



Looking back over the last 10 years since our first Container Library & Learning Centre: Story 2

The First Library Was Also Almost The Last

I am packing my bags for the three months stay in Kenya. I have no idea what to expect and I am buzzing with anticipation. At the beginning of May our one and only employee tells me that he was offered a job with another charity and because we cannot guarantee that we will have a job for him next year - my idea was to run JBAC for three years and then ease off and let the project run on its own - would I mind if he takes it? Opportunities come so rarely in Kenya that I really couldn't say no. At this point I am not really thinking about how or who will help me with the very first library.

At some point before I leave for Kenya it dawns on me that I don't actually know how I am going to get the container off the lorry itself. Luckily YouTube knew. It is easy, 'they' said. Tie the container to a tree and drive off. The cheapest way to do it. Trust me, it will work. 'They' reassured.

I arrive to Kenya in the middle of June and the sky is grey and angry. I am thinking that is OK, I have at least three weeks before the container arrives and is cleared through customs. The weather will improve. Surely. Then the call, I am so eager to receive, finally comes. The container is here. I travel to Mombasa's port to help our Forwarder with the paperwork. The container seal is broken and the never ending stream of inspectors is lined up to do their thing. But first, half of the container is offloaded so the boxes can be opened and contents inspected. I did not see this coming.

Five hours later and only half way through the inspections I am ready to go home and get a stiff drink. No fewer than seven government officials spend two days compiling their report and nine days later fees paid, the container is ours. While in Mombasa I bought strong ropes for the container removal.

We are now in the middle of Ramadan and I just hope against all hope that the container will not be released on Friday as that is an important day for Muslims, especially in Ramadan.

But what do you know? It is Friday. And the rain was relentless over night. Everything is flooded, muddy and soggy. The driver arrives to the ferry, which back then is the only way to cross from Mombasa island to the South Coast and the tide is low. This means that the long and heavy lorry cannot drive onto the ferry because the approach is too deep. Four

hours later, the tide is high enough and the container is on the move yet again. I am pacing back and forth and triple checking everything. Well, actually just making sure that the rain didn't make the field too wet and that the mango tree to which we were going to use to pull the container off of the lorry is still standing. The field turned into slush!

There is a sudden change in the excitement and a distant rumble is reaching our ears. The lookouts I sent to the main road are leading the behemoth through the tiny, badly maintained, full of knee-deep puddles dirt roads to the final destination. The lorry crosses the football field with not much of a problem, but as soon as he drives onto the piece of land we want to use he sinks into the wet sandy soil. "Let's take the stuff out of the container, make it lighter and then we try again." I said still full of optimism. What took nine volunteers in the UK three hours, took 30 something people six hours in Kenya. Incredible. But the heat was rising and the house someone lend us was a bit further to go. So, I can't be too harsh. Plus pretty much everyone is hungry. Including me.

The container now empty is probably six tonnes lighter so hopefully the lorry will be able to drive to where the tee is awaiting. But no such luck even after a group of local men tried to help the lorry out of the ditch. It was amusing to watch when a line of young men started their upper body exercises in preparation. But even as their veins were getting dangerously prominent the lorry remained firmly stuck. We agreed that we will have to change the location and I selected a new mango tree. I must have looked like I knew what I was doing, where in reality I had no idea. The tree was mature and it looked solid. That was the extent of my judgement. So, the lorry driver pops the truck into reverse and once out of the ditch keeps reversing. And reversing. Despite the crowd screaming at him to stop he reverses into the newly selected tree and runs over a motorbike for good measure. I am close to tears at this point so I do a proper English thing, I went home and had a cup of tea and a slab of chocolate.

By the time I returned to the field, the lorry is repositioned in front of another tree. Yes another mango tree. We tied the ropes around the tree and through the container eyes. I should describe our lorry, which now I know was both a gift and a nightmare. You might not know, but when a lorry is transporting a container, empty or full, the container sloshes into locks which prevent it from sliding off of the lorry accidentally. To unlock it you need to have the right equipment or perform some cool trickery. Our lorry is a grain lorry not designed for carrying containers at all. This is our gift - it doesn't have the locks we have to worry about. And the nightmare, well when we try to test the method of dragging the container off the lorry we find that it has flaps that prevent the container from sliding out.

By now the crowd which started with around 200 bodies begins to thin out as the sun is slowly setting. Time for prayers and more importantly food. But a local welder, who turned out to be a great asset to our charity, comes to our rescue. He proceeds to cut off the flaps (not sure the drivers in the UK would let us do that to their lorries) and 20 minutes into his work the electricity in the entire village goes out. It's dark. Pitch black dark and I am ready to call it a day. But the electricity comes back on and Jay the welder does his thing. It is 11 o'clock by the time my weary head hits the pillow. We have an early start tomorrow.

I am up in the crack of dawn, although we are not meeting till eight. I come over to the field and am pleasantly surprised that people have already gathered. While the elders tie the ropes to the tree I go and speak to the driver. I first established that we do not need a translator, but wish I had one anyway. "To test the tree, please just drive a little, perhaps 2-3 meters" I said. "OK" he said. He drove and the container with incredible creaking moves by less than a few centimetres. The driver stops, looking pleased with himself. "That is great, but can you try for a bit longer test run?" I am trying to sound encouraging. He does as he is asked and everything is holding. Excellent.

"Now, drive and don't stop until you hear loud thud." I instructed. "OK" he agreed. And so he drove, and drove and then for no reason whatsoever he stopped. I am speechless. The container is barely half way off. It's just hanging half in the air, half on the lorry. That is it, we are done. I am thinking. But I must be the only pessimist in the now again large group of people. The rest are clapping each other on the backs and celebrating our victory. The driver starts up his lorry and tries to drive forward. Except the weight is redistributed, the ground is soft and all he achieved was digging himself deeper into the field. Before he even started, I asked if we could call for help. Some tractor or heavy vehicle that could pull him out. I was overruled. They, the men, will push him out. It has to be easier now, right? Have they learnt nothing yesterday?

They tried. I have to give them that. An hour. I am watching the wheels dig themselves deeper into the ground, while I am sitting on the ground actually shamelessly crying. Various male members of the community came to see me, patted me on the back and said 'why I am being so negative?' and sauntered off to push the lorry out of its predicament. And all I wanted to do was to yell that it is physics that making me upset, but I said no such thing. Eventually, one of the elders called for help. He called for a tractor, I was told. I felt an enormous relief, because it is almost 3 o'clock by now.

Another wave of excitement and I turned my head to watch the smallest imaginable (really I didn't even know tractors come in miniature) made its way onto the field. The tiniest tractor in the world is driven by the largest man walking the earth. Not just his statue but also his personality. Suddenly he was everywhere. I am trying to tell him to tie the ropes to the container itself and drug it out and only after it rests on the ground try and get the lorry out. Physics. But I am overruled, because after all I am the only woman in the group and what exactly do I know? I am also trying to say that they will need to coordinate and work together, but no one is listening at this point as they are busy preparing for what is to be a successful mission. Surely. They place wood, rocks and who knows what under the front wheels of the lorry as someone trying to tell the lorry driver how he should position his wheels. I am lost in all the shouting. In Swahili. I have no clue what is actually going on.

The tractor driver is behind the wheel at last. He honks and drives forward. Except, the lorry driver is not ready and his breaks are fully engaged. I watch in horror as the ropes pop, one by one, while the lorry hasn't moved an inch. Another burst of tears, because it is Saturday rather late and Ukunda may not have the ropes we need. I am not even sure I have the money to buy something half decent. But then someone suggest that we

should go and borrow some electricity cables that are by a road little way away. It is worth noting here that even borrowing electricity cables is punishable by prison, but what could we do?

We borrowed the cables. This time they were tight to the container and the tiny tractor succeeded in pulling the container out enough to drop it to the floor. Then he repositioned himself and eventually, after much tagging he managed to pull the lorry out. Physics. I was so exhausted, I almost missed the final big thud when it came. The container was on the floor and it was only the loud cheer that snapped me out to the present. I sighed a massive sigh of relief.

Except as soon as the container was on the floor and the happy ending celebrated by all a small group of young men come to see me. I thought they just want to know what's next, but instead they came to tell me that they have a big football match tomorrow. "That is so great." I said a bit unsure why I need to know. "Hmm, madam, (it's never good when they result to calling me a madam) the container is now in the middle of our football pitch." I am not sure I am hearing right and for a minute I just stare at him. But I snap into action, just in time to catch the mini-tractor before it drove off. I call the two drivers over and insist on translation this time. "What I need you to do, is to work together, where the lorry will push the container, while the tractor will pull the container away from the field." I smile a smile I don't feel. "OK" they agreed.

Another 45 minutes watching two vehicles working completely independently of each other, the container is in its final position. Nowhere near where it was supposed to be, but exactly where it is going to stay. I am not doing this again. Especially not by myself. This is the only Container Library Just be a Child will ever operate. I am adamant.