

Chikukwa Community Library and Theater Project

Country of Project: Zimbabwe

Sponsoring College: Yale University

Project leader: Sam Brakarsh

- a) Zimbabwe
- b) Yale University
- c) UWC Costa Rica

Summary

The Chikukwa theater and library project examines the conflux of education, health, and art as a means of social change and community dialogue. It places emphasis on culturally aware bottom-up approaches to social and infrastructure development, with the community possessing full agency over the work. It is comprised of: building the first community library in the district for service of up to 10,000 students; a series of Theater of the Oppressed workshops developing techniques for collective problem identification and action that are now being used in chief's meetings and gatherings in the area; and the distribution of female sanitary pads which will support regular school attendance.

The Chikukwa Community

Chikukwa is situated in a remote rural part of Zimbabwe in the Chimanimani mountains, 450km from the capital city of Harare. During a meeting I had with the community elders and members of the traditional leadership, the phrase that was repeated time and again was "Love and Unity". Those are the two central tenets to how they see their community and what they want it to be. I begin with this honest cliché because I believe it is important to understand the context of collectivism and emotional intelligence within which we work.

However, while these values capture much of their approach to work and interaction, it is equally important not to idolize the beauty of such an ideology and view it in isolation. Chikukwa is a community with the highest rate of child marriage in the country, an 'O' level (grade 10) pass rate of 30%, and a fear of incoming diamond contractors who threaten to displace the community.

The Library

A few months ago, I reached out to a wonderful man called Zeddy Chikukwa, a member of the traditional leadership with whom I had become particularly close. It was - and is - important that this is a project *with*, and not *for*. The conversation started with the question of what it is they need and how we can create it together. The first element that jumped out was the need for a community library. This would be **the first community library in the district** and would serve up to 10,000 school children in the area in 10 different schools that currently do not have adequate access to books. The library will also provide the opportunity for further study for all members of the district. The community believes that education is the key to empowerment but, without access to significant reading materials or outside knowledge sources, they are held back from many elements of growth.

The community elders have given this project a patch of land on the royal mountain to build a library. Now we need to complete the library structure – work that is filled with many challenges and creative solutions due to Zimbabwe's current economic crisis – and design the interior along with local carpenters. We also need to collect a diverse array of books and transport them to Chikukwa, a seven-hour journey from the capital city. The next key steps will be to develop a library system linked to the schools' network that offers activities, readings, and spaces for sharing in order to embed the library in the community.

Theater as a Means of Dialogue

The second key component of the project is theater - namely **Theater of the Oppressed**. I designed a pilot syllabus based on the theories within this style of theater that uses the artform as a

means of community dialogue and conflict resolution rather than just performance. We have begun establishing a theater group made up of youth in the community along with members of the traditional leadership. Now that the tensions after the national elections in Zimbabwe have subsided, they have begun performing in chief meetings and gatherings. The initial performances were successful to such an extent that we are now expanding out to all eight wards in the district.

As this technique is spreading, I am in continual contact with members of the community. I need to continue designing further syllabi for those who I originally trained to use and adapt in different villages in the area. We need to observe what elements of the process are most successful and what requires adjustment. In addition, we are beginning to explore how to incorporate these tools into local politics and discourse.

During the pilot training, the group tackled a range of issues including child rape and pregnancy, abusive orphan and mother-in-law relationships, women not feeling sexually satisfied by their husbands, and diamond contractors attempting to displace the community in order to mine. Through theater, the group deepened their understanding of the causes of and possible solutions to topics that would otherwise be considered taboo. Art provided a space for non-hierarchical dialogue *with*, where the youth and the members of the traditional leadership interacted on the same footing.

A central theme running through community discussions of these problems was an expressed need to improve access to knowledge and the need for a community space to engage with learning. This was particularly relevant with regards to the empowerment of women. Thus, the theater work reinforced the community intentions to build a library and space for learning. The components of the project are interwoven.

Education and Child Pregnancy

When I spoke to a form two (grade 8) school teacher she said that 9 of the 30 female students in her class had dropped out due to pregnancy. While there are multiple strategies needed to deal with this problem, one vital element is to find ways to keep girls in school.

Girls are missing approximately four days of school per month when they have their period. They are using cotton wool or rags which often lead to discomfort and leakage. For this reason, I am also working with a powerful, insightful woman in the community by the name of Amai B. I am purchasing reusable sanitary pads that she is distributing amongst girls who are missing substantial numbers of days at school because of their periods. As a trial, we have distributed to 50 girls and Amai B is tracking the efficacy of the project and what requires adjustment in the specific context before we purchase more and carry out wide reaching implementation as part of a full scale project.

The Chikukwa Project and Peace

At this stage in my life, my model for peace envisions all individuals or groups as having the agency to relieve their own suffering and the suffering of those around them. Oppression and violence – whether structural, emotional, or physical – impede on this freedom. By reclaiming agency from the bottom up, we begin attaining peace.

My work in Chikukwa is done with this notion of peace at its core. The library project is improving access to knowledge and education across the district, providing a generation with a new set of tools that contribute to self-agency. The component focusing on female sanitary health is operating in the same vein by providing increased access to schooling and gender equality in response to a terrain with the highest rate of child pregnancy in the country. And the theater work is approaching contentious political and social issues in a region of the country where the government has maintained an iron fist over the electorate. It is addressing power structures through a process of dialogue. What is more, by having representatives of the community present in planning and decision making at every stage throughout the process, they are wielding their own tools to alleviate suffering in their community and make the patient steps towards long term peace.