

Togetherness for Peace in Douala, Cameroon
Country: Cameroon
Sponsoring University: University of Rochester
Beauclaire Mbanya Junior, University of Rochester (Cameroon)

The goal of the Togetherness for Peace project is to build entrepreneurial skills and facilitate restorative justice for both internally displaced victims of the current Anglophone crisis in Yaoundé and Cameroon, as well as the violent offenders in the Kribi Principal Prison in Kribi, Cameroon. The project focuses specifically on providing internally displaced women from crisis affected regions with psycho-social and economic support, empowering them to become advocates for peace, as well as giving violent offenders a new lease on life by economically empowering them with alternatives to violence.

A sum of USD\$350 was raised to facilitate a humanitarian drive launched to assist some of the project beneficiaries. This was raised from individual donations given by members of the Cameroonian society.

For over 50 years, the minority English speakers in Cameroon have been marginalized mainly by the imposition of the French system in the English-speaking regions. The lack of adequate government action to resolve their complaints led to the Anglophone crisis. With the escalation of the crisis in 2016, the number of refugees and internally displaced persons has increased by 37%, resulting in a high demand for humanitarian intervention.

Due to high levels of unemployment and poverty, many young people continue to engage in violence and crime leading to a dire need for intervention and restorative justice between these perpetrators and their communities. Thus, addressing the unemployment challenges and those of the Anglophone crisis are vital for having a stable Cameroonian society. My project intervened in two ways; firstly, by providing psycho-social and entrepreneurial skills training as well as small startup capital to 30 internally displaced women living in Yaoundé; secondly, by providing alternatives to violence for violent offenders in the Kribi principal prison in the form of facilitating and financing the building of a small business/rehabilitation center for the violent offenders.

After arriving in Cameroon, I conducted meetings with my partner organization, Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC) to finalize all logistical needs pertaining to the project as well as details about the beneficiaries. Based on the drastic socio-political and economic changes on the ground which characterize the current Cameroonian society, we decided to change a few things. For example, it was necessary to empower internally displaced women who were some of the biggest victims of the crisis and also advocates for peace. Then, it was imperative that we change the project location from Douala to Yaoundé to facilitate easy access to the displaced women. In order to access internally displaced women in Yaoundé, I partnered with HaRO (Hope and Rehabilitation Organization) Cameroon, an organization which provides sustainable solutions to vulnerable groups. We further had meetings to understand the profile of our participants and how to best impact them. Also, we added another component to the project to also work with violent offenders in prison in a bid to counter violence and crime.

Working with the internally displaced women in Yaoundé was an awesome experience. My local partners, LOYOC and HaRO Cameroon, were extremely supportive, especially in ensuring all project related resources were accessible. The project had 30 participants, internally displaced women from the English-Speaking regions living in Yaoundé. It ran from Thursday, July 25th to Saturday, July 27th. The objectives of the project were delivered in two main formats, namely: group discussions and guest speakers' presentations. On the first day of the project, the participants were introduced to the vision of the project. A safe space was created for the women to share their stories to begin the trauma healing process. These women shared heartbreaking stories of rape, death, destruction of property and fleeing for their lives. Thereafter, the women had an opportunity to have one-on-one sessions with counselors about their trauma. Later that day, the women had their first introduction to entrepreneurship; they were taught about the mindset of an entrepreneur and how to come up with sustainable small businesses. On the second day of the project, the participants then had a second session on entrepreneurship, mainly on key aspects of small business development for long-term profit. These aspects were key in helping the

Togetherness for Peace in Douala, Cameroon
Country: Cameroon
Sponsoring University: University of Rochester
Beauclaire Mbanya Junior, University of Rochester (Cameroon)

women move from Internally Displaced People (IDP) to Internally Displaced Entrepreneurs (IDEs). At the end of the day, the women started to brainstorm business ideas and their respective budgets. The participants were asked to submit their business plans the following day. On the third day, the participants were introduced to a legal clinic where the National Coordinator of Civitas Cameroon facilitated a session on empowering women and understanding their human rights. The session focused on how to respond to prejudice in communities as well as how to effectively play a peaceful role in the current crisis. The participants were later asked to submit their written business ideas and budgets. Then, ten best of the thirty business ideas submitted were selected for funding with small grants awarded to the beneficiaries.

Also, working with the Kribi Prison community was an enriching experience. The prison officials were supportive as they ensured the design of the rehabilitation center building according to Kribi's laws. The Kribi project focused on reducing violence and crime through the construction of a rehabilitation center for the violent offenders. This center is a unisex hair salon where the violent offenders could interact with the community in a bid to promote a peaceful coexistence and enable forgiveness.

Implementing the project was a great experience but I faced some challenges. For example, there was a need to change the name of the project to "Displaced but Not Challenged" because of potential government scrutiny because of connection to crisis. This was to avoid any form of controversy on the project. Other steps I took included informing government officials about the work and releasing a press release to local media outlets to ensure the right message was being shared with the public.

Another challenge that I encountered was in communicating with the participants. Most of the participants spoke Pidgin English, which is different from Standard English. Therefore, I made sure I co-led the sessions with facilitators from LOYOC who were fluent in it. Also, engaging in the highly sensitive, emotionally charged discussions with the women was a challenge for me as I was not familiar with such experiences. Therefore, I focused more on listening during the group discussions as well as having one-on-one conversations with the victims in order to fully build my empathy.

I define peace as the ability to connect pain to its cause in order to reconcile it to its healing process for the betterment of society. Reconciliation, inclusion and empowerment are therefore important in initiating peace in the Cameroonian society.

The Togetherness for Peace project created a platform to build a community of Internally Displaced Entrepreneurs (IDEs) whom society has been unresponsive about their struggle. The sole focus of the community will be to support each other and lead peace discussions in other communities. In the short term, this new community of IDEs will serve as a support system to other victims who are still struggling with the challenges that come with being displaced. In addition to this, the rehabilitation center built for violent offenders in Kribi provides a platform for the long-term contribution of this project to peace. This center will facilitate the reintegration of the prison inmates into society once done with serving their jail terms. It will also financially empower the prison inmates via their skill acquisition, thus enabling them to be recognized as valuable assets to the Cameroonian society. This will create a peaceful co-existence between the prison inmates and members of the Cameroonian society in the long term.

The impact of the project became evident to me when BBC Pidgin News wrote an [article](#) about the change I was initiating in the Cameroonian society.

"When I witnessed the mood shift of the women- from crying on the first day to laughing and smiling on the last days, then I understood inner transformation the victims experienced as well as the project's value. I learned that the best way to contribute to peace is by initiating and being constantly invested in the process." - Beauclaire

Togetherness for Peace in Douala, Cameroon
Country: Cameroon
Sponsoring University: University of Rochester
Beauclaire Mbanya Junior, University of Rochester (Cameroon)



Group Picture with Participants



Fun Group Activity led by a participant



Kribi Prison Rehabilitation Center