

International House NY  
Paula Lemos  
*Acting for Peace In A Hostile Environment*  
Buenos Aires, Argentina

**ABSTRACT:** More than 40,000 people live in the most emblematic slum of Argentina: *Villa 31*. This population faces daily violent situations, mainly caused by the inequality and the structural poverty conditions they live in, combined with high levels of drug trafficking (one of the biggest of Argentina), gang fighting and intra-family conflicts. The central goal of my project is to promote peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation in children, youth and families who live in this daily risky context. The key two innovative techniques proposed are the *Restorative Practices* and *Drama*, as an art discipline for social integration. The project will have three stages. During the first one, we will train 10 local social leaders in restorative practice techniques. This will be held by the peacebuilding specialist Andreas Riemann. During the second stage, these leaders will work directly with children, youth and their families to implement this new knowledge through specific workshops and drama lessons. During the third stage a final play will be presented in some well-known theatres to spread to the community a different and non-violent way of conflict resolution.

**BACKGROUND:** Official reports say that about 30% of Argentines live in poverty. Many of them (3 million) 1 live in informal housing settlements called *villas* (slums). 40,000 of this people<sup>2</sup> live in “Villa 31”. “Villa 31” is the most emblematic and oldest slum of the country and it is **considered one of the most violent neighborhoods of Buenos Aires**, mainly because of the high presence of drug trafficking. It is in this context that thousands of children live surrounded by street violence, structural poverty and inequality. Only 27% of the youth at Villa 31 have a high school degree compared to 80% in the rest of Buenos Aires, said Diego Fernandez, the city’s secretary for social and urban integration who also says that about 52% of the neighborhood lacks a sewage system or running water.<sup>3</sup> **In Villa 31 the homicide rate in 2014 was 27%.**<sup>4</sup> All these are evidence of the extreme vulnerability and risk that children and youth have in this place: they are daily involved in an unsafe environment, seeing gang fighting, mobs and being surrounded by criminal gangs. Furthermore urban integration is still a challenge. Non-profit organizations and the presence of different religious institutions play a key role, especially the so called “Curas Villeros” (*slum priests*). They go beyond formal education to adapt social intervention to the local needs.

**PROPOSAL:** My proposal is to create a new and innovative project in *Villa 31* combining **Restorative Practices and Drama**. On one side, restorative practices offer an alternative approach for dealing with harm caused mainly by crime. It uses a three-dimensional approach that includes the victim, the offender, and the community. <sup>5</sup>The main goal is to promote peace through specific skills for communication, individual and group reflection, conflict resolution and healing. On the other side, drama is an art discipline that helps to improve communication between peers, self-esteem, self-expression, group discussions, among others. This project will be possible thanks to the support of my mentor (a peacebuilding specialist, Andreas Riemann), and the NGO “Mensajeros de la Paz” (*Messengers of Peace*, which will help in the coordination and participants convening) and the Local Church (Parroquia Cristo Obrero) lead by the “Curas Villeros” who will give us the physical spaces to develop the project. The project will have three stages. The first one is based on a deep training, the second one is based on workshops with the community and drama lessons with participants and the third one is the presentations of the final play. The participants of the initial training will be 10 social leaders: teachers, local referents and international volunteers. The participants of the second stage will be children and youth who live in the slum, between 7 to 13 years old and their families. To promote participation in the drama, a specialized teacher will participate in the initial training and will be then in charge of preparing a final play.

### **PROPOSED ACTIVITIES:**

-1° STAGE - 5 DAYS INTENSIVE TRAINING (week 1). DAY 1: Activities of social gathering of the participants. Introduction to the recent history of peace-building, restorative justice and restorative practices in different cultural contexts. Exchange of experiences concerning violence, conflict, conflict resolution, conflict transformation and healing. DAY 2: Introduction to the peacemaking circle as an instrument that reaffirms, repairs and rebuilds relationships. The practice of the peacemaking circle in the contexts of educational and social work. Group activities and practice of the peacemaking circle. DAY 3: Introduction to the family group conference (FGC) as an instrument that reaffirms, repairs and rebuilds relationships. The practice of the family group conference in the contexts of education and social work. Group activities and practice of the family group conference. DAY 4 Introduction to the victim-offender mediation (VOM) as an instrument that reaffirms, repairs and rebuilds relationships. The practice of the victim-offender mediation in the contexts of education and social work. Group activities and practice of the victim-offender mediation. DAY 5: Final discussion and evaluation. Group decisions about the theatre play. Evaluation of the week (group-based). Peacemaking Circle (to express emotions and observations and to address further questions and ideas).

-2° STAGE - COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS AND PLAY PREPARATION (from week 2 to 13): The first part of this stage will be focused on working the different restorative practices skills with the community through weekly workshops. This will be held by the teachers and volunteers that were trained and by the theatre teacher. The second part of this stage will be based on preparing the theatre play to show through this art discipline the learnings of how to solve problems peacefully.

-3° STAGE - PLAY EXHIBITIONS (week 14 to 16): Play presentation in remarkable theatres.

**EXPECTED RESULTS:** The proposed activities seek the integration and strengthening of the members of the group through social gathering, intellectual input and exchange of ideas, communication exercises, educational games, the learning and practice of the 3 most common restorative instruments and participative evaluation activities (in order to reflect on the learning experience and the next steps to take (individual and group level)).

**SHORT TERM RESULTS:** 1) To train social leaders with restorative practices that they will immediately use to promote peace in the different social projects they work in Villa 31. 2) To give children and families new skills for daily peaceful conflict resolution: being respectful, recognizing their own mistakes, assuming responsibility and repairing damage. 3) To train international volunteers in restorative practices that they could take globally. 4) To promote in children better relationships with their family, their school and with their pair groups. 5) To promote urban integration (from people who live in the slum and people who do not).

**LONG TERM RESULTS:** 1) To prevent drug use in children. 2) To strengthen children to help them know their needs, understand their relationships. 3) To increase awareness in children about life values. 4) **To build a more peaceful, democratic and participative society with more tolerance, where discussion is accepted.**

**INDICATORS OF SUCCESS:** Positive changes in participants' attitudes, behaviors and communications. Number local social leaders trained, number of children, youth and families.

**SUSTAINABILITY:** The idea is to train with these "peace building techniques" the teachers and also international young volunteers to make the project more sustainable, because they would have new skills to continue this work in the community and in other countries (in the case of the international volunteers).

**PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES:** *Messengers of Peace* has been working in vulnerable areas in more than 50 countries for more than 50 years. They have more than 5 years of experience in Villa 31 and more than 9 of arts projects for social inclusion. They have previous experiences with remarkable theatres and cultural centers in Buenos Aires. The *Parroquia Cristo Obrero* is the key trusted institution for the community and its role is the most important one in the place. *Andreas Riemann* is a Certified Peace and Conflict Consultant, with a Master's Degree in Peace and Reconciliation Studies of the University of Coventry (UK) and 20 years of experience in social, peace, conflict and development work. In my case I have more experience in different roles in non-profit organizations, project leading and social commitment.