

## **The Chikukwa 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 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.

### **Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?**

I received additional funding from a secondary fellowship (the Thomas C. Barry Fellowship). I also mobilized material donations such as books, furniture, and equipment from partners within Zimbabwe. One particularly beneficial partnership was with LearningFactory who are now using Chikukwa as a case study and are developing context specific educational videos the community.

### **How did you come up with the idea for your project?**

It began in conversation with key members of the traditional leadership in the community about their needs. It snowballed from that point forward.

### **Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?**

A long history of political oppression and marginalisation of the rural areas in Zimbabwe.

### **Why did you choose your host site to work in?**

It is a community with which I have had a relationship for many years and I have always believed that an understanding of context is an important prerequisite to any form of work. Furthermore, Chikukwa is a community that has one of the highest rates of child pregnancy in the country and one of the lowest 'O' level (grade 10) pass rates while simultaneously having the building blocks for collective community response in the form of inspired, engaged, mobilised, community members and stakeholders.

### **What was it like to work in your host site?**

It is a gift. I feel as though I am working with a group of dear friends in the community; people who are equal parts inspired and inspiring.

### **Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?**

Cyclone Idai – one of the largest natural disasters to hit the Southern hemisphere – struck Chikukwa in March 2019. Food security in the region plummeted, the communal gardens were destroyed, homes flattened, water systems washed away, road systems cut off, lives lost. Priorities and needs shifted and we had to redefine our approaches to work. We took pause and waited for the community

leaders to decide what they needed regardless of our previous mandates. In the short term, we purchased food and stopped the library construction to ensure that all labour was focused on vital reconstruction work. After immediate community needs were met, we regrouped. The community leaders decided that our work was needed more than ever in response to this new context so we moved on in full force with new obstacles to navigate and new approaches to apply.

### **What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?**

There are a few ways of approach the question of communication. Firstly, because of the long-term nature of this project we require a sustainable form of communication. Chikukwa does not have access to cell phone signal so we have had to find ways of keeping each other up to date in sporadic bursts. However, at its core, the communication within the key community stakeholders in our work has been honest and open.

### **How do you define peace?**

I define peace as all individuals or groups 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.

### **How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?**

My work in Chikukwa is done with this notion of agency as a channel towards 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 the development of a reusable sanitary pad production is operating in the same vein by providing increased access to schooling and gender equality (which women in the community possessing full agency over the production) in response to a terrain with one of 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.

### **Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?**

My belief in the importance of breaking down the barriers of oppression in order to create space for others to enact their own change has taken root and found a true complexity that I never would have expected. Space. I want my form of interaction with my work in this world to be based in a recognition of this space. It is important to create but this creating should never be oppressive in its own process by not leaving space for all those around you to take control. There is a Terry Pratchett quote that speaks to me with increasing nuance each time I read it: “You cannot build a better world for people. Only people can build a better world for people, otherwise it’s just a cage”.

### **Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result. Indicate the student’s name (yours or your teammate’s) for quote attribution.**

The aim of this work is to not only give community members a seat at the decision-making table but to place them at the head of the table. I have increasing conviction that this is the only way to achieve contextual nuance and deep sustainability. [Sam Brakarsh]



*(The Chikukwa library under construction)*



*(a recent Forum Theatre performance in July 2019)*



*(a portion of the Theatre of the Oppressed team)*