

## **Building Bridges through Sports: Addressing Tensions between Police and Youth in Kenya's informal settlement**

The tension between the police and the youth has heightened following the anti-government protests by the Kenyan Gen Z individuals in recent months. The clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement have led to a significant deterioration in mutual trust, with both parties viewing each other as threats. Many youths perceive the police as enforcers of an oppressive system, while the police see protestors as antagonists. The fallout from these confrontations has caused injuries and fatalities among young people, further exacerbating the already strained relationship in communities like Mukuru and Kariobangi. However, innovative initiatives, particularly sports programs, emerge as powerful solutions to reconcile these discordant relationships, facilitating dialogue and fostering unity.



*Anti-Finance bill 2024 riots in Nairobi, 25/07/2024 Photo by Reuters*

In many urban global contexts, the relationship between the police and young people can often be fraught with tension and distrust. In recent times, this dynamic has been sharply illustrated in the wake of anti-government protests led by the youth in Kenya. Incidents of violence, injury, and even loss of life have taken a toll, particularly in areas such as Mukuru and Kariobangi. Irene, a Police officer attached to the gender officer in Mukuru Kwa Njenga Police station, shares a poignant insight: “It has become increasingly difficult for us to get information from the community. The youth, who used to provide us with prompt information, now view us as enemies.” This sentiment highlights a critical issue—how can we bridge the divide that continues to widen between these parties?

The events surrounding recent demonstrations have created a significant rift that complicates community cohesion. For many young people participating in these protests, the police are seen as agents of oppression rather than protectors. Conversely, law enforcement perceives youth protestors as hostile threats. This breakdown in communication and understanding results in a cycle of mistrust and violence that can only be broken through conscious efforts aimed at rebuilding relationships.

In light of these challenges, sports programs have emerged as an unexpected yet powerful tool for reconciliation. Sports possess the unique quality of transcending barriers—be they social, economic, or even cultural. As a universal language, sports provide a platform for interaction that can soften the sharp edges of animosity and facilitate a sense of community.



*Youths participating in a Table Tennis game during one of the youth/ Police dialogue forum Hosted at Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Photo by Vision Changers Kenya*

One such initiative, **Hope Kwa Vijana Mtaani**, leverages table tennis to encourage positive engagement between youth and police officers. This project run by Vision Changers Kenya a Social Justice Organization, offers a neutral space for participants to share experiences and foster an understanding that transcends the tensions associated with their everyday interactions. When police and youth engage in friendly competition, they are reminded of their shared humanity, creating opportunities for camaraderie rather than conflict.

Irene observes that “Hope Kwa Vijana Mtaani has helped foster the Police relationship with the youth.” This has been crucial, as it allows for a reframing of perspectives—where once the youth may have viewed police as adversaries, the program helped mold them into teammates working toward a common goal.

The efficacy of the Hope Kwa Vijana Mtaani programs goes far beyond offering a physical outlet. It has served as a platform for dialogue, opening channels of communication that may otherwise remain closed. By participating together, officers and youths have been afforded the opportunity to engage in constructive conversations within a relaxed and non-threatening context.

Youth have been able to voice their concerns, frustrations, and aspirations while police gives them a listening ear, absorbing feedback, and responding in a manner that demonstrates their commitment to community safety and collaboration. Such dialogues has helped demystify the roles that each party plays in societal dynamics and aid in dispelling long-held stereotypes that perpetuate division.

As communities grapple with the aftermath of unrest, the need for relationship-building initiatives grows ever more critical. The unifying power of sports through the program serves not just as a tool for personal empowerment but as a foundational component in fostering trust and cooperation.

In a landscape where mistrust threatens to splinter communities, **Hope Kwa Vijana Mtaani** provides a vital lifeline—an opportunity to build bridges and foster dialogues that can lead to lasting peace. By harnessing the passion and energy of young individuals through sports, we have found a pathways to healing, understanding, and mutual respect.

In conclusion, rebuilding trust and healing divisions requires sustained effort, open minds, and innovative approaches. Hope Kwa Vijana Mtaani project offers an accessible and widely embraced medium through which police and youth can reconnect, challenge biases, and ultimately foster a safer and more unified community. As the emphasis shifts from hostility to collaboration, we continue to aspire toward a future marked by understanding—a future realized through the timeless and invaluable power of sports.