

## **Toronto – Nairobi: Newspapers, Media, and Human Rights**

*by Kennedy Odede and Wojciech Gryc*

*A similar piece to the one below was published at the University of Toronto at Scarborough's student newspaper, The Underground.*

One of the most heavily fortified structures in Prague is a radio station. Right next to the National Opera, men with machine guns stand guard and let no passers-by peek into the massive building. Roads are blocked off, and inside, journalists broadcast messages of democracy to Iran, Belarus, and other “enemies of democracy.”

Contrary to what declining newspaper subscriptions might appear to say, the press and radio are alive and kicking, being used by massive governments and small grassroots associations alike. Indeed, the newspaper you hold as you read this article is more than just a sheet of paper, it is a tool that can be used to help or hurt, make weep or smile. Stories of big media are often heard, but rarely do grassroots groups have their work promoted or repeated.

Free press – or any press at all – is often difficult to find in some regions of the world, where media companies find unprofitable markets or people are too poor to afford such products. It is in Kibera – one of the largest impoverished areas in Africa, just outside Nairobi, Kenya – that one such group exists. Called Shining Hope for the Community (SHOFCO), it is a group spearheaded by Kennedy Odede, a young resident of Kibera.

Formally registered as an organization a year ago, SHOFCO is volunteer-led, and focuses on using members from the community to help promote their own well-being, be it through organizing social events, youth groups, or one of their latest projects, starting a community-led newspaper. In areas such as this, it is often difficult for large organizations and institutions to be successful: Kibera is rarely seen as a priority, and most institutional representatives who visit arrive with guards and armored vehicles. No resident can relate to such a foreign group, and most projects leave soon after the armoured trucks and diplomats.

Local projects are often met with much skepticism as well. Informal associations, started by youth, and lacking major funding are often met with distrust, in some cases even by the local churches and schools. SHOFCO prides itself in being a group that simply acts, rather than waiting for approval or support from others. Members of Kibera often contribute with time and resources they have on hand, and organizing social events that focus on improving the community do not need the approval of external groups.

Within the last year, with the help of Five Minutes to Midnight (FMM) – a group run by UTSC student Wojciech Gryc – SHOFCO was able to start a youth-led newspaper. Typical of SHOFCO's projects, the newspaper started small and is continuously growing, without the need for serious funding. It reaches a total of 300 youth, and focuses on any topic of interest to those involved or those reading. The first issue was published during the summer of 2006, and since then other community groups have noticed: an eye clinic has used the newspaper as a way to promote free eye exams, while the youth themselves have taken the writing and journalism to heart, constantly working and trying to improve the newspaper.

And with this, SHOFCO and FMM look ahead. This upcoming summer, Wojciech Gryc, Kennedy Odede, and Hannah Renglich, another FMM volunteer, will be working together in Kibera to build on

the newspaper SHOFCO started and help train the youths in their journalistic skills. The project, called the Article 13 Initiative (A13I), is following in the footsteps of a similar project run in Chad in December 2006. It prides itself in using open source and freely available software, with low-cost computers and custom tutorials and workshops.

It is media at such a grassroots level that often makes the biggest difference, and SHOFCO and FMM are just at the beginning of a long journalistic journey.