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'Me to We' Sends Helping Hands to the Kenyan Savannah

by [Josephine Matyas](#), Posted Monday 5th March

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Down a rutted, dusty road in the rolling [Maasai Mara](#) savanna of southwest [Kenya](#), sits a little piece of Canada. It has four sturdy walls, three rows of well-used desks and a wide blackboard. It's a classroom – a new one at that – built by the people of the Kipsigis tribe as part of Free the Children's Adopt a Village development program.

Modest by North American standards, the building is light years ahead of the 'old school' that stands beside it. But, to the Kipsigis people, *all* the structures at the Enelerai School – old and new – hold special and powerful meanings.

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Josephine Matyas






"This old school – made of logs and cow dung and dirt floors – is a symbol of hope, of the vision of the elders," says Robin Wiszowaty, who oversees Free the Children's Kenyan projects. "The people here are proud of it, because of what it symbolizes. It was the first school ever built in this region."



Josephine Matyas

In 1969, the community came together with their resources to build the rough structure.

"It was a *harambee*," explains Wiszowaty. "It's translated as something they want where the whole community has to come together; something that no one person can do alone. They built this first school because the community saw education as a way to better themselves."

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Enelerai School is just one part of a whirlwind trip through rural Kenya – a single stop on a Me to We tour focusing on sustainable engagement. Me to We is a social enterprise that includes tourism and community development. Funds raised through its tourism operation support the projects of its charitable partner, Free the Children.

Enelerai is a perfect example of the Adopt a Village philosophy in action: Programs based on the wisdom of the elders to create systemic change, not just short-term solutions.

"The rainy season would melt the walls of the old school," continues Wiszowaty. "And in the windy season the mud dries and dust is everywhere. But try to imagine that when the kids were sitting here, they would be so excited to have an education."



In 2006, Free the Children helped the community break ground on a first, new classroom.

"The foundation of all hope is the education of the girls. Initially there were just a few girls enrolled in the school. In these communities it is the job of the girls and the women to fetch the water. Many girls were not in school because they needed to go to the river to fill jerry cans with water for the household. The next challenge was to put a source of clean water right next to the school – girls were able to go to school and head home with clean water at the end of the day. Enrollment rates tripled."

After the schools and clean water came mobile health clinics to provide treatment and teach basic hygiene and prevention. Then a pillar of the sustainable development strategy: empowering local women with financial literacy training to become economically self-sustainable. Me to We provides an export market for goods like colourful beadwork produced by women's artisan groups. The result? They can buy medical services needed by their families. They can afford to send their kids to school.

"These schools are not just structures. They are symbols of hope, knowing that this vision was started with this community. The people of the village call the old, rundown school 'Africa' and the new school 'Canada' – and they feel proud and connected to both."



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What? [Free the Children](#) is a charity dedicated to eliminating child exploitation around the world. It operates programs with 7,000 children in schools and tens of thousands of people receiving clean water, health programs and education, breaking the cycle of poverty.

[Me to We](#) is a social enterprise connected to Free the Children that operates transformative travel experiences for youth and adults to countries including Kenya. Participants visit classrooms, help to build health clinics and meet with children and elders in the communities.

Why? Together, the two organizations operate from a unique perspective: the goal is sustainability, supported in part by the tourism ventures. The focus on community development and sustainable engagement (rather than tourism) makes the Me to We dynamic different from many other voluntourism programs.

Where? Me to We's Kenya program is based at the Bogani Cottages and Tented Camp in the scenic Maasai Mara region. The facilities are newly built of renewable, indigenous materials; rustic but not rough. Generators provide power just a few hours each day.

More information? [Merit Travel](#) handles all the registration nuts and bolts of Me to We travel experiences for adults and families. They have over 50 offices across Canada.

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