

Reading and studying for Peace

Mpaka Refugee Camp-Swaziland

By *Aristide Sangano - Duke University*

Background

Swaziland is host to numerous refugees who fled their countries due to civil wars as well as other adverse political and social situations which are prominent in a number of African countries. Virtually all those who come to seek asylum (in Swaziland) have not only left everything they owned behind, they have also travelled such a long distance and have gone through so many hardships along the way that they arrive in Swaziland with little or no possessions in their name. This means that they have to start over. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in collaboration with the Swazi Government have established a Refugee Camp at Mpaka (about 70 km from Mbabane, the capital city) where they try to meet minimal needs of the incoming asylum seekers in terms of shelter. The shelter provided is in the form of large halls which have been subdivided into compartments which act as housing for the families of the refugees.

Situation and Solution

Although refugees are provided with shelter, most of the houses are overcrowded because the number of incoming refugees has been increasing while available space to live in (the number of houses) has not. These living conditions therefore mean that most families have to share houses. Most people have space for their beds and their few personal belongings and lack space for such activities as studying. Furthermore, the camp is situated in a rural area and most children from the camp attend the local schools. These schools do not have places where students can sit down and read or do their homework after school. This becomes a problem especially for children from the camp since they also do not have space at their cramped houses to study. These conditions adversely affect these children who are not in a position to familiarize themselves with the culture of reading and who do not get to spend as much time on their studies as they should. This in turn affects their performance at school and has led some of them to drop out of school.

I have been to the camp a number of times in the past and I have been inside many houses and talked to residents there so I have become quite familiar with the situation. I strongly believe that providing a place designated only for studying and reading and also setting aside space for appropriate reading materials would be very helpful and constructive and would benefit the education of these children. As noted above, the lack of adequate housing for refugees limits what the children can achieve in school. It is my desire to addressing this problem by building a library and reading room for children and thereby help them to achieve a better life.

My plan is to acquire a piece of land within the camp's premises—the camp matron assures me that land can be made available—and to build the library on it. This library will have a section where books will be stacked and a reading/studying area. Most of the building materials will be obtained from the local dealers in order to reduce transportation costs. Most of the labor will be provided by the camp residents who have relevant skills but are unemployed. Materials not locally available will be purchased in the city of Manzini about 40 km away from the camp.

In addition to providing the camp with a reading and studying place by building and furnishing a library the size of a classroom, I intend to pursue the following objectives:

- Approach Waterford Kamhlaba, a United World College in Swaziland and Heligator Records, a digital music company which is also interested in establishing and maintaining a library in the camp about finding helpful resources for the library.
- Educate the camp residents (especially the children) on the importance of reading and getting an education.
- Seek the help of the Mpaka Refugee Community Service group at Waterford Kamhlaba, my former school about establishing a sustainable and continuous relationship between the camp, the school and other donors to ensure the availability of books and other educational materials in the camp.

Time frame

The building project is expected to start in June 2014 and last about four weeks. June in Swaziland is a good time to do construction work because there is no rain at that time and although it is winter there, it is not too cold to work. I will be personally and fully involved in the project but I will also be assisted by the camp administration (in particular Make Nkambule, the camp matron, whom I have already contacted), the Waterford Kamhlaba Mpaka Community Service group which is headed by Mrs. Judy Williams as well as Thabiso Dlamini and Ntandoyenkosi Ngubane, two University of Cape Town students studying engineering who are also graduates of Waterford Kamhlaba and former members of the Mpaka Community Service group. I expect the process of obtaining reading materials to be a continuous program which will start in the summer and go on with the help of Waterford Kamhlaba and Heligator Records. I plan to stay in the area where the camp is or inside the camp in the unlikely event that there is a free room for the duration of the project (the occupancy of these houses/rooms varies because there are always people moving in or out of the camp).

Sustainability of the project and my hope

My wish for this project is that it will address immediate and long-term educational needs in the Mpaka Refugee Camp. Although I did not live in the camp, I am familiar with the problems encountered by the children living there because I also had to leave my native country and relocate to Swaziland. I am aware that some thought was given to converting one of the residential houses into a library, but I seek a permanent solution to the problem of lack of reading and studying space, one that does not require the camp to the available living space for refugees. In the longer run I hope to establish a network of partners who will help in providing useful reading materials to the camp in order to enable refugee children to get a decent education. Without the necessary resources they would fall behind the rest of the children in the world. Education is the only way for them to get a better life, given the conditions that they live in and their life experiences. This project will be a strong foundation to a long term project that I hope will yield very profitable results for the children in the camp. I will be going back every summer to check on the facilities and I would hope to witness a considerable improvement in the children's academic performance due to this project. My other long term dream is to be able eventually to provide access to technology to the camp residents by bringing computers into the camp through different partnership that I hope to create.