

Creating Peace for People with Epilepsy
Mahenge, Tanzania
Vassar College
Julianna Shinnick, USA, Vassar College

This project attempted to address the interconnected issues of social stigma and unemployment for the many people with epilepsy in the Wapagoro Mountain region of Tanzania. Fifteen times more people suffer from epilepsy in the Wapagoro Mountain region of Tanzania than in the United States and Europe and people with epilepsy are often viewed as *maskini* or “useless” in Wapagoro communities. This Project for Peace aimed to challenge the notion that people with epilepsy are unfit to work by providing craft training and microfinance grants to adults with epilepsy so that they could establish their own small businesses. All funding was provided by Davis Projects for Peace, though I will work on continuing to fundraise for the project in conjunction with Provision Accounting, Vancouver.

Project 1: Tailor Training

Local crafts are a promising vocation for people with epilepsy because, with the necessary equipment, they are able to support themselves from their homes. The long-term benefits of the program will be a lucrative profession that can be practiced from one’s home. This allows women with epilepsy the flexibility to care for their children and their health and not be limited by discriminatory hiring practices. The women we have supported have expressed excitement about being able to pay for their children’s school fees in the future. Each woman will be provided with a sewing machine on the condition that she teaches two other people with epilepsy the craft.

There were also short-term benefits of the training. Families provided program participants with better clothing when they went to training. A second unanticipated short-term benefit is dispelling employers’ stereotypes about people with epilepsy’s ability to work.

Project 2: Candle Making

I organized a candle-making “seminar” where two women learned candle making from an experienced artisan in the area. The class culminated in a practical exam where the women made a batch of 50 candles by themselves. At the conclusion of their training, they received the necessary materials to make candles from their homes. The major short-term benefit of candle making for these women has been an increased sense of independence. As 27-year-old participant, Irene, described, “since I started having epilepsy when I was 13, I have sat at home being helped, until now.” In the future, I hope that the women’s presence at the market, which is unusual for people with epilepsy, will continue to show community members that people with epilepsy are capable of work.

Project 3: Carpentry

We are funding one person every 6 months to learn carpentry with the local carpenter (who can only accommodate one student at a time). During the six month training, the participant will learn how to make furniture like tables and chairs as well as make repairs in homes and buildings. This project will run on the same model as the tailors: participants who complete training will receive the basic tools needed for their craft in exchange for teaching others with epilepsy. We have already seen some of the same benefits as tailoring on levels of community understanding. For example, the carpenter was originally hesitant to train a student with epilepsy, but decided to give the student a chance. He has now reported that he is impressed with the student’s progress.

Project 4: Brick-laying, Plumbing and Water Access

The goals of the brick-laying a plumbing program were multi-faceted. First, I hoped to provide a paid training opportunity for people with epilepsy to learn the basics of laying bricks and piping. Second, I hoped to address the serious water shortage in Mahenge. In the past years, several people with epilepsy have died after having seizures while gathering water at local streams. Therefore, we used Davis funds to hire four people with epilepsy to build four water tanks in Mahenge. The short-term benefits of the

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program were that the four participants used the money they earned for the project for basic needs such as children's school fees and new clothing. There are several long-term benefits of the program. First, program participants gained valuable experience as they apply for other construction-based jobs. Second, the water tank system will be used by over 200 community members. A group of people from the seminary and the hospital have spread the word that people with epilepsy built the tanks, giving them greater esteem in the community. Third, people with epilepsy will be able to use the tanks so that they do not have to risk their lives on a daily basis by going to the stream to fetch water.

Project 6: Scholarships for People with Epilepsy

A central underlying problem that led to unemployment and stigma against people with epilepsy is that many people with epilepsy are expelled from school upon their first seizure. I used Davis funds to provide a scholarship for a high school student with epilepsy to continue her studies. She hopes to become a teacher and educate others about seizures. I hope that, in the long-term, she will provide an example that people with epilepsy are capable of completing school.

Challenges

One of the greatest challenges of working on this project was to direct and support the project while simultaneously remaining enough in the background that 1.) The project would continue successfully upon my departure and 2.) I wasn't replicating the recurring hierarchy of white people above black people by "providing charity." I was troubled by some of the other craft projects for people with disabilities that I visited, featured a strong presence of white people, photographs of white people on the walls, and a dependence on Europeans for their market. I wanted craftspeople to learn from experts in their community and to sell their goods to others in the local market.

A second challenge that I encountered was working towards the goals that I originally proposed while remaining flexible based on the culture of Mahenge and the needs of the community. For example, I originally hoped to integrate epilepsy education through art into craft projects. However, based on my dedication to employing the people in local crafts rather than introducing craft projects that would be seen as foreign, there were few crafts that could integrate messages about epilepsy. For example, painting was seen as superfluous in a largely agrarian society. However, I ultimately found that the messages I hoped would be physically visible in the art pieces were more present than I even expected – the ideas quickly spread by word of mouth in such a small community.

Part II: Contributing to Peace

Rick Jahnkhow and others have written of the importance of "proactive" rather than "reactive" peace, an articulation of Mrs. Davis' goal of supporting students in "preparing for peace rather than war". The violence that the people with epilepsy in Mahenge face is largely structural violence. This project aims to diminish this structural violence towards people with epilepsy before it arises in the form of poverty. In the short-term, microfinance grants and training provide an opportunity for people with epilepsy to exit the cycle of poverty and, therefore, challenge misconceptions about the disease. In the long-term, we hope that increased participation in the workforce will lead to less "structurally violent" discrimination between people with epilepsy from the rest of the community.

As a person with epilepsy, it was extremely meaningful to witness the strength of people with epilepsy in Tanzania in the face of immense social stigma. The Davis funds allowed me to facilitate projects that tapped into this strength and perseverance. When given the opportunity, people with epilepsy were excited to work, many for the first time in their lives. Peace and equality for people with epilepsy and other disabilities is essential to creating a peaceful community as a whole.

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Left: Elaine learns to make candles during the candle-making seminar. Eileen has had epilepsy for 10 years and has never had a job. *Right:* Jasmine learns tailoring at the local tailoring shop.



A local plumber (front) teaches a man with epilepsy how to dig a trench for the water tanks.