

Concretizing and Mobilizing the Wall-less Classroom in Abuja, Nigeria

The Reality: Jabi Motor Park

Abuja, Nigeria. This sprawling desert is the capital territory's biggest motor park, jammed with dilapidated vehicles and people hawking everything and anything under the hot sun. Some of these hawkers are children as young as eight-years-old. They balance enormous tubs of moin-moin or bagged water on their heads, wandering from prospective traveler to taxi driver during the most unbearable hours of the day.

The motor parks of Abuja team with activity, as they are hubs for the major operations of hawkers and inter-state transporters alike. The majority of those selling goods and offering transit services are adults without basic reading or writing skills, but ages range from infants to the elderly. The people of Jabi Park spend their days within its walls, which enclose an unpaved dirt expanse with areas rancid with the smell of rotting garbage. They do not have the luxury of spending peak business hours in the classroom where they belong.

Thus on July 15, 2008, Teachers Without Borders (TWB) launched its very first classroom without walls in the middle of the park. The goal was granting the people of Jabi the basic right that is basic literacy by bringing the classroom to them. TWB is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to achieving the United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. In Abuja, this amounts to a tiny makeshift office founded by Mr. Oko himself, a local Nigerian who learned about TWB through the web and has since committed his life to its mission.

Due to extremely limited resources at the launch of the Classroom, beginning immediately required beginning small: the teaching station held class in rented chairs under a rented canopy. From the very first day of class, turnout exceeded capacity with more than fifty men, women and children packed into a single square of shade, some sitting on the dusty ground. The inaugural classes learned how to write without even a table to properly write upon.

These classes were informal English courses and open to all who wished to attend. Offerings included two classes a day, three days a week in the park, with the vision of expanding the number of available classes and teachers as resources allowed.

Today, basic logistics threaten to permanently shut down the modest beginnings of what otherwise promises to become a life-altering opportunity for many. Rental costs for the canopy and chairs are sky-high for an NGO budget, rendering the project unsustainable in the long-term. Simply purchasing a canopy and chairs is also out of the question –how would they be transported? Where would they be stored? It is a seemingly simple problem with tremendous repercussions for the most effective project TWB Abuja has launched to date.



Four-deep on the periphery: the first interest meeting
for the Wall-less Classroom

The Proposal: Making the Wall-less Classroom Mobile

The needs are immediate, and the goals lofty: to procure a canopy, tables, chairs and most importantly, a second-hand vehicle for supply storage and transportation. The van is in no way a superfluous expenditure: its incorporation makes possible the larger vision to create a Wall-less Classroom that is not only permanent, but truly mobile. The vision is for it to move freely throughout all of Abuja's motor parks and provide multiple classes throughout the day, five times a week.

With the funds to put the proper "mobile" infrastructure into place, trained volunteer teachers from TWB would be able to focus its small available funds on improving curriculum. In addition to basic English courses, more advanced classes would be provided for those who wish to improve their language skills so that they may later take advantage of TWB's computer training opportunities. All classes would be modeled as part of a three-month training course, with periodic testing to ensure methods remained tailored to the students' unique requirements.

In addition, between classes, volunteers would teach additional workshops and seminars on relevant topics, including the MDGs, HIV/AIDS awareness, road safety, customer service, healthy living and environmental sustainability all designed to address the community's immediate problems and cultivate a range of personal and professional development skills.

The Hope: Peace and Development, Development and Education

Nigeria gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, but the new republic quickly folded to what eventually exceeded three decades of military rule. Sporadic returns to civilian regimes were truncated with violent military coups. In 1999, Nigeria reestablished democracy, but the twenty-first century has been marked by rigged elections, rampant nepotism and fiscal mismanagement. Corruption plagues all levels of government, and the result has been paralyzing for the select groups and individuals struggling to effect change. The well-intentioned are camouflaged among the steadily proliferating scam organizations that have impaired their legitimate counterparts' attempts to secure aid from sources both domestic and foreign.

Despite rapid modernization within the capital city, as a developing country, Nigeria still lacks much of the infrastructure necessary for reliably developing and sustaining grassroots projects. No matter how critical the cause or valiant the efforts, the major challenge is overcoming the endless bureaucratic complications that constantly threaten to stall progress and halt real change.

The Wall-less Classroom emerged from the logistical nightmare of finding physical infrastructure to house Community Teaching and Learning Centers on Abuja's rural outskirts. Mr. Oko's original idea was to establish a CTLC in a convenient location within the Park to allow easy access to all who wished to attend in between work hours. I spent summer 2008 volunteering with TWB in Abuja, and together with Mr. Oko conceived of and launched the Wall-less Classroom in response to the continuing delays to the CTLC dream.

At every opportunity –at every volunteer training seminar and every specially scheduled Wall-less seminar –Mr. Oko emphasized that peace goes hand-in-hand with development, and that development is only possible through education. The Wall-less Classroom stands as a paradigmatic example of a grassroots-level initiative designed to bring basic literacy to the nation's poorest, and to thereby outfit the nation's poorest to be agents of change for Jabi and ambassadors of peace for Nigeria.