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Little Sisters of St. Joseph on their five-day, 160-km fundraising walk from Holy Family Basilica, Nairobi, to Savelberg Primary School in Namanga, Kenya, in 2024. Their goal was to raise enough money to build new classrooms and a borehole for their day school. (Courtesy of Sr. Julian Simba)



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In a small border town between Kenya and Tanzania, in the interior villages of Namanga, sits Savelberg Mixed Day and Boarding Primary School. The school was founded in 2012 by the Little Sisters of St. Joseph as a response to the community's need for a learning institution.



Savelberg Primary School students having lunch (Courtesy of Sr. Josephine Munyiva)

Villagers sought out the Little Sisters of St. Joseph, who lived in Namanga town, and implored them to build a preschool. The only public school in the area was about 7 kilometers (over 4 miles) away. As a result, many children started school at age 10 when they were strong enough to cover the distance, almost six years older than the average preschool starting age.

The school grew quickly as it had a bus that traveled the long distances children had to walk in the blistering heat of Namanga, according to Sr. Josephine Munyiva. A food program also incentivized children to stay in school. Furthermore, given that it was part boarding school, where day schooling wasn't feasible, parents could also place their children in the boarding school. According to Munyiva, the school started with 56 children, and by 2015 had 400 students, only three years after its inception.

While the school's growth was remarkable, it came with its challenges. Namanga is a semi-arid area, and water is scarce.



The Savelberg Mixed Day and Boarding Primary School vegetable garden is pictured during the rainy season. The farm grows kale, spinach and traditional vegetables that feed the school population during the rainy season. During the dry season, the school can't sustain crops and must buy vegetables. (Mourine Achieng)

Sr. Rose Bonareri, the school's headteacher, said they dug a borehole when they opened the school that supplied the school's needs. However, the water started receding after a few years until it dried up completely. They dug another borehole, which they're currently using, but there is not enough water to sustain the school's daily needs because their equipment cannot pump water for more than 45 minutes.

With the collapse of the first borehole, the vegetable garden that sustained its food program suffered, and flushable toilets stopped working. Students must now use latrines during the day and carry buckets of water to the washroom at night.



Little Sisters of St. Joseph and their students pose for a photo with Kenya Commercial Bank employees. The bank donated a 6,000-liter water tank to the

school in March 2024 as part of their initiative to help schools in dry areas access clean drinking water. (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Bonareri)

Boreholes drying up is common in Namanga, and the school's neighboring homes have experienced the same problem. At the height of the drought seasons during the 2020-2022 famine, the school loaded 200-liter tanks into their pickup to find water wherever possible.

According to Bonareri, community water shared between the school and the villagers is not always available, and water rationing leaves the school with little to no water during the dry season when they need it most. Livestock is extremely valuable in the community, and some villagers cut or disconnect the water supply pipes to get water for their herds.



Sr. Rose Bonareri, the headteacher of Savelberg Mixed Day and Boarding Primary School (Mourine Achieng)

Despite the challenges, the Savelberg Mixed Day and Boarding School opened the Savelberg Primary School in 2018, a day school serving children along the Namanga highway centers, as the mixed day and boarding school already serves the interior villages of Namanga.



Sr. Josephine Munyiva, headteacher of Savelberg Primary School (Mourine Achieng)

"As we continued with the day and boarding school, which is around 6-7 kilometers in the interior, it was not easy for the school buses to ferry students every day

because the roads are deplorable, especially when it rains. When it rained, we couldn't have classes," explained Munyiva, the headteacher of the Savelberg Primary School.

The sisters bought the day school, which was built in 1999 with unburned bricks, local timber and plaster. Despite four renovations, Munyiva told GSR the classrooms' walls and floors are breaking down, and termites infest the timber.

Last year, the sisters organized a five-day, 160-kilometer (about 99 miles) charity walk from Holy Family Basilica, Nairobi, to Savelberg Primary School in Namanga. Their goal was to raise enough money to build new classrooms and a borehole for the day school.



Sisters built the multipurpose hall in Savelberg Primary School with contributions from a charity walk. Their goal was to raise enough money to build new classrooms and a borehole. Although the sisters did not raise enough for new classrooms and a borehole, they built a multipurpose hall that is partitioned into classrooms and a dining hall. (Mourine Achieng)

The sisters reached out to potential good Samaritans and Catholic parishes along the way. However, due to stereotypes that the global Catholic Church is wealthy, most people didn't take their requests seriously, according to Sr. Julian Simba, the fundraising walk organizer. The parishes they visited were not as receptive as they'd expected, and the sisters didn't seek sponsors since it was their first time raising money through a charity walk.

Although the sisters did not raise enough for new classrooms and a borehole, they built a multipurpose hall that is partitioned into classrooms and a dining hall.

Munyiva said that she believes a borehole is the best way to sustain them, as they can irrigate their garden to help with the schools' food program. Despite the charity walk not going as expected, she and the sisters are optimistic about achieving their goals for the community.

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