



Looking back over the last 10 years since our first Container Library & Learning Centre: Story 3

Communication Really Is The Key

Jay, our original employee returned to JBAC 12 months later, just in time to help with our second Library. We've built this one on the outskirts of Ukunda, in a village pretty close to the Shimba Hills region. And this gave me an idea. Why not build one in Shimba Hills?

I instruct Jay to start looking for the right location and get in touch when he finds one. We have taken a year off from building Libraries as we needed to regroup back in the UK first, and so we were keen to get started again.

Our 2018, 3rd library is to be located in the beautiful, but remote hills. The region is pretty big, spanning some 1,000 square kilometres, out of which 320 square kilometres is the National Park. But we are trying to keep our libraries close together, so we can manage them, but also so we can bring them together for activities and competitions. So I am excited about the location Jay proposes. And when he finally does, it sounds great. The distance from the latest library is rather larger than I would have liked, but free community land is difficult to find, so I didn't question it.

I made it to Kenya and before I even have the time to adjust to the climate we have a visit to Shimba Hills community planned. We typically travel by motorbikes and so I am not surprised when a couple show up to whisk us to our meeting. What I am surprised at is to learn it will take us an hour! At first we follow roads I know and I am pretty relaxed. I love the bikes. I am a bit antsy when we go through sand though. Before I can get too comfortable we turn off the tarmac and onto the dirt roads. Well we are going to the Hills, so that is what is expected. Right?

We begin the climb. And we climb. And climb. We go past some amazing scenery, but I am too preoccupied by trying to stay on. I am gripping the bike so hard I can't feel my knuckles. The bike fishtails through loose sand more than once and I literally close my eyes until it's over. My butt begins to feel every bump and my back is pretty sore. We narrowly miss falling into a ditch when an extremely fast rider hurtles in the opposite direction on the only tiny piece of road that is passable. And when I say tiny, it is pretty much just the width of the bike's tire. We finally made it. I am trying not to think about the journey back and do all I can to focus on the meeting.

As it often happens the community wants the container in a position we just can't put it in. No lorry could drive through, around or under where they want it. We agree on location that seems to work for everyone and only then I have the chance to speak to Jay in private. "What on earth possessed you to place the library all the way up here?" I ask incredulous. He looks a bit upset and unsure how to response "You said put the library in Shimba Hills. This is the only Shimba Hills Village." And then it dawns on me, where I was talking about the hills, Jay thought I want the library in Shimba Hills and just can't be bothered to add the Village to the conversation.

Now what? We have an incredibly excited community that is going to be almost impossible to reach. "How are we going to deliver the container all the way up there?" I asked. There are different, better roads everyone reassures me. Well, there are different roads leading to the Village, but they definitely didn't prove to be better.

And this is how our miscommunication led to yet another dramatic container delivery. Here is what happened:

The container arrived to Ukunda, the base before the turn off to the hills, on a very old and rather weak sounding lorry pretty late in the night. Early in the morning volunteers assembled, matatu (local minibus) loaded with bodies and supplies set off pretty much on time. The lorries - there were two - followed soon after. It rained over night, of course it did but on top of that the government decided to rake the dirt roads. Pretty much just loosened up the top layer of sand in preparation for some future works. We struggled in the matatu and I didn't even want to imagine what the lorries will make of it.

We arrived at Shimba Hills Village an hour and half later and waited for the lorries. And we waited some more. We've eaten half of our supplies and the lorries were still nowhere to be seen. Eventually, I call Jay who tells me they are stuck again. The fifth time. This time it doesn't look like they will make it out. I propose to take the stock out of the container again and this time everyone agrees. The problem with taking the consignment out just about anywhere is that the onlookers become too inquisitive and that is when stuff starts to go missing. But we were stuck in the middle of steep incline and had no choice. We organised transport and piled into the tracks heading back down the hills. We arrive to a scene of complete carnage. The sand, already loosened by the road workers was churned up by the lorry's wheels spinning.

So, we offload some of the cargo into the spare lorry that is heading, with our items, to the West Country, just before the dark descends. We assumed that the second lorry will make its way down and leave, but the driver's solidarity was touching. He stayed to assist. And so, most of the guys decided to sleep there - in and under the lorries' cabs. The local people gave them food and all reported in the morning that they actually enjoyed the night. I was at home, in the comfort of my bed. I enjoyed it too.

The plan was that as soon as the lorries start moving I will get a call and I will make my own way up to the Village. It was 11, then 12 and still nothing. I am calling Jay every few minutes but the signal isn't great. No point in leaving messages. In the end he called. "We

made it to the Village. The lorry's fuel line broke three times. We had to repair it. Even emptier it couldn't make it up here, so we ended up towing it." He reports obviously exhausted. "I am coming." was all I managed to reply.

By the time I got there, the container was empty. But I couldn't fully understand what I was seeing. Rather than reversing and half turning, so the container can be dragged off by a heavy vehicle recovery machine, it was side on. And the deep grooves in the opposite, extremely sandy field showed signs of more unfortunate manoeuvring by our unfortunate driver. "He has no skills." the now grumpy recovery driver tells me in a whisper. From the little I've seen of his driving I have to agree, but I am in no position to judge. Two days later, we have finally delivered our third container. I am not looking forward to the frequent bike rides up and down this road, but it ended up being a perfect choice of location. There is nothing anywhere near here for children to engage in after school.

Some of the people that helped us overnight came to help some more. It was so kind of them. They just wanted to be a part of our project. We have donated books to them all and made sure we got in a round of tea and mahamri (local unsweetened doughnut).