

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/seeing-potential-in-the-most-poor>

Leila Janah, founder of Samasource, recalls how she came to commit her life to fighting poverty after witnessing first hand the grit and resourcefulness of villagers living on a dollar a day in sub-Saharan Africa. "We're wasting the most important natural resource on the planet, which isn't gold or diamonds or lithium. It's the talent at the bottom of the pyramid."



## Transcript

- I was living in Southern California, as a high school student.. I got a scholarship from, of all places, a big tobacco company called Lorillard, for community service in high school, and I decided to use it to go and do a volunteer exchange program.. I was not so much motivated by idealism as by the idea of leaving school, and having an adventure, so I graduated a semester early, and I went to Ghana, in west Africa, and I volunteered as an English teacher, and I became really close to people who lived at this income level, and I saw so much avoidable tragedy that as an undergrad, I couldn't ignore it.. I kept going back to Africa, and I decided I wanted to do something about this, and make a difference in my life through my career.. So that's how I ended up here.. So these are the stats, right? We have a billion people living in this kind of poverty, and just to give you a more human picture of this, this is someone who used to live at this income level, Ken Kihara, with little daughter Rosaline.. I met Ken about four years ago, in Mathare, which is a really awful slum in Kenya, where about half a million people live.. That's what Mathare looks like, and Ken was supposed to be one of the success stories.. Ken had actually gotten lucky enough to get a scholarship to a boarding school in Kenya, so he had graduated with top marks from this boarding school, and you would assume, as a westerner, that after this, Ken's life is secured, right? He's gonna go to a good college, he's gonna get a job, he and his daughter will live a happy life.. But Kenya faces 70% youth unemployment..

Many of the people living at a dollar a day are actually working full time.. This is hard to imagine.. We think maybe if you're not making much money, it's because you're sitting around, and eating coconuts or something, but the reality is that a billion people work full time and still earn less than a dollar a day.. Ken was one of those people.. After he finished high school, worked really hard, managed to get the scholarship, gets a diploma, no one offers him a job.. It's really tough if you come from a poor background in a poor country to get into the formal economy and get an office job.. So Ken was stuck going back to the informal economy.. He moved back to the slum, and he made a living picking bits of plastic and metal from those junk heaps that you see, and selling them to the local recycler, which made him about a dollar a day.. Later, he ended up boosting his income.. Many of the young men in the slum, young men and women are incredibly entrepreneurial and run lots of side hustles..

So one of Ken's side hustles was actually brewing a kind of moonshine called changaa, and what you see here in those barrels are these guys brewing changaa.. Now initially, I thought this was kind of a fun story.. Here's this guy selling bootleg liquor to make some good money, until I heard what changaa does to people in the slum.. They actually mix it with kerosene, and Ken told me that people drink the stuff to forget themselves.. This is what people are doing now to earn a living, people working really hard, people who speak the Queen's English, like Ken, probably better English than I do.. This is a waste of human talent.. This is a massive waste of human talent.. I think that's actually the biggest problem in the world is that we're wasting the most important natural resource on the planet, which isn't gold, or diamonds, or lithium.. It's the talent at the bottom of the pyramid...