

Jumping into the unknown: field studies in Kenya with a peace-building church



Before arrival

I first heard about KTH's Field Studies program during a lunch presentation. It sounded interesting, so I told my friends about it, but none of them wanted to join. I spoke with my mentor in Computer Science, who encouraged me and talk to the program coordinator, and I eventually got special permission to do my bachelor's project alone. I started calling around and eventually got in touch with FPFK, a church in Kenya, and they agreed to host me.

Honestly, I had no real idea of what I was getting into. I contacted a vaccination clinic and got all the necessary shots: typhoid, cholera, hepatitis A and B, polio, and yellow fever (which is required for entry into Kenya). The vaccines alone cost over 3,700 SEK. They also wanted to charge for prescribing malaria tablets, so I decided to wait and buy them locally in Kenya, where they were much cheaper. Getting a visa was very easy. I applied for a tourist visa, as recommended by my contact person at FPFK.

Upon arrival

I was picked up at the airport by a taxi and dropped off at the guesthouse where I would be staying. After some time, my contact person stopped by just to say, "Hi, I'm flying out now, back on Monday, bye!" So there I was, my first week in Nairobi, completely clueless.

That week, I met someone who was traveling to Kitale, which I thought was where I needed to go to meet the people working on the system I was supposed to evaluate. When my contact returned, I asked about the plan. She basically said, “Well, there’s nothing for you to do here, you need to go to Kitale.” I told her I had met someone going there the next day and maybe I could travel with him. She agreed, as long as she could meet him. The next morning, he came by to say hello, she took his number, and we left for Kitale. I never saw her again. Luckily, after some adventure, I made it to Kitale and received a very warm welcome there.

Financials

One of the first things I did was get a Kenyan SIM card and set up M-Pesa, Kenya’s equivalent of Swish. In general, Kenya is much cheaper than Sweden, but because I’m white, I often had to pay more. If you don’t stand your ground, people will try to take advantage of you. For example, using a motorcycle taxi (a *boda boda*) typically costs 50 KES, but some drivers would ask for 250 KES just because they assumed I had money and didn’t know the real prices.

Being white also led to culture clashes. Everywhere I went, people would shout “Mzungu” or “white person,” and ask for photos. In more rural areas, some people had never seen a white person before. Children especially, and sometimes adults, would come up and touch my arms or hands out of curiosity. People often wanted my number, I think it carries some status. Since I interviewed many of these people, I felt a responsibility to reciprocate. I usually gave out my Kenyan number, but sometimes had to use WhatsApp, which meant giving my Swedish number. I still receive messages from people I met almost every day.

Accommodation

In Nairobi, I stayed in FPFK’s guesthouse. In Kitale, I stayed in their hostel. When we traveled for field visits, we stayed in hotels. I had to pay for my own accommodation during field trips, but FPFK covered my meals.

The standard varied. In Kitale, where I spent most of my time, the conditions were low by Swedish standards but compared to the slum just outside the compound walls, it was relatively high. The night I arrived, I honestly felt overwhelmed, but I got used to it quickly and learned to appreciate the little things. I showered using a bucket, and one week, we didn’t have running water at all. Hygiene was a constant challenge. I really don’t like my hands feeling sticky, but they almost always were. I carried my own soap whenever I could, as soap was not commonly used. I only drank bottled water, but I still got sick. I likely got ill due to poor hygiene, either my own or from whoever prepared my food. I had diarrhea from my first week in Kenya and it didn’t go away until three weeks after I returned to Sweden.



The food wasn't particularly special to me. A very common daily meal is sukumawiki with ugali. I didn't love it, but they do. Ugali is made from maize flour and has no real taste, you eat it with your hands by shaping it into small balls and flattening them into makeshift spoons to scoop up the sukumawiki, which has a quite bitter taste. My favorites were *chapati* (a kind of flatbread) and *maandazi*, which is deep-fried dough loaded with sugar. The fruit, though, was amazing and very cheap.



At one point, we celebrated a chief who had received an award from the president. The celebration ended in traditional fashion by slaughtering a goat. I witnessed the entire process, from killing it to

take out its intestines and just putting it on the fire. I had eaten a lot of goat in Kenya, but never like this. It wasn't seasoned at all, and I even tried the liver and some horrible, unknown intestines. (I actually ended up preferring liver over meat because of how chewy the meat usually was.) Of course, I got even sicker. A few days later, I had to go to the hospital and get IV fluids. I also needed to take a blood sample, something that already terrifies me in Sweden, and even more so in Kenya. They told me I had "a bacteria". They gave me a bunch of medicine but never told me what kind. I had three amazing days, only to later find out one of the pills contained opiates. In general, antibiotics were handed out very casually, and many people kept some at home. When I returned to Sweden, doctors were concerned I might have taken too many antibiotics, but turned out it was only an African bacterial infection again.

Project

The project turned out to be different than I had imagined back in Sweden. FPFK had developed an Early Warning and Response System (EWRS), which acted as a bridge between local communities and authorities. They had selected individuals from communities, those passionate about peace, who served as monitors and sent SMS messages about conflicts or tensions. These were received by controllers at the church, who verified the information and forwarded it anonymously to authorities. Anonymity was critical because if a person's identity was revealed, they could be killed by neighbors. Since authorities were known to be corrupt, there was no guarantee they would keep the information confidential. My task was to explore how this system could be improved. In particular, FPFK's developer wanted to create a mobile app to support the reporting process, this was my focus during the evaluation.



Country

Even though it was officially the rainy season during half of my stay, temperatures were often very high, to me. I would walk around in a T-shirt and skirt, while many locals wore jackets and wool hats. It's interesting just how differently people experience the same environment depending on what they're used to.

During my time in the field, I witnessed a level of poverty that was emotionally difficult to process. Some people I met did not have access to clean water. These experiences were humbling and gave me a new perspective on what we often take for granted in Sweden. The contrasts in Kenya are sharp, not only in terms of infrastructure and wealth, but also between different ethnic groups and cultural practices. The country is home to over 40 ethnic groups, each with their own cultures and languages, but the two official languages are Swahili and English. If they have gone to school they will know English, so no worries.



One of the most difficult aspects of my stay was the cultural difference in views on gender. I had hours-long conversations with local colleagues, especially men, who were determined to teach me how to become a “good wife” to my future husband. At first, I tried to listen with curiosity, but eventually I felt frustrated and powerless, there was no room for my perspective, and the conversations were not dialogues but lectures.

In some communities, polygamy is practiced. I met several people who lived in such arrangements. Personally, I found it hard to relate to, I couldn’t imagine sharing a husband with two, three, or even five other women. That said, one woman pointed out that with multiple wives, the husband isn’t always around, and in a society where violence against women is common, that distance can be a form of safety. I actually asked multiple people, men and women, across ages, what percentage of Kenyan men they believe are physically abusive to their partners. Every single one estimated it to be between 60% and 80%. It was shocking to hear, but what shocked me more was how normalized it seemed. When I described how couples in Sweden might share household responsibilities, like cooking together after both coming home from work, many women were surprised. It was clear that such an arrangement was not something they had even imagined. The men, however, often understood how things worked in the West, they just didn’t want it that way. One man told me, without irony: *“Women are already privileged, they get to decide what we eat, unless we’ve specifically requested something.”*

In Nairobi, I felt relatively free to move around on my own. I could blend in more easily and didn’t feel as visibly foreign. In Kitale, however, the experience was very different. During almost two months

there, I only saw one Chinese person and one other white woman. I felt much more exposed walking outside the compound alone as a white woman. **I didn't want to risk being robbed**, not necessarily out of hostility, but because there seems to be a widespread perception that white people are so wealthy that taking from them isn't really a moral issue. **I was also warned about being taken by someone** and "claimed" as their wife. I received multiple marriage proposals, some joking, others more serious.



Another thing that stood out was the presence of weapons. In cities, only police officers carry firearms, but in rural areas, it's common for herders to be armed to protect their animals. This is also the root of many of the conflicts the Early Warning and Response System I studied seeks to prevent, particularly through tracking cattle raids. I met many individuals who FPFK referred to as *reformed warriors*, men who, before getting to know Jesus, had taken part in violent raids, including killing and raiding in neighboring villages. It was difficult to grasp.

Despite all the challenges, poverty, inequality, insecurity, what impressed me most was the joy and positivity of the people I met. On Sundays, church services were filled with singing and dancing, often lasting for hours. The energy was contagious, and the gratitude people expressed to God and to life was deeply moving. In Sweden, we have almost everything materially, yet many people struggle with mental health and dissatisfaction. In contrast, people I met in Kenya, living under far tougher conditions, often radiated joy. It made me reflect.



Leisure and social activities

I kept something like office hours when I wasn't out in the field, though "office hours" in Kenya are very flexible. The office was in a compound that also had a primary school, so there was constant chaos, noise, and children running around.

In the evenings, I spent time with others in the compound. There was a nearby university, and students would often come for dinner. Some lived there as well. The compound also had a carpentry and tailoring school. I had brought a deck of cards and ended up teaching everyone all the card games I know. Surprisingly, their favorite became "finns i sjön" or as we called it, "Fish in the Sea," which was easy to learn.



Sustainability

One striking environmental issue was the amount of litter. Streets and sidewalks were often covered in layers of trash, especially plastic. There is no formal waste management system in many areas, and the common way to get rid of trash is by burning it. The smell of burnt plastic became a part of daily life.



The project itself connects to multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The system empowers local communities to report conflicts and contributes to preventing violence. It also touches on Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

Other recommendations and observations

In summary, things don't turn out the way you expect. I probably would have preferred not to go alone, but on the other hand, I learned so much and truly immersed myself in their culture in a way I might not have if I had someone with me. It truly has been a challenge in many ways but I've discovered that I'm capable of much more than I thought. Also learning to just take things as they come, it's very hard to plan in Africa, things happen as they happen, you show up when you show up, there's no hurry in Africa.