's situation have since changed for the better

with the partnership of Great Plains and Bridging the Gap Africa (BtGA). 3,000 people now have access to the recently constructed footbridge at the Ngosuani village. 350 children will be able to attend school come rain or shine, Peter and Isaac will be able to buy and sell at market, take their children to the clinic when needed and visit friends for advice and information exchange.

Bridging the Gap Africa is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of rural African communities by constructing footbridges that improve accessibility. Their approach emphasizes empowering communities through active participation and support throughout the bridge-building process. One of their long-term visions, in collaboration with the Great Plains Foundation, is to construct more bridges like the Ngosuani bridge. This initiative aims to positively impact the lives of conservation tourism communities in the Mara and Oloitoktok regions of Kenya. To

date, this is Bridging the Gap Africa's fourth bridge project in partnership with the Great Plains Foundation. Great Plains Foundation a non-profit organisation with footprints in East and Southern Africa that has been in operation now for twelve years. They intend to continue partnering with the communities in this constituency and in others, intending to bring about a positive impact on education and health.

Crossing a bridge is only easy if you have health. Education and food-health work together in symbiosis, as have Great Plains and Bridging The Gap here, to create equal opportunities for a better life. The Great Plains School Feeding Program continues daily in Kajiado County in the Shompole area, and on the Mbirikani Group Ranch near Tsavo, locales that lie close to several luxury camps operated by Great Plains.

Speaking during the launch at Ngosuani Foot Bridge, Marrieta





Keru, manager for the Great Plains Foundation Kenya, said that the school feeding program has already benefited an estimated 12,400 school children and this number is expected to rise as more come on board.

And yet there is more. Some of the other programs run by the Great Plains Foundation are the Mobile School Eye Clinic; which brings much needed medical services to rural communities.

For two decades, Bridging the Gap Africa has passionately pursued its mission to provide safe crossings for thousands by constructing over 80 bridges. These projects, exemplified by the Ngosuan area bridge costing Ksh 3.5 million, have saved lives and brought socio-economic benefits. By creating job opportunities for local youth, sourcing materials locally, and engaging skilled artisans and engineers across Kenya, they contribute to community development and foster cultural integration among workers. Bridging The Gap Africa's unwavering dedication has connected thousands of people, leaving a lasting impact on



the communities they serve who live in a Walking World.

All this work has not gone unrecognised. The Honorable Patrick K. Ole Ntutu, the governor of Narok County graced the bridge opening ceremony at Ngosuan and expressed a special gratitude to Great Plains Foundation and Bridging the Gap Africa for identifying a need and working in collaboration to build

a bridge that is one step in ensuring a more equal society for all.

While AirKenya brings many international visitors by way of air, those on the ground can be part of a once-in-a-lifetime Mara cultural and wildlife experience because they were better able to get to work, access healthcare and learn about the wider world outside at school ... all because of a bridge.