

Section I: Project goals, collaborations, project details, scope & challenges

Practicing Peace – Helping Hands for Health (French title: Main dans la Main pour la Santé et la Paix) is a project to remedy inequality and injustice through community-led HIV/AIDS education and prevention through street theatre and improvement of access to clean water.

We were able to secure the support of REVS+ (Responsabilité, Espoir, Vie, Solidarité) a Burkinabe non-government and non-profit organization supporting people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Burkina Faso. The organization's theatre group leader advised us in designing the plays and the youth group leader volunteered to lead the HIV/AIDS and general health sensitization workshop. These collaborations allowed us to invest the saved funds into the well repair part of the project.

The project was realized together with the Dorcas Street Boys project in Lafiabougou near Bobo-Dioulasso in south-western Burkina Faso. The street boys of the project, youths between the age of 10 and 18, attended a sensitization and education workshop on HIV/AIDS and general health. Based on the acquired knowledge a questionnaire was designed probing awareness and knowledge levels of the village population concerning water sources, water-borne illnesses, well maintenance and HIV/AIDS. The boys administered the questionnaire. Using the gathered information we identified knowledge gaps and misconceptions which we then addressed in the educational plays. The boys again took the leading role in designing the plays. Four short plays which the boys performed were chosen for the sensitization program; one on water-borne illnesses/importance of drinking clean water, one on well upkeep, and two on HIV/AIDS (prevention, treatment, discrimination & solidarity). At the same time we identified several villages with insufficient access to clean drinking water (broken boreholes) and collaborated with a team of technicians to repair the broken wells. We changed from the original proposal of supplying household purification devices because of practicality, availability, sustainability, and longevity considerations and since the greatest number of people would benefit from borehole repairs instead. The two parts of the project went hand in hand as in a first step the wells were repaired, followed by the performance of the sensitization program (the four plays interspersed with dance performances) in the same villages. The boys participated in the well repairs and played the leading role during the performances being health facilitators and mentors.

All in all, roughly 25 of the 35 boys in the Dorcas project participated in our program from start to finish. Pastor Moise Oubda, founder of the project, presented the project in his church which hosts roughly 200 people every Sunday. Additionally, the boys acted as spokespeople in their communities and families. Thus, a great number of people in Lafiabougou was thus touched by the project. We performed the sensitization program 3 times since 4 of the 6 communities belong to the district of Péni and people attend the market there; thus the sensitization program for those 4 communities was combined into one performance for all in Péni. The number of spectators for each performance ranged between 70 and 120 people. 7 wells in 6 communities were repaired from which a large number of people are benefiting. For most wells it is not just the village population that uses the well but also families living in more remote areas or in villages without wells/broken wells which sometimes walk great distances to access the functioning boreholes. On average at least 60–150 families are benefiting from each repaired well. Through the combination of well repairs, for which we ensured the use of proper and new materials and collaborated with well repair experts, and our sensitization plays on well upkeep it was ensured that the repaired boreholes will be functioning properly and constitute a sustainable source of clean water.

The person in charge of the Dorcas project who was my closest collaborator and most of the boys are bilingual in French and the local language Dioula. Thus, there were no language barriers, even though all plays were performed in Dioula. Likewise, due to the fact that we worked with communities around Bobo with similar cultural values and traditions there were no cultural barriers either affecting this part of the project. However, culture did have an influence on the well repair part; negotiating in financial matters constituted a challenge. Unfortunately, corruption even on the lowest level is a big problem in Burkina Faso. Thus, negotiations with the well repair specialists were tedious initially and sometimes frustrating since initial prices were inflated and dubious. Unfortunately, there also is the mentality and belief that white people who come for a project have lots of money and thus everyone tries to take his or her share. I made it my personal mission to hold against it. Fortunately, with lengthy

negotiating, persistence, honesty, cultural sensitivity, and the fact that I did not just give the money and watch but participated actively in every step, even borehole analysis for 6 hours under the burning sun, I earned the respect and trust of the people and thus managed to get prices down to a realistic level to repair a maximum amount of wells. Several times I was called ‘courageous’ and people told me that my energy and personal dedication was inspiring to them and giving them energy, too.

Section II: Definition of peace, project’s contribution to peace & reflection

In my project proposal I have quoted Robert Fulghum, who said: “Peace is not something you wish for; It's something you make, Something you do, Something you are, And something you give away.” The Dalai Lama called it the ‘manifestation of human compassion’ and noted that “If you wish to experience peace, provide peace for another.” We are all responsible for creating and sustaining peace. It is nothing that just comes to us for it requires, apart from external factors, an attitude of love, kindness and support for one another as the building blocks for peace, to speak with the words of Kathryn W. Davis. We all play an active role. Oscar Romero defined peace as the “generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all”. Hence peace is doing, is participating, is helping, is supporting. Peace is created by *practicing* it.

Indeed, the project has shown everyone that nothing happens by itself, that talking is just not enough, but that it is about joining hands, combining efforts, standing in for the right things, and doing them. We were only able to realize the well repairs the way we did because the people involved joined hands and hearts, starting from the village officials removing barriers for us and supporting the project, technicians investing their personal efforts beyond payment, or the village population coming to help. Likewise, the boys’ enthusiasm and diligence in performing our sensitization program exceeded all my expectations. Thus, apart from the short-term contribution to peace building via joining hands during the repairs and the act of performing the plays and sharing knowledge, the project has clear long-term contributions to peace: We ensured access to clean drinking water for 6 communities and thus contributed to alleviating inequality and injustice arising from such misdistribution of resources. Having access to clean water as well as increased awareness and knowledge levels of important health topics will help to improve wellbeing and health in the long run. Furthermore, the sensitization program helped decrease stigmatization and discrimination to foster understanding and tolerance, prerequisites of sustainable peace. Last but not least, the Dorcas boys took pride in actively contributing to peace building and will continue to execute their role as community health mentors.

The enormous success of the project would not have been possible without the combined effort of all people involved, the ‘helping hands for health’. It was an enriching, at times challenging, hugely inspiring, and overall simply wonderful experience whose memories I will cherish for life. It has taught me so much not only about health, water and wells but about collaboration, leadership, project management, development work, education and mentorship, culture, interpersonal communication, and most importantly peace building. I can only express my enormous gratitude and deep appreciation for having been chosen as a Davis Projects for Peace grantee and having been given the trust and responsibility to carry out this project. It has been a pleasure and an honor.

Personal statement:

Through our sensitization plays and repaired wells the project had an impact on a large number of people, ensuring access to clean drinking water and raising awareness and knowledge of important public health topics to improve wellbeing and health. Equally important I believe is the experience and the message I and everyone involved took from the project: If we join hands and work together so much good can be achieved that money alone can never realize; bringing about positive change and building peace is all about personal effort and dedication, collaboration, support and love for one another, the courage to stand in for the right thing, and the endurance to never give up. – Claudia R. Schneider

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Dorcas boys, villagers, and technicians after successful well repairs at Kokorowe



During one of the play performances of our sensitization program



'Helping Hands' assisting with the well repairs at Noumoudara