

Permaculture Training and outreach in Kenya: PermoAfrica



Lilian at PermoAfrica training centre. Photo: Paul Ogola

Permaculture training and outreach for local food security in Kenya

Part of the Community Gardens
Beyond Communities Series 2021-22

Wednesday October 27th 2021
14.00-16.00 UK Time
Held online via Zoom



Lilian, Homa bay resident and trainee who has become a teacher and community leader through this work, working with and inspiring the next generation

The community garden story for Homa bay begins with Paul Odiwour Ogola and the PermoAfrica centre. PermoAfrica is a seed bomb which has spread to more than 40 surrounding communities, this has come about through both the demonstration of permaculture techniques through the centre and increasingly by the outreach work and teaching of Paul and the PermoAfrica team, which he has slowly built from his trainees.

PermoAfrica has become a hub, an engine seeding new projects in surrounding communities. The first step for most of these new hubs was to begin as a form of community garden, designed and planted as part of a training program devised by Paul. Through this hard work Paul has learned how to communicate permaculture in very practical and methodical ways and has clearly connected with and energized those he has worked with. Permaculture is a design approach, much more than the sum of its parts, it is not the compost heap but why, what you make it from, where to put and it how to use compost. It is a way of thinking beyond a set of techniques.

At the hub all manner of techniques and approaches are demonstrated, Paul is ever experimenting and trying out new things. A worm farm sits in the shade of his food forest, with passive water catchment and management, this is a daily hub for training sessions, and the whole site is put over to intensive growing, plant propagation, freshwater fish cultivation, insect farming, the list is endless.

Once visitors have been inspired by these demonstrations the question Paul has been wrestling is, how to enable trainees to translate and communicate these ideas to bring back to their own community? In many ways the early adoptees are faced with the same dilemma experienced by Paul after his initial permaculture training in Uganda, how to pass it on?

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This is the PermoAfrica classroom, built through donation and located at the demonstration farm

Through the S39/ PermoAfrica partnership we have been able to work closely with Paul over the years and to understand much more deeply how he is achieving these amazing outcomes. Permaculture needs to be seen, and an evolved, mature, and complex permaculture system is something which speaks volumes. Not only highly productive in food and other useful materials, but also running on its own waste, on harvested rainwater and sunlight, with only the minimum being bought in from outside. It is inspiring not least because through working with the local natural resources, commonly available or affordable, permaculture is accessible to all.

Lesson one when Paul approaches a new host community for the first time is encourage and challenge those participants to observe. To really begin to think about what their own needs and priorities are and what potential resources they might have to hand, especially those which they haven't previously valued like cow manure and dry grasses. The second challenge Paul gives to a host community is to think about ways to catch and store energy, how to build up soils with compost, to look for ways to trap rainwater in the ground, to save seeds, to use dry grasses for shading and mulch; these are the building blocks of productive systems, and many are already there within a community.

There is plenty of space for the participants to contribute their local knowledge and experience but this process shapes activities to action. Raised beds are made with available local materials, be it stone, wood, bamboo, sacks and with a layering of compost and soil as the beds are formed, observing this process serves as the first lessons in soil science and biology. These beds often have inbuilt compost towers which again encourage the trainees to interact and learn through experimentation as they manage the system.



These simple rules, demonstrate how you can build simple productive systems – gardens that will help feed you, with what you have already. To observe and try out new things, to aim to use the materials available in the locality, to learn to recycle everything and with these observations you can design ways to catch and store energy and which ultimately generates yields, ever more efficiently. The yields stretch beyond the vegetables to the lessons learned, new community connections, fertile soil, and renewed enthusiasm, these are all valuable outputs.

These simple ideas are the first 6 principles of permaculture, and they are beautifully and powerfully communicated through the series of training sessions run by Paul and the PermoAfrica team. He has already reached over 40 villages and each of those community gardens has started to build its own community around it.

Of course, there are many challenges and much has been learned along the way. The SUII project has given us a moment to reflect on the journey we have made so far and the chance to compare experience from across the globe. The community garden has so much to offer the world at a time of increasing food insecurity and social isolation.

Those interviewed on our evaluation visit in Sept 2021 told us that a community garden is a place to re-connect with community roots, to rediscover a connection with the soil, to learn to garden in a way that is somehow new and a way to value some of things being taken for granted.

For some participants these shared spaces have connected with memories of a more integrated society from previous generations. We are reminded that communities

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are around the world are experience pull of consumerism and individuality. Some participants see these gardens as full of potential to contribute to a wider and more profound change far beyond enhanced food security.



Positive outcomes	Challenges
Regular supply of green vegetables	Some people are jealous
Able to sell surpluses for cash	Your neighbour can block the way
Helped pay school fees	The husbands may want money from any sale of produce
We enjoy community	Water is a problem
We have built more beds	We need money for seeds and tools
During covid we came as family groups	
It can really inspire the children and youth	

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(above) PermoAfrica team member and Homa Bay resident Lilian enrolls at Garissa University to study sustainable development. Inspiration can travel far



(above) Another satellite community garden to PermoAfrica in October 2021

Origins of this partnership



(above) Paul with S39 tutor Richard Stephenson in 2016

Community gardens and community growing projects embody many of the characteristics and the personality of the communities they serve. They are also shaped and defined by those pioneering individuals who initiate them. As much as this is a story of the creation of an amazing network of permaculture inspired community gardens, it is also the story of permaculture pioneer Paul Odiwour Ogola, a blacksmith and small farmer from Homa Bay County in Western Kenya.

Through a project initiated by Dundee University, as part of the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) we have been afforded the opportunity to go and visit Paul at the PermoAfrica training centre he created, something which grew out of a series of three Permaculture Design Courses, led by myself and the Sector39 team from Wales, commencing in 2016. A PDC is 12 days of training in the ethics, principles, and design tools of permaculture. It is practical, based on observations of ecology, and society and adaptable and relevant to every climate zone or culture. I would argue that the power of permaculture is that it is universal.

My home nation Wales may be small, but it has big ideas and one of those is the Well Being of Future Generations Act. We must view all future policy through the lens of how it might impact on future generations. Wales as a nation seeks to find and invest in truly sustainable ways forward for a global community. From that flows a Wales for Africa fund which has helped support an amazing range of small NGO's and projects which have developed relations and friendships between Wales and Africa. It was through *Dolen Ffermio*, the Farmer's link charity from nearby Llanfyllin

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that I became involved in a project which ultimately led to the opportunity to pilot a PDC for the network of Ugandan partners from that same charity.

Through the wonders of the internet and some generous small donors, the Sector39 team was able to offer some fully funded places on the first of these PDC's to people we had met online from further afield. Paul was clearly keen to learn and was reaching out to connect with new people and new ideas and was instantly interested in permaculture. That thirst led him to the first S39 PDC in Kamuli Uganda, May 2016.

Paul did not know how to even begin sharing and explaining what he had gained to his family and community when he returned after the course but was fully inspired and motivated to begin something which built on what he had learned. His exit interview from that 2016 course is interesting to look at now. (Posted at the end)

That first PDC was a very steep learning curve for all concerned but we all instantly knew we had started something we could build on. With some support from the Wales for Africa program we were able to repeat it in 2017 in the same venue and with the same team, but this time with more participants. Also, with some seed funding behind us and some support from a small German NGO we were also able to start planning for a 2018 course as well, our first time opportunity to look and plan ahead.

2017, returning for the second PDC Paul came back to experience it again, but this time he came with 3 others from his community he had handpicked, each a representative from an outlying village from Paul's home area of Homa Bay County. He had already begun building his network he came to tell us how much the first PDC had impacted on him and how much he wanted to build on it.

“Before the PDC I was like a man in the dark, I was reacting to things, but never planning ahead. I realised when I got home that the only way I was going to be able to explain permaculture was to demonstrate it. I resolved to start a training centre”

I am paraphrasing Paul's words, but it is from this commitment and vision, to bring permaculture to his community that created PermoAfrica and the community gardens which are the product of that.

PermoAfrica was born the days and weeks after that 2016 course and it quickly drew interest and began to inspire people from around the world. The power of Facebook and the power of a good idea, Paul has attracted a bedrock of support locally, but also from around the globe with donors, visitors, volunteers, and students coming from ever further away. PermoAfrica's goal is alleviating food poverty in Homa Bay country, with a population of over a million people, this is no small ambition, in this process the centre is also inspiring the world.

In 2018 Paul came again to the PDC with community leaders and pioneers from another set of local villages, this time held within a school in small town called

Ssanje. This was a much larger course and this time the setting and the fast-growing training team allowed for much of the teaching and practical sessions to be led by graduates from the previous courses, Paul included. In the that time Paul had built up the PermoAfrica centre and built a network around it, but it was after this that things really developed as skills were sharpened and the objectives became clearer.

Pandemic and post 2020

Sector39's role has been to initiate this peer-to-peer learning process, and then stand back and to try and nurture and support that to become a network of its own. We have loosely called this idea the Academy of Permaculture a network that might link together pioneering educational hubs for permaculture across east Africa and beyond. From Jan 2020 S39 won support from Arkleton Trust in UK, who seek to support knowledge sharing in this kind of context, and from this has grown a three-year project to develop and learn from this whole experience.

Restrictions on travel has made work more locally focussed and we would welcome the freedom to exchange students and volunteers more feely between the various projects. We look forward to 202 and the potential to run a PDC with Paul at Homa Bay and have the opportunity follow through on project evaluation and leave PermoAfrica in a place where it is supported by the wider academy network but not dependent on that.

One-line resources

- 5 minute video produce for SUII project
- Paul Ogola PDC exit interview 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkPiN7NE9eI>

- Tweets from the 2017 PDC #pdcug17

https://twitter.com/search?q=%23pdcug17&src=typed_query&f=top

- Tweets from the 2018 PDC #pdcug18

https://twitter.com/search?q=%23pdcug18&src=typed_query&f=top

- A tour of the PermoAfrica centre, Nov 2020

<https://youtu.be/Gw2k-LygJUk>

- Paul Ogola in 2021, some closing thoughts to the most recent trainee group

<https://youtu.be/Z55aQQv0xyA>

- Paul Ogola in 2021 – Inspiring the next generation

<https://youtu.be/t9SHBCBkHaM>

- Stella Amuge from S39 visits community garden in in Homa Bay Sept 2021

<https://youtu.be/zYdu9UUeal>

