

Reading and Studying for Peace Swaziland

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Project summary

The main aim of this project was to provide the residents of the Mpaka Refugee Camp, especially the children, with a conducive place to study and read in order to improve their academic performance. The project also aimed at acquiring resources which would contribute to the betterment of the residents' education in general.

Project details

I arrived in Swaziland in early May and I immediately started making contact with officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs. I officially requested a piece of land in the camp, on which to build the study center. As soon as the government granted me the land and the permission to develop it, I then approached a local civil engineer who provided me with technical assistance so that I could start on the right track. After consulting the engineer and the camp administration, I then hired one of the camp residents to carry out the construction process as the leading builder with my help, the engineer's as well as five more people that he chose himself from the camp. It was important that most if not all the labor came from the camp residents (with the necessary skills) so as to benefit them in any way possible and to increase their stake in the project. Due to the financial constraints experienced during the project, we had to reduce the size of the study center in order to be able to finish it as was planned. We therefore ended up building a building with 7 meters in length and 5.2 meters in width.

The construction process took about two months without counting the time spent on planning and waiting for the ministry's permission. At the same time as construction was taking place, I engaged with different people in the camp including one resident who volunteered to be a librarian and to help the children with their education, particularly with research and French. One challenge everyone I spoke to mentioned was the absence of the internet and computers. Given that most of the books available in the camp are either not resourceful enough or outdated, access to the internet would greatly enhance their abilities to learn about the world.

Moreover, on the last day of school, I experienced for myself the effect that the lack of appropriate resources had on the students' results. The majority of high school children did not pass their second term exams. I therefore decided to include internet installation on my list of duties in order to supplement the study center. We approached the company responsible for internet services in the country and we submitted all the necessary paperwork and they made all the required measurements. By the time I left, everything was in place except that the hardware had not yet been brought in for internet to start being used. By the end of September, it is expected that the installation process would have been finalized and that internet would have become fully operational. The study center is already being used as a study room and as an English class for individuals who are not proficient in English.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges that was encountered was the fact that the funds allocated to this project were taxed (federal and state taxes), resulting to a \$ 1977.01 reduction on the original budgeted amount before I could even access it. This meant that I worked with a tighter budget because the time would not allow for any attempts to raise more funds. Other challenges included delays from local businesses from which I purchased construction material. It was also difficult to get in contact with school-going children in the camp as they were at school for the better part of the day and I was hardly available to meet them at night since I stayed in Mbabane (about 40 miles away). However, despite these challenges and the compromises we had to make, the project was successfully completed and a study center was built from a bare piece of land.

Sustainability plans and the long-term hopes

The primary objective of the project was to implement a way of improving the education of refugee children in the Mpaka Refugee Camp. As mentioned above, school grades of most children show that there is still a lot of work to be done for their academic performance to reach a satisfactory level. Most of this is related to the living conditions which do not give the children the necessary space and resources to study. I therefore hope that the new study center will provide them with a conducive place to study and that the resources in the library (books and internet) will introduce them to another way of learning. My interest in this project is far from over as I would like to personally witness the results of these resources. I would also like to find ways of obtaining more resources (such as computers and books) and also be involved in an education outreach program which would help guide the children through their education from the time they start to the time where they have to figure out the different directions to take.

Peace Statement

To me peace is a state where one's basic human rights are respected and where today brings hope for an even better tomorrow. A number of basic human rights are a luxury to many refugees around the world and this is deplorable. It becomes even more alarming when children are involved because these are people who still have their whole lives ahead of them, who have dreams just like any other children, who have the mental capabilities like any other children's, and who should be granted the same opportunities as other children.

I personally believe that providing hope and opportunity to such individuals is a powerful way of promoting peace as it helps them realize that there can be brighter tomorrow. Moreover, education is a powerful tool which can restore the hope and provide opportunities to the refugee child who thought that the unfortunate past predicament which turned his/her life around had ruined his/her future forever.

"This eye-opening and fulfilling experience taught me a lot about service and it encouraged me to stay passionate about education as a tool for peace and unity. It also reinforced my hope that despite all the unrest in the world, if our resources are properly allocated and utilized we can help point the world in the right direction by restoring peace.

