

Practicing Peace - Helping hands for health, Burkina Faso, May 26 - July 7

"Peace is not something you wish for; It's something you make, Something you do, Something you are, And something you give away." (Robert Fulghum, American Author)

The inspiration

When I came across the quote by writer Robert Fulghum it reminded me of what three of the to me most inspiring people have said about peace. The Dalai Lama: "Peace is not just mere absence of violence. Peace is, I think, the manifestation of human compassion. If you wish to experience peace, provide peace for another", Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world", and Kathryn W. Davis on the occasion of her 106th birthday renewing her commitment to the Projects for Peace: "My many years have taught me that there will always be conflict. It's part of human nature. But love, kindness and support are also part of human nature, and my challenge to these young people is to bring about a mindset of preparing for peace instead of preparing for war." All three quotes point into one direction: 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. 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.

The challenge

Burkina Faso as one of the poorest countries of the world faces severe challenges in the area of health and sanitation. HIV/AIDS has been characterized as a generalized epidemic¹. Particularly alarming are statistics on knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention methods among 15-24 year olds, with only 15% among females and 23% among males². There are widespread misconceptions concerning HIV/AIDS, oftentimes denial and stigmatization of those affected. Thus, HIV/AIDS constitutes a factor of social and economic unrest and inequality threatening peace. The government recognizes the threat of the disease, however, often times invests mainly in treatment which is challenging due to limited resources in public health personnel and costs. Prevention thus constitutes the key to a more sustainable solution. Furthermore, many communities, especially rural, lack access to clean water³. Unsafe water causes infections and waterborne disease which often hit those of lower socio-economic status, a further cause of social inequality and threat to peace.

The idea

The 6-week long *Practicing Peace* project will aim at creating remedies for the outlined threats to peace and causes of inequality and injustice. It is built on the idea that peace arises through practicing it, i.e. taking responsibility and initiative, active involvement in the creation of peace, and providing support and thus peace to one another. It is centered on community involvement, a bottom-up approach for sustainable peace that emerges from among the people rather than through external forces. *Practicing Peace*, realized in collaboration with the 'Dorcas Street Boys' Project of Pastor Moise Oubda in Bobo Dioulasso, will address the creation of sustainable peace in several ways. It will help to increase knowledge on HIV and support the prevention of HIV infection, and will furthermore increase access to clean water. Thus, it will address the core human rights of health and wellbeing which are building blocks of peace. It will fight stigmatization and discrimination for more tolerance and understanding and thus a more peaceful society. The method chosen to reach these goals constitutes a further building block of peace: active, community led realization of the project following the idea of building and ensuring peace by practicing it.

The project

In a first phase, the street boys will receive a thorough education of HIV facts, transmission and prevention via a set of interactive workshops (**Phase I, week one**). In **Phase II (week two)** they

¹ UNAIDS country progress report 2012, <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/burkinafaso/>

² WHO country report 2005, http://www.who.int/hiv/HIVCP_BFA.pdf

³ UNICEF 2013, Burkina Faso: Water, Environment and Sanitation, <http://www.unicef.org/bfa/english/wes.html>

will travel to different parts of town and surrounding villages to investigate knowledge, beliefs and misconceptions related to HIV/AIDS and assess access to clean water. Additionally, one representative for each community will be identified who will act as a future community mentor and 'expert' on the topic. All mentors will participate in the following project phases. **Phase III (week three)** will be dedicated to collaboratively creating a play that will address common identified misconceptions, present the most important facts about HIV and address stigmatization. In **Phase IV (week four)** the participants will travel the different communities to perform the play increasing knowledge on HIV transmission and prevention and countering stigmatization. The plays will be performed in churches, community halls, or market spaces and will be followed by Q&A sessions to allow for clarification of additional concerns. Simultaneously, those communities/households most in need will receive water purification devices (**Phase V, weeks five and six**).

The street boys, who receive a basic education and professional training in the Dorcas Street Boys project, are selected as the main 'actors' for the project for a number of reasons. First of all, they are associated with crime and thus stigmatized by society. Government efforts largely focus on women neglecting boys. *Practicing Peace* will give them the chance to support their communities, act as responsible community leaders and 'change facilitators and mentors' practicing 'love, kindness and support' as Ms. Davis phrased it. It will allow them to take pride in their engagement and have a sense of agency over peace building efforts. At the same time it will break down prejudices and decrease stigmatization against street boys as they will be seen as positive forces supporting and giving to the communities. The boys will thus actively participate in the process of trust and peace building.

The impact - Building blocks for sustainable peace

The project will increase awareness and knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention and will help provide access to safe drinking water, thus contributing to the improvement of health. It will furthermore help to decrease stigmatization and discrimination and foster understanding and tolerance, prerequisites of sustainable peace. Last but not least, it will allow participants taking pride in actively building peace and understanding and supporting their communities. The project will serve as a role model for future health initiatives with a broader geographical and thematic scope. It will furthermore implant the idea of actively participating in the process of peace creation and demonstrate that much can be achieved via taking local and personal initiative. For the street boys in specific it is hoped that it will educate them to be future responsible community leaders actively taking part in the process of peace creation and sustaining it.

The skills

Pastor Moise Oubda and his wife Elizabeth are running several successful and sustainable community projects and are thus well respected in the local communities. The different projects are realized in collaboration with and supported by the German non-profit organization Kinderhilfe Westafrika e.V. (<http://wordpress.kinderhilfe-westafrika.de/>) which I came to know several years ago when applying for my Peace Corps project and have kept in touch with since. The Street Boys education project is well on way; Pastor Moise is furthermore active in surrounding villages and has started improving access to clean water. Thus, strong local ties are well established and community acceptance and support of the project is secured.

I, myself, have been active in a number of volunteer work projects around the globe (please refer to resume). In particular, I have worked for an NGO caring for people with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria, where I engaged in sensitization campaigns, counseling, community mobilization and involvement, and the realization of plays. I thus possess the necessary understanding of HIV/AIDS, background knowledge on the proposed methods, and am furthermore accustomed to working in a Western African cultural context. Thus, I believe that the outlined project led by the involved parties and realized with the gracious support of the Projects for Peace grant will be a successful building block for sustainable peace serving as a role model for future projects.