

Eco-Pad Project

Kenya

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Section I (a)

The Eco-Pad Project incorporated a holistic approach to tackling poverty by taking into consideration multiple aspects of poverty, such as health, education and micro-enterprise. The goal of the project was threefold: increasing awareness and understanding of personal health; improving access to school for young girls; and providing women with the capacity to earn money, save money and reinvest through the sale of eco-sanitary towels.

Section I (b)

The project was executed by developing and following predesigned indicators and outputs to achieve the above stated goals. The project was divided into three main areas --- health, education, and micro-enterprise.

For the health portion of the project the indicators designed to measure success were: girls and women's knowledge of how menstrual cycle and reproductive system works before and after the project; ability to use eco-sanitary towels; and knowledge of hygienic practices during menstruation. Upon my arrival in Kenya, I began to strategize efficient methods to measure the above mentioned indicators. I realized that there needed to be proper awareness and education on the importance of cloth pads. Hence, I sat down with the nurse from Haller to discuss the goal and plan of the project. Because of the nurse's long standing ties with the women in the communities and her understanding of the socio-cultural undertones, we were able to devise a system to ensure that the right information was passed along. Over the next few weeks I visited the communities with the nurse to introduce myself and the project. Because of language barriers, the nurse explained to the women the aim of my project and the need for environmentally and affordable reusable pads which would be a better alternative than the cloth rags being used. The women were excited about the idea of using reusable pads and wanted to see a prototype. Unfortunately, the prototype had not arrived. Consequently, as the project progressed, I met with the nurse to discuss and plan health workshops. The purpose of the health workshops was to provide a forum for education and discussion. The health workshops were held August 3-8th in three communities around the rural parts of Mombasa, Kenya. During the workshops, the nurse began by introducing the aim of the day; she then asked the women to draw what they thought their reproductive systems looked like, which began discussions. In one community (Kimbunga) we even had five men attend the health workshop, which added another dimension to discussions. On August 8th I organized a "Girls' Health Day" at Haller's education center. The purpose of the day was to provide an informal and safe space for girls to talk openly about menstruation and other issues. We had about fifteen girls in attendance. The initial challenges in executing the health portion of the project was introducing the idea of reusable pads; once they understand what it was, however, people got excited. In addition, because I was unable to bring a sample pad with me to Kenya, the women and nurse wanted to see a visual and physical idea of what it was. Another challenge was not speaking Swahili or the local dialect. As a result, I always needed someone to translate for me and my initial worry was ensuring that the right message got along. Fortunately, the nurse was extremely efficient and sold the project to everyone.

For the education portion of the project the designed indicators were: observing both female and male primary/secondary enrollment and attendance; primary/secondary drop out rates; primary /secondary graduation rates; and purchase of sanitary towels or lack thereof. When I arrived I spoke to Haller's librarian and introduced the project. She was excited and had a lot of questions. In the coming weeks, she introduced me to two teachers and explained the project. We then strategized on how to go to schools and effectively talk to teachers, obtain records and conduct surveys. However, as the plans progressed, I was informed that I would be unable to go to schools without submitting a proposal to the Ministry of Education and the process was lengthy. Therefore, the approval would not be given during my short time in Kenya. Thus, that portion of the project could not be conducted. As a result of being unable to go to schools, I decided that having a girls' health day would achieve a portion of the goal. During the health workshop, the girls were able to acquire knowledge on how their body works and fill out questionnaires.

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For the micro-enterprise portion of the project, the designed indicators were measuring: number of women who attended sewing training; number of women who attended business workshop; number of pads produced daily, weekly, monthly; cost of production and sale costs; and confidence of women to run a business after the program. Once I arrived in Kenya, I realized no group of women had been selected for the project, so I spent the next few weeks familiarizing myself with the communities. However, I was unable to get a group of eight and a sewing trainer in due time, which delayed training. Fortunately, Dr Haller introduced me to a HIV/AIDS support group called Jahazi; he told me they were a dedicated and organized group. So I met with the group and introduced the goal of the project. They were excited and I was able to get two women and also the sewing trainer from that group. Also, I was able to talk to their social worker, who is involved in micro-enterprise projects and works with the Red Cross. Over the next week the trainer and I began sewing sample pads and organizing how the sewing training would go. Later on we were able to get four women from two groups (Mitedi and Jahazi) and we successfully began the sewing training. Over the following weeks, through a lot of going back and forth in the communities, we were able to get the remaining four women for the project and by end of July all eight women had begun sewing training. In the beginning of August we had our business training, which was successful. Through the business training, the women learned a lot about the purpose of the project and the important role they played in it. They were taught on topics such as production, entrepreneurship, developing a business and marketing plan, financial record-keeping and most especially their role as advocates. By the end of the training, they developed a self-help group name, "Inuka Community Project," and each person had a role and responsibility to ensure ownership of the project. They planned to sell the pads under the name "Smart Lady Products." Overall, the women were very enthusiastic about the potential of the project, which was very inspiring. I realized in order to ensure that the project continued smoothly after I left, someone needed to be hired to follow up and tie up every loose end. As a result, I hired a monitoring officer, who was also the business trainer. He is expected to assist the women in registering as a self-help group and securing certification from the Kenyan Bureau of Standards; meeting with the women's group weekly to discuss progress and concerns; developing a marketing and sales strategy to ensure growth and sale of product; and assisting in the dissemination of product information into local networks and communities.

The initial beneficiaries of the project, particularly the micro-enterprise portion, were the eight women and their four respective communities. In addition, the project provided employment opportunities for four other people outside the group of eight. The project provided the women with new and invaluable skills. Most especially, it provided them with something to do. I recall one of the ladies from the HIV group telling me that, before this, she had nothing to do, but now she is part of something special and greater than her. In addition the project educated women, girls and even men on issues often carefully ignored by society. The long term impact of the project will be its becoming a self sustainable group, which produces environmentally conscious and affordable pads. In the near future, these pads will be targeted to rural areas, school girls, women's prisons, and health organizations. The production of the pads will empower local women with the skills to become environmental entrepreneurs, improve women's and girls' health and improve girls' attendance at schools. Most especially, it will empower women with the skills to become stakeholders in their society. By having these four communities involved, it creates a chain reaction of development.

Section II I believe peace is a state of being in which one has all the basic necessities needed to survive. I strongly believe peace is something that can not be realized overnight or in two months. Nevertheless, I believe the Eco-Pad project laid the foundation for building a society of peace by empowering women and girls with the knowledge, skills, and tools to develop a solution to the problems in their societies. One of the most important things I learned from this project is that development does not occur overnight; rather, it takes dedicated people and leaders who are willing to see change happen. It is the HIV-widowed mother of three who is willing to work hard to ensure her children's futures are better than hers or the young lady in the remote village who believes she can be part of something greater than herself and could possibly impact her village, state, nation and beyond.

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