

Urumwe Youth Forum “Mtu ni watu”

Pathways, purpose and belonging: Youth navigating the future

Reflections on the Urumwe future leaders forum 22 June 2025

By Greg Swensen

On a recent unexpected wintry evening of the Winter solstice, I attended the Future leaders forum to witness and listen to voices of the leaders from the Kikuyu community.

As many appreciate, organising a seminar like this takes a lot of planning and effort, such as was evident for this occasion, which rested on the efforts of a team of volunteers. And that it was a rainy evening in a bit of the out-of-the way place in Bentley, the turnout demonstrated that the occasion had touched a vein of interest.

The forum coincided the Winter solstice, a day on which for time immemorial humans have celebrated new beginnings, as winter starts to recede and the light of longer days and the warmth of impending spring slowly return. I thought this coincidence was good sign, reflected in theme of the Forum “Pathways, purpose and belonging – youth navigating the future” being hosted by the Urumwe Association.

As the evening progressed my expectations were more than exceeded by the presentations at the Forum. All of which reflected a personal understanding of important elements needed to navigate the future, distilled from participants’ journeys of coming to Australia with passion and determination.



All the presenters recounted stories with themes that reflected strength, of being able to forge a life of meaning and value at both an individual level and at a wider community level. This amalgam brought of a sense of strength and quiet achievement that drew upon each presenter’s Kikuyu heritage and how they brought that into their Australian identities



There were themes in many presentations that highlighted the necessity for career building through education, the importance of social capital and value of social networks to develop opportunities for employment and belonging to Australian society.

I was also curious and interested to learn first-hand more about Urumwe Association, and how it actively supported and promoted the lives and culture and well-being of Kenyans with strong identities with Kikuyu culture who were living here Western Australia.

It does this through promotion of social and cultural activities that resonate with our Kikuyu culture, as well as this more serious forum to dialogue, share ideas and experiences to support young Kenyans, including those who have come here to study in Perth.

I also had another reason why I had came to Forum. But more about that shortly, after pausing to reflect on the Association's mission. As stated on their website, while this is to preserve the Kikuyu heritage by upholding diversity, promoting understanding and to foster unity among communities, it's also to build a future where cultural richness thrives and bridges the gaps that often divide us.

In Kenya the Kikuyu is estimated to have over 5 million native speakers, making it one of the most widely spoken African languages. The Kikuyu make up about 22% of the country's total population and were originally from the central highlands of Kenya, where they have lived for centuries.



The language uses a Latin script system for writing and was first standardised in 1922. This form of written Kikuyu has become increasingly popular since its extensive use in literature, newspapers, radio broadcasts and more recently on social media platforms.

Important characteristics of the Kikuyu is a strong sense of community and an emphasis, common with many other African cultures, on the importance of family and the extended family. Many were originally primarily agriculturalists, with a long history of cultivating the land, known for their expertise in growing crops such as maize, beans, and coffee, which are important staples in the Kenyan diet.¹



An important reason I attended the Forum was to come and see Jackline Wambui, who had played a key part in planning this event and listen to her presentation, *Finding belonging and purpose through service*.

Besides her involvement in the Association, Jackie has also spread her wings and assumed the role as the President in 2025 of the Student Council at the Perth Campus of Acknowledge Education, where she is in the process of completing her Bachelors in Community Services (BCS).

I thought Jackline's presentation was a standout on the evening with her clarity and sharp focus on pertinent issues, highlighting in particular that students needed to understand and manage to fully all the benefits and opportunities from studying here in Perth, beyond just obtaining a qualification.

¹ <https://urumwe.org/kikuyu-people/>



Jackie also highlighted by examples of the value for Kenyan students to draw upon and engage with the supports that are available through the Association and also the broader range of support services. As she reiterated a number of times, it was valuable for you young people and students studying here to access the knowledge and deep experience of those living here, so as to help them to navigate the complexities of the Australian visa and immigration system.

To quote from her presentation –

‘It's good to affiliate yourself with people who went before you. Because in life, someone has to go before you to prepare something for you.

*Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa.*²

So that by the time you get there, you don't have to set the table, you just have to add a spoon, you know, just hide and sit. And then when someone else comes, the seat was warm.’

Jackie also reflected how being successful in studying is to find your passion and to find ways to develop a career which may also make the lives of others a bit better.

‘You cannot live alone. You're not an island. You need people. In my culture, where I come from, we say, people is things I don't know. *Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu.*’³

You won't understand when I say it in English. But those that come from my community understand what I say’. You're not an island. You need people. You need to belong. You need to affiliate.’

Jackie also shared with the audience quite remarkable work she does as a volunteer at Karent Prison. (Karnet is low security prison, some 85 kms from Perth – more than an hour's drive.)

This is under Prison Fellowship Australia. Initially she started with them as a practice for school placement, which developed into taking on a fully-fledged volunteer role. At Karnet she leads an interactive session on Monday nights that is Christian based, where personal stories are shared and growth is encouraged.

Jackie has done this intense work since September 2024 and it builds on voluntary work she had previously done in Kenyan prison system.

² One finger cannot kill a louse. (A vivid way of saying we need each other to solve problems; teamwork is essential.)

³ Unity is strength, division is weakness

I left the forum on a wintry Solstice evening, impressed about the generosity of the community working purposefully through the Urumwe Association and of the determination to harness the power and wisdom of the culture, whilst also building a unique blend of identity to thrive in Perth.

The young people at the occasion were interested and quiet listeners. We should feel encouraged that they will embrace the next stage, to be engaged and to take on some of the big challenges and expectations for them to contribute and become active participants in leading the way forward.

In that respect I knew too as I listened to Jackie's story life and the hopes she has, that I had just witnessed the emergence of one the Kikuyu culture's future leaders.



Urumwe Youth Forum 2025

“Pathways, Purpose & Belonging: Youth Navigating the Future”

Full Event Schedule

Time	Activity	Details
6:00 – 6:20pm	Arrival, Registration & Networking	Light music & reception.
6:20 – 6:30pm	Opening Remarks/ Prayers	MC Sam Ngunu intro.
6:30 – 6:45pm	Speaker 1: Dr. Toyosi – Career Pathways	Navigating career pathways.
6:45 – 7:00pm	Speaker 2: Barry PCEC – Migration Pathways	Migration myths, opportunities & risks.
7:00 – 7:10pm	Interactive Session/Game	Faith & Paska.
7:10 – 7:25pm	Speaker 3: Mumbi Amani – Family, Relationships & Mental Health	Building emotional intelligence and resilience.
7:25 – 7:35pm	Speaker 4: Salome OAC – Drugs & Alcohol	Substance abuse, prevention & peer influence.
7:35 – 7:50pm	Interactive Session/Game	Faith & Paska.
7:50 – 8:05pm	Speaker 5: Dr. Shiko – The University Playbook	Navigating uni life – from applications to transitions.
8:05 – 8:20pm	Speaker 6: Jackline Wambui – Community Engagement	Finding belonging and purpose through service.
8:20 – 9:00pm	Panel Q&A – All Speakers	Moderated by Paska & Chelsea.
9:00 – 9:10pm	Closing Remarks	Vote of Thanks / Closing Prayer.
9:15 – 11:00pm	Music, Food & Mingling	DJ set / Networking, Social time.