

**Girls Leading the Way: Building Peace through Entrepreneurship**  
**Koudougou, Burkina Faso**  
**International Student House, Washington, DC**  
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**Section I: Narrative**

- a) The project's aim was to empower adolescent girls to build the skills necessary to lead economically viable lives and explore alternative livelihoods in the face of increasing instability and rising security tensions. The project provided a curriculum designed to create innovative businesses to address peace and resiliency in their own communities and help women and girls establish a business network and a formal mentorship system.
- b) No other funds were used for this project. However, this project did strengthen capacity of the local organization to participate in national peacebuilding efforts and paved the way for future funding opportunities as their roles in national peace dialogues was further developed.
- c) Studies demonstrate that men and women may not benefit from business training in the same ways. For example, Shinnar, Hsu, and Powell (2014) found that women who completed a semester-long business class had lower self confidence in their business abilities than when they started the class. This could be due to gender prejudices in business training material or messages the women absorbed from their male classmates, who demonstrated higher self-efficacy at the end of the course. This and other studies, as well as the documented discriminatory social norms that women often internalize make it pertinent to include life skills and socio-emotional trainings in business curriculum to make trainings useful for women. Mentorship has often been an informal part to successful entrepreneurial projects due to the networking and self-confidence that is gained. Thus, this project combined entrepreneurship training with socioemotional skills-building through mentorship to empower adolescent girls to challenge existing norms and become future leaders in their communities. This idea was borne out of a discussion with local university women who highlighted the need to reach girls at an age when they are beginning to think of their future and provide alternatives to early marriage and dropping out of school.
- d) Burkina Faso has experienced worsening insecurity since 2015, evidenced by several high-profile attacks in the capital city of Ouagadougou and a growing insurgency in the country's northern border. Since then, security clashes have become more frequent, with recorded incidents occurring almost daily against state institutions, security services, schools, and health centers expanding nationwide. Today, there are approximately 1.5 million people affected by the conflict, including 1.1 million children and over 115,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Escalating tensions between warring factions—including ethnic clashes in northern provinces—have shed light on the urgent need to strengthen communities that have not yet been directly impacted by this conflict to create viable and sustainable paths to regional peace and security. The promotion of economic stability is a key component of peace-building across the region. This project therefore aligned with interventions related to women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment in fragile states more broadly.

A project of this nature is particularly important in Burkina Faso as the country quickly descends into insecurity; women and girls are increasingly more vulnerable to the effects of the conflict. While other deeply rooted factors of vulnerability for women and girls were present prior to the escalation of tensions in the region, the fragile economy of Burkina Faso will need to continue to be strengthened through entrepreneurial activities that reinforce women's economic capacity and ultimately, their roles in the promotion of peace.

- e) The host site was in the city of Koudougou, situated 118 kilometers west of the capital city of Ouagadougou. This site was chosen because of an existing working relationship with local organizations as well as opportunities for growth in business activities and large potential for social impact. The partner organization also has a good relationship with the University of Norbert Zongo,

one of the country's few public universities, which attracts a large ethnically diverse youth population that come to further their studies. Furthermore, Koudougou provided an ideal environment for project implementation as it is in a region that it has not yet experienced the direct effects of the conflict.

- f) Working in Koudougou was facilitated not only by existing relationships but also the availability of conference rooms and related service providers, as the city is close enough to the capital to attract professional development events. While I was unable to physically go to the host site during project implementation due to security concerns for foreigners, the local partners were able to easily and efficiently implement all components of the project without issues. Their capacity in project implementation was strengthened by a training visit to Ouagadougou prior to the start of the camp during which I conducted a training on how to design and lead the camp sessions, administer the survey tool, and structure the mentorship network. This "training of trainers" was crucial to the project and allowed us to work together on aspects of the project that required adaptation to local context, including daily sessions with the camp speakers to ensure consistency in the project activities and learning objectives.
- g) We encountered issues in the months leading up to the project as the security context worsened substantially. The main concern was my security during travel to Koudougou as local terrorist groups had recently increased kidnapping activities throughout the country. Given the project's connection to the U.S. Embassy, I received frequent security updates in the months leading up to my travel and heeded their advice. Based on this guidance, I decided to travel to Ouagadougou instead and host a training of trainers on project implementation. This shift in plans proved to be an even better approach as considerable time was spent providing extensive training to the local partners, resulting in improved sustainability and ownership of the short-term and long-term objectives. Travel occurred from May 27 to June 09, which provided ample time for the training of local partners and preparation of camp activities at the end of June.
- h) Communication was a minor—but constant—issue during this project. Given the communication network challenges in Burkina Faso, the team sometimes experienced long delays in sending and receiving text messages and emails, as well as difficulty with dropped calls in the months leading up to the project. One major challenge was receiving large email attachments after the completion of the project due to an overburdened network. Language barriers were not a major concern, but it did impact the project during one instance. We developed a survey tool to be administered before the start of the first session and upon the conclusion of the camp. However, the camp leaders did not administer the survey at the end of the camp simply due to a misunderstanding. Since a baseline was established with the initial survey at the beginning of the camp, we will be able to address this gap by planning a one-day event for the camp participants where the follow-up survey will be administered. This will allow us to measure the outcomes of the intervention and whether it helped to reach the goals of the camp as well as knowledge uptake among the participants and facilitators.
- i) As I reflect on my growth through this project, I realize that my understanding of peace has also changed. Acknowledging the traditional definition of peace as the lack of conflict or violence, I now recognize the importance of individual choice and agency as indispensable for peaceful and cohesive societies. I would like to point to one of the fathers of peace studies', Norwegian academic Dr. Johan Galtung, definition of positive peace as the presence of conditions encompassing justice, equity, and harmony, in addition to the absence of conflict. If fully realized, these conditions pave the way for individuals to pursue a life of their choosing, without interference of structural, societal, or economic barriers to access.
- j) Entrepreneurship is an important part to surviving in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This project contributed to women's economic empowerment by 1) implementing local contextual factors, along with attention to psychological well-being, into trainings and, 2) evaluating how this added component, unique to this training design yet suggested by previous research, improves the impact of entrepreneurial trainings in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The short-term goals for this project were to: 1) increase girls' understanding of their basic human rights and their roles in peacebuilding, including what constitutes gender-based violence and what forms of support are available to them; 2)

equip participants with the tools to start their own business; and 3) develop a mentorship network to support the launch of new businesses developed during and after the camp. Long term goals include: 1) developing and fostering sustainable relationships between vulnerable adolescent girls and women entrepreneurs through the partnership of local associations and a structured mentorship program; 2) provide girls with skills that will help them make more informed choices about their future; 3) promote the long-term success of women-led businesses in Burkina Faso; and 4) encourage better financial habits such as savings and participation in the formal financial sector to help decrease the impact of factors of vulnerability, instability, and insecurity.

There are several potential short- and long-term effects of advancing women's economic empowerment on the promotion of peace. The Projects for Peace funding helped to create sustainability of peacebuilding activities through entrepreneurship by building the capacity of a local women's association. The potential impact of this project will be establishing the young association as an active peacebuilding organization in Burkina Faso, furthering the goal of engaging local women leaders in civil society. The unique structure of this project will allow for long-term impact through the establishment of a network of women with a shared goal of increasing female participation in the economy as a path to creating resilient communities. This outcome has already been concretized as the local association was invited to be a founding partner in Burkina Faso's first national Women in Peacebuilding association—a UN initiative—alongside other women's associations nationwide. This enormous first step toward a unified voice among women leaders in the promotion of peace underscores how important it is to invest in women's roles as drivers of peace and stability.

It is equally as important to highlight the role of this initial project as instrumental in the association's visibility to peace activists in Burkina Faso, who served as speakers for the camp and are now mentors to the women of the association. Because the camp activities included sessions on topics such as non-violent communication, impact of conflict on local communities, and the promotion of inter-ethnic and interreligious dialogue, participants walked away with a profoundly different understanding of how they can create change in their communities. Beyond the local impact of the project, educating girls on entrepreneurship is vital to the wider economic resilience of households in Burkina Faso.

- k) While my prior interests before starting graduate school did not include conflict and fragility, the escalating tensions in Burkina Faso have alarmed me and given me much to think about as I reflect on sustainability of initiatives like this. Whilst this project has given me a deeper understanding of drivers of conflict and of factors of vulnerability that erode social cohesion—including social norms and gender disparities—I realize how much I still have to learn about the rapidly evolving dynamics of conflict and its impact on women and girls. It has caused me to reflect on private sector solutions to how communities experience the effects of conflict, including ways to prevent forced displacement. Though at times it feels hopeless, I do believe we are a critical juncture of innovation as key actors explore the conflict-development-peace nexus to address vulnerabilities before, during, and after crises. Finally, this project has caused me to reflect on my role as a development practitioner as I make career-related decisions. I am eager to learn more about what measures work in spurring behavioral change in these complex environments that encourage genuine cooperation among key actors to ensure the safety of innocent lives and the preservation of livelihoods.
- l) “The Davis Projects for Peace was instrumental in equipping our local partners to play an active role in Burkina Faso's peacebuilding initiatives, especially as it relates to women's roles in peace dialogues. I experienced growth alongside them as we explored together the practical and immediate applications of entrepreneurship on building community resilience, even amidst rising tensions.” - Rachel Almeida



