

This Travel Company Is Helping a Nairobi Slum During the COVID-19 Pandemic

BY JENNIFER FLOWERS

As survival becomes harder during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nairobi's second-largest slum, Micato Safaris is offering residents a glimmer of hope.

In Kenya, failing to wear a face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to arrest.

But for the estimated 300,000 souls living in Nairobi's densely populated Mukuru slum—where the average daily income is \$3—the prospect of buying a mask is slim to none.

“A parent [in Mukuru] has to save for basic needs: paying rent, school fees, buying food,” says Christine Obara, a Nairobi-based social worker at Micato-AmericaShare, the nonprofit arm of Micato Safaris, a family-run outfitter that started in Nairobi in 1966. “Buying a mask right now is a luxury they cannot afford. And currently you can see that nobody's working, which means most people are going hungry.”

As pandemic-related trip postponements have quieted the business on the safari side of things, closures and restrictions across Kenya have only intensified the work of Obara and her team in Nairobi's second-largest slum. They often work seven-day weeks to continue their mission to improve the lives of impoverished and vulnerable women and children through education. But additional concerns—the prohibitive price tag of face masks, the closure of schools, and the worsening problem of hunger—have added new challenges.



Micato-AmericaShare team members visit Mukuru, Nairobi's second-largest slum and the site of the nonprofit's education and empowerment work.

AmericaShare has pivoted quickly to address them by leveraging its long-standing ties in the community and zeroing in on those who are neediest, according to Lorna Macleod, the New York City-based founder and director of AmericaShare and sister organization Huru International.

“Because of our longevity there, we know who the most vulnerable people are,” says Macleod. “Our social workers are known in the community, so if people are in dire straits they will reach out to the social workers and ask for help.”

Since the founding of AmericaShare more than 30 years ago, Micato guests have been able to engage with Micato's community work as an add-on to their safaris; many visit the organization's projects in Mukuru, and end up becoming philanthropists, creating lasting connections with the community



Through AmericaShare's COVID-19 feeding program, \$40 can feed a family of six for a month.

there. And regardless of whether a guest visits Mukuru, Micato commits to sending one child to school, through high school graduation, for every safari booked.

Providing face masks

Huru International, AmericaShare's sister organization that educates girls on reproductive health, has a factory near Mukuru that makes reusable sanitary pads for girls in East Africa, which helps to keep them in school when they're menstruating. In March, factory redirected 70 percent of its production to washable and reusable face masks, the lack of which not only potentially exposes residents to COVID-19, but also prevents them from leaving their homes in search of jobs out of fear that they might be arrested.

"Christine [Obara] told me that people had been knocking on Huru's doors saying, 'I know you know how to sew—can you make us masks?'" recalls Macleod.

Huru has produced 60,000 masks to date, even while faced with hurdles such as implementing safe working conditions for the 55 workers at the factory and local shortages of fabric and elastic.

Fighting hunger

Obara, who was born and raised in Mukuru, is no stranger to the myriad issues residents face in her former home—the top one being hunger. When she was a young girl, she and her

twin sister lost both parents. They were living with their aunt in 2006 when they became sponsored students of AmericaShare. Both girls ended up attending college; five years ago, Obara joined the nonprofit group as a social worker. "The biggest issue is food," says Obara. "We are not sure how long this pandemic will last, and this means that people will remain unemployed and won't be able to access any source of income."

Until recently, AmericaShare did not have an official food donation program, which according to Macleod is complicated, extremely difficult to handle correctly, and usually best left to specialist Mukuru-based NGOs that specialize in food programs. But because the need has become more acute during the pandemic, AmericaShare entered a partnership with a local grocer to create and distribute bundles of food using donated funds from the travel world, including Virtuoso and Signature travel networks, and even past guests, one of whom recently donated \$20,000. The bundles, which cost \$40 each, can feed a family of six in Mukuru for a month.

"This is a different set of circumstances from normal, and dire enough that we have to address it somehow," says Macleod.

Obara's recent mask deliveries within Mukuru have revealed to her just how urgent the hunger situation is becoming on the ground. One resident named Hilda, a single mother with five kids, told Obara she was grateful to finally have a mask so she could leave her house to find work and put food on the table, without fear of being arrested. On another visit to a single mother named Beatrice—who has six children and

is the household's breadwinner—Beatrice took out a head of cabbage, the only food for the family that day—and cut it into pieces for Obara to thank her.

“The need is still growing but I’m grateful for the number of people we’ve been able to help,” she says.

Continuing education

In addition to mask making and hunger relief programs, AmericaShare has been continuing its core mission to keep its sponsored kids from falling behind on lessons during school closures, but rules on gatherings and a lack of smartphones for digital learning have added new hurdles. AmericaShare’s own library and computer center remain shuttered.

“We’re really wrestling with how to keep these kids up to speed,” says Macleod, who adds that most families in Mukuru have one phone per household. “Other kids their age who are middle class and at boarding school have access to computers and internet at home. But even if everyone had a smartphone in Mukuru, it still wouldn’t be enough because there’s no internet.”

For the time being, AmericaShare is purchasing review textbooks from the Kenyan government for all sponsored children between first grade and high school, and it allows them to follow along with lessons.

“We’ll actually have physical workbooks so we can sit in their house and go over them,” says Macleod.

As for Huru’s sex education programming—which is especially important right now, according to Macleod, because more young women are out of school or out of work, and more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy—Huru plans to go from household to household in small groups to continue their work while abiding by social-distancing rules.

Obara stresses how important education is for young people who have dreams of leaving Mukuru forever one day. Over its 30 years in existence, AmericaShare has seen sponsored kids forge their own professional paths as doctors, accountants, and hairdressers.

“A lot of children are coming through the same system that I did,” says Obara. “They’re getting their lives in line and facing life just like any other person who got support from people in the same career path. It has made us equal and has given us access to the same opportunities as everybody else.”

Both AmericaShare and Huru International are accepting donations for their relief efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For AmericaShare, contribute [here](#), and for Huru, contribute [here](#).



A typically exuberant classroom, led by Peter Mithamo at a school near the Micato-AmericaShare Harambee Centre.