

Project Title- Picturing Health And Hygiene For The Street Children of Saly Mbour- Senegal

Sponsoring College- University of Pennsylvania

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Project website: www.projectalefs.com

Project Goals- The aim of this project is to improve the living conditions of talibé children in their Quranic boarding schools (daaras) and the reduction of disease transmission via the development of healthy habits through:

- Biweekly discussion and demonstration-based health and hygiene classes that covered topics ranging from corporeal to environmental health.
- Distribution of health kits, mattresses, mats, mosquito nets, garbage cans, water barrels and construction of 5 bathrooms and showers in order to provide beneficiaries the materials and facilities they need to apply and develop proper health habits
- Recruitment of community leaders and associations (community health workers, young men's' associations, women's' associations etc.) to create a community committee that would provide daaras and their marabouts the support they need to achieve and retain behavioral changes. This was a way of ensuring that the project is sustained and remains viable.

We received additional funding from the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Global, the Mazzatenta Association of Alumnae Scholars, and Civic Scholars program to cover travel and living expenses. Thus, the entirety of the Projects for Peace grant was solely used for the implementation of the project.

Project Impact

This project benefits talibé children who range from ages 4 to 18 and live under the patronage of Quranic teachers (marabouts) who are often responsible for 15 to 100 children at a time. These children beg for food and money for their daily meals, and live without access to potable water, a balanced diet, and hygienic conditions. As such, they suffer from malnutrition, communicable illnesses, and infections. Our project has benefitted about 250 talibé children and their caretakers in 5 daaras.

As a part of a year-long project, the initial interventions we have begun over the summer will be followed up with health education and support from staff and the community to achieve and maintain the hygiene of the daaras and talibé children. Further, the local government will be involved in providing periodic subsidized septic waste removal and assessment of water wells of each daara. In addition to the immediate impact, this project has also created a model approach that engages the various stakeholders (marabouts, local government, and community) to utilize local resources and solutions as well as create a sense of ownership of the project among beneficiaries and the local community. This model will be used again as we expand the operation of our non-profit organization, Kids of Dakar, in the near future.

Project Execution

The initial phase was the negotiation of the project contract between our partner daaras and the non-profit organization we worked with, Avec Les Enfants Et Les Femmes Du Senegal (ALEFS). This process of negotiation was done over the span of one month and multiple meetings both at the ALEFS center (Children's City) and the home/daara of each marabout. These meetings were critical in earning the trust of the marabouts and discussing the participatory nature (conditions) of the project in detail. Due to past experiences of foreign organizations that either did not follow through with their commitments or projects that undermined Islam and vilified the traditional Quranic education system, the marabouts were very apprehensive and reluctant. We were able to overcome this issue of trust by building rapport with them during our meetings and explicitly showing them their direct input into the planning and implementation of the project.

Through the input of the marabouts and our needs assessment, we determined an adequate intervention that would meet the need of each daara. The needs assessment phase allowed us to identify the material and facilities needed and to observe the high-risk health habits of talibés to inform our health and hygiene education program.

As a result, we developed a health and hygiene education syllabus that was divided into four modules and spanned 7 weeks. The education classes were held on Thursdays and were attended by both talibés and adult caretakers (this was one of the conditions of the project). These classes were formatted to be discussion-based to gauge the health and hygiene knowledge of participants and allow them to identify high-risk behaviors and conditions that often lead to the many infectious diseases they suffered from. We aligned the distribution of materials with the topic discussed in the health and hygiene classes so that talibé children can observe and apply the hygienic habits they have learned right away. By combining discussion and application we ensured that the talibé children remain engaged.

The third aspect of the project was organizing the community in order to ensure the sustainability of the outcomes of the project. We initially met with various leaders of several community associations and neighborhood delegates to garner their support and mobilize the community. This effort allowed us to use social networks that were already in existence to reach the larger community and create a structure to support the daaras. Thus, the general community meeting resulted in the creation of a committee that will provide support ranging from additional adult supervision at the daaras to organizing drives to collect items that are needed to foster hygienic habits i.e. soap, toothpaste etc. In addition, we designed pamphlets that exhibit the goal of the project and the various aspects of its implementation to be used by the community committee and ALEFS to forge additional partnerships and promote the project.

A difficulty we encountered was the language barrier between the two of us and the marabouts. We had to rely on the project staff to translate from Wolof to French and vice versa during meetings. But aside from that we were very much focused and successful at planning and developing the various aspects of the project while assisting the project staff in teaching the health and hygiene classes.

This Project allowed us to think of peace as an abstraction that allows each individual to grow and thrive in more optimal living conditions so that he or she may continue to thrive. This definition especially rings true when it comes to the children we've worked with who will grow up to become adults who will contribute more positively to their communities because we have done something to help ameliorate their living conditions. By improving their livelihood, we have begun the first step toward improving their future. The project promotes not only personal hygiene, but also the proper care of one's environment and living area as well as those who reside in it.

By taking the right steps of building trust, transparency, and communication we have challenged the idea that issues relating to religion are too dogmatic to change. Through this project, we have created a new avenue of interaction among various stakeholders to come together. Further, the facilitation of an environment where talibé children and their caretakers can analyze their living conditions and actively work to change it will lead to a future generation that is keenly aware its ability. This project has taught us the importance of listening to the voice of beneficiaries and communities. Given the right opportunities, both can become a great asset in providing a nuanced knowledge behind social issues and become the source of local solutions that are appropriate and sustainable.

"The Projects for Peace grant has given us an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the talibé phenomenon of Senegal and opened our eyes to nuances that come with partaking in a bottom-up approach to intervention. As a result of our experiences, we will continue to work to alleviate the plight of talibé children and apply the knowledge we have gained to further improve not only ourselves but the lives of the beneficiaries of any project we might undertake in the future."

-Antoinette Zoumanigui and Selamawit Bekele

