Acting For Peace In A Hostile Environment
Argentina
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FINAL REPORT

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project:

The goal of this project was to contribute to the promotion of peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation of children, youth and families who live in the most emblematic slum of Argentina (Villa 31). The main techniques to achieve this objective were to combine art (drama) and restorative practices, giving participants specific communication skills, individual and group reflection and conflict resolution while improving self-esteem and self-expression.

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

During the different stages of the project, we developed complementary fundraising strategies to contribute to the strengthening of some key aspects, but essentially with the intention of involving social actors to this new initiative, to give further visibility to the project for future implementations, to empower its impact and sustainability. In this sense, we encouraged an active participation of many institutions from the private and public sector.

Regarding the private sector, we received help from different NGOs and companies. For example, the “Curas Villeros” (slum priests) gave us a space for free to carry out the drama lessons and also to exhibit one of the final performances (which was very important in terms of having local spectators from Villa 31). Furthermore, a company donated additional food for the activities of the project (snacks, cookies and cereals). Additionally, a non-profit organization named “IERP” lent us a space for the initial training and meetings and the “Ukrainian Association of Culture Prosvita” lent us their theater, in one of the main cultural neighborhoods of Buenos Aires (Palermo), to perform the final play.

It was an achievement for us to involve the public sector: the government of City of Buenos Aires (through different departments such as Culture and Education) supported us in the coordination of activities that were needed for the final exhibitions (and they also attended them).

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

For the last 6 years, I have been carrying out – together with the NGO “Mensajeros de la Paz” and the Local Church “Parroquia Cristo Obrero” - different social projects in Villa 31. During this time, I witnessed constant violent situations and conflicts, where children were involved, directly or indirectly. These experiences gave me the motivation, as an individual and as a professional, to mobilize resources and to engage people and institutions to work together to seek solutions, not only in the short term but with a lasting, sustainable impact.

In this sense, and working with an amazing team of professionals from different disciplines and organizations, we created and empowered projects to promote social integration, such as art lessons, school support and sports activities. Nevertheless, I felt that there was something else we could do to stop violence in a more direct way. It was thanks to the opportunity that Davis Projects for Peace gave me, that I felt very motivated to start discussing deeply with colleagues and professionals, on how we could undertake a peace building project that could help the community to restore harm and resolve conflicts without violence. It was then that Andreas Riemann began to mentor me, and helped me to shape this new project, that involved the arts, and a new discipline based on the Restorative Practices Techniques. It was also inspiring to work together with the local church, to adapt and improve the initial idea, in order to make it functional to the community’s needs.
**Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?**

I believe there are many different causes for the high levels of violence that Villa 31 has. It is important to consider that Villa 31 is considered one of the most violent neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, mainly because of the high presence of drug trafficking. Thousands of children live in social exclusion, surrounded by street violence, structural poverty and inequality. The city’s Secretary for Social and Urban Integration, Diego Fernandez, stated that only 27% of the youth at Villa 31 have a high school degree, compared to 80% in the rest of Buenos Aires, and about 52% of the neighborhood lacks a sewage system or running water. Children and youth are daily exposed in an unsafe environment, seeing gang fighting, mobs and being surrounded by criminal gangs, which are clear evidences of their vulnerability and risk exposure. Furthermore urban integration is still a challenge. In this context, non-profit organizations and the presence of different religious institutions play a key role, because they go beyond formal education to adapt social intervention to the local needs.

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

The main reason to choose Villa 31 to develop this project was the fact that more than 40,000 people live there, in a condition of extreme vulnerability. The risk that children and young people have in this place on a daily basis make all these kind of actions and social interventions necessary to establish new tools in the community for peace, conflict resolution and communication. Also, the fact that I had previous knowledge and connections there was prior when choosing the site, to guarantee the appropriateness and the success of the project.

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

Working in a slum in Argentina is always challenging, due not only to the structural internal problems of the place, which were mentioned before, but also due to the difficulty that social institutions have in terms of finding strategic allies to support this kind of initiatives in such a complicated area. Having Davis Projects for Peace support was very motivating not only for me but also for the rest of the team and organizations participating on the project and I believe this gave us energy to work positively and feel enthusiastic during the three stages.

Furthermore, it was very helpful and enriching to involve professionals, volunteers and institutions with previous experiences of social projects in Villa 31, because they understand the different problems of children, young people and families living in the neighborhood.

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

I can proudly state that the project was a success as a pilot experience. Our main goal of training social leaders and leaving a concrete and useful tool in the community was achieved. Children and adolescents who participated in the process developed their ability to communicate better, to resolve conflicts and to work as a team; while they were strengthening their self-esteem and empowerment.

We believe that one of the main challenges we faced was the lack of time. Children and adolescents needed time to consolidate themselves as a group, to develop a sense of belonging where they felt safe and confident. We worked intensively to complement simultaneously restorative practices and drama lessons, as the technical team needed to promote habits of respect and healthy coexistence, promoting group exchanges, teamwork and the creation of an emotional and physical space that enabled meaningful experiences, while creating a theatrical performance, with a group of children without any previous experience in the theatrical field.

Another challenge of the project was the lack of collaboration of family members. This was due to several factors such as their lack of time, work, and family responsibilities, among others. Families are not always very used to committing beyond their daily life of day-to-day
obligations. Nevertheless and surprisingly, the attendance of family members during final performances to support children was significant.

Both, restorative practices and theatre games had a very positive and notable impact on the population. Therefore, I believe that another and current challenge is to find new ways and allies that could help us to give continuity to the consolidation and the development of the activities.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

The main challenge in terms of communication was at the beginning of the project, when we needed to spread the voice of a new activity to children living in Villa 31. We did a big effort in terms of dissemination through different channels: social media, posters, informal meetings, among others.

Another communication’s challenge was related to the relationship with family members, as mentioned previously, because we would have liked to involve them more, but it was difficult in such a short period of time.

How do you define peace?

I believe peace is a broad concept with many different edges, but for me it is mainly a state of harmony in a community or group of individuals, where there is no hostility nor violence. For me, peace is respect, expression, dialogue, and acceptance to diversity.

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

I believe that this project contributes in creating peace from different sides. On one side, 10 social leaders were trained in restorative practices during Stage 1 of this project. They are social workers, teachers, psychologists and volunteers who are directly involved not only in this project but also in other activities with this and other vulnerable communities. They immediately started to implement their new knowledge and skills with the communities in which they work.

On the other side, children and families that participated on the project showed us during these months how they improved their communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, self-esteem and self-expression. There have been several examples in the group of boys and girls participating that I consider worth mentioning: the first one is the case of an 11-year-old boy, with a destructive family and with indicators of physical abuse and with a school context that is also being a hostile environment for him. In the project, he found a place to feel safe and protected not only by teachers but also by his peers who began taking care of him, protecting and supporting him, even at school. It became clear as the project went by, that he was able to improve his attention, concentration, communication and integration, as well as his self-esteem and security. Another participant of the project incorporated new tools during this process and she was then able to start conversations with her family and to communicate the pressure and anxiety she felt for fulfilling her father’s expectations and not hers.

Finally, the consolidation of the group willing to achieve a common goal for the final performances, made children forget about their narrow circumstances, internal conflicts and difficulties, to focus on their potential talents, possibilities and ability to work in a group, among others.

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

This project changed me not only professionally level but also personally. At a professional level, it gave me new tools not only to work in the field but also with my colleagues at the office. I learned new ways of working as a team and resolving every-day conflicts. This project also motivated me to keep studying and learning more about peace-building and gave me new ideas to replicate it. At a personal level, this project gave me the chance to reflect about my everyday actions and expressions with my family and friends.

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.

“Many times promoting peace in extreme vulnerable areas requires engaging yourself in places and ways you would never have imagined. Receiving this support gave me the hope, inspiration and enthusiasm needed to keep doing it.” Paula Lemos
Stage 1: 10 social leaders were trained by my tutor Andreas Riemann on restorative practices.

Stage 2: Children implementing restorative practices through games and dynamics.

Stage 3: Children representing violent situations at one of the final theatre performances.