**Vahombey Project: Empowering Education to connect people and address conflicts in Madagascar**

Our project for Peace is the continuation of our personal non-profit charity project “Vahombey” initiated in 2018, while we were in UWC. Our mission is to improve education for all in Bekitro, a village in the South of Madagascar, primarily for the local middle-school students, enabling them to learn new skills, update their learning conditions, increase their awareness and connect them with people from around the country and the world. We target students, scholars, and artists, but also business start-ups and ongoing businesses to promote organic and natural push for development. As Madagascar’s cultural heritage still restricts it, we also plan to work on women’s and girls’ education and health in Bekitro and villages.

My (Jullian) father was born and grew up in Bekitro. The village resides in one of the poorest areas of Madagascar, where road access is rudimentary and infrastructures are near inexistent. The region’s people suffer recurring famines and dry periods, causing many organizations and projects to act on those issues. Few are the projects aiming at improving education there.

Back in 2018, our first step resulted in bringing donations of personal souvenirs from the UWC community to Bekitro. That visit to the village also led us to collect data and discuss the possible outcomes of the project with the people of Bekitro, in order to direct our efforts in benefiting ways. This exchange influenced the plan described in this proposal. At the same time, Andreea Coscai, part of the team and a fellow UWC and Bennington student, helped initial donors stay up to date on the project by growing our social media pages to over 1,000 followers on Instagram and 800 likes on Facebook, which later allowed us to raise nearly 2000 books in donations. She also helped in organizing both online and real-life fundraisers for the project, as well as currently brainstorming ideas for Vahombey’s progress. In the spring of 2019, the “Vahombey Project” was generously awarded the sum of $1000 by the “GoMakeADifference” Foundation following a contest.

**Demonstrated Needs**

The population of Madagascar has undergone since decolonization a phenomenon often labeled as a mysterious ‘downward spiral.’ It refers to the country’s drastic economic and political decline despite the absence of major wars or natural disasters. The complex issues linked to corruption, political instability, and colonial history face Malagasy citizens with conflicts they struggle to resolve. Cattle-rustling in the South has been thriving and kidnapping cases have multiplied in the past decades, feeding on poverty and instability. Education does not escape this spiral, as the World Bank reported in 2008 that only 20 % and 33 % of professors in the first and second cycles of secondary education posses the required teaching diplomas. These numbers have been supported by the experience of the middle-school teachers we are collaborating with, most of whom have not earned a high-school diploma. The lack of funding also resonates: one of those teachers that we had the chance to meet, Rosalie Miliarijona, attested that she has used students’ notebooks as teaching material in her classes, due to the absence of governmental support.

Decades of this system have maintained the vast majority of Malagasy people uneducated and despite the efforts already in place, unable to educate themselves. Complex conflicts without the tools to sustainably address them is at the heart of this downward spiral. The poor enrollment rates and the alarmingly low (or high due to corruption) passing rates at National exams show how education is viewed in Madagascar. Bekitro has 31,000 people, with the majority under 18 years old, and only 600 students in the school we are working with. This represents a terrible ratio and sadly can be found on the majority of the Island. There is a rather problematic disinterest in education and a lack of incentive to use it as a tool to bring change and to uplift communities, by connecting them. Our project aims to do just that.

**Goals**

Our most imminent goal is to open an electronic library in the village of Bekitro this summer. It will be contained in a 23’ by 16’5” room the school has agreed to lend us and will possess resources for teachers, students, and all other citizens. The installation will offer materials, furniture, and equipment needed to hold the various activities that will be taking place. These include chairs, tables, shelves, lights, books, maps, a stable internet connection, computers, tablets, projectors, sound systems, and online platforms. With this structure in place, we will be able to provide the school with the resources they are missing (textbooks and teaching materials for instance) and reduce the amount of outdated learning they have using the digital resources.
Students will have access to those resources to not only improve their performance at school but also to develop and discover meaningful learning methods on topics they truly care about.

The library will also be a regular venue for a variety of workshops and didactic activities that will aim at widening the awareness and the skills of community members, empowering the voices of local scholars, artists, or scientists. We will invite activists from outside the village to give talks in the area as well as other villages, and form a local team to carry the organization of these activities in the long run. This team will, at the start, be composed of the aforementioned teacher, Rosalie as the head librarian, my mother, Eugene Virginie, who will take care of on-site logistics as she has valuable experience in commerce, therefore, budgeting, and a student from the school as an assistant to build responsibility and experience. The students will have to apply for this position and will be chosen based on their level of motivation to work for Vahombey. At the same time, the students will interchange this position every 3 months when a new student will be chosen. In this way, more students will have the chance to experience being part of the project, bringing in their ideas along with being the voice of the student body. This team will also be responsible for organizing books and check-out, hiring security and cleaning the library. At this time, starting with bi-monthly events seems to be a healthy schedule.

Beyond 2020 and the Davis Project for Peace grant, our project aims to bring the library to a sustainable state with regular activities and expand into a network of libraries/learning centers around the Island. We hope to get additional funds allowing us to give the library infrastructures that will make it financially sustainable. This can range from paying seats during events to services offered to locals such as print-jobs. Our hope is to stimulate the educational experience and opportunities of Malagasy people in order to let them develop educated assessments of conflicts and issues as well as solutions.

Activities

The physical library we are building aims to be the first anchor point for exchanges of knowledge and promotion of success around the Island. To stay consistent with our goals, we will focus during the first months on organizing workshops and seminars with people coming from other places. These will mainly be collaborations with artists/scholars in Toliara, the closest city, and the capital city, Antananarivo. Part of our effort is empowering those activists, whose voices are often overshadowed by western sources. In the months leading up to the opening of the library, we will begin discussions with said scholars to invite them to Bekitro on specific dates over the summer. The opening week would be our largest event of the year because we are hoping to be able to hold events every single day of that week. On a more regular basis, activities will be happening on the library’s site, with workshops or seminars, or as trips for Bekitro’s students and interested people to the scholars/artists’ workplaces. Those activities will be centered around the building of a specific skill, the study of local or international work or the building of awareness around political and environmental issues. These events will be promoted by the mayor making public announcements of the schedule in advance of the activities so that the community is informed and can choose to participate in their choice of interest.

Timeline

Until the end of May, we will be running campaigns to collect books and start collaborations with Malagasy volunteers. We are also preparing and organizing the library’s functioning, including the needed staff, the book, and lending systems, etc. The month of June and the beginning of July will be preparations for the installment of the physical library. Those will include finalizing the agreement we have with the local school, the purchase of all needed equipment and materials, and hiring the workers and volunteers who will help in bringing the library to fruition. I (Jullian) contacted the University of Toliara to organize talks to raise awareness of the project and invite students and teachers to participate. I will train the future library’s local librarians and will organize with the school the adequate schedule for the library opening. We aim to open the library between the 10th and 20th of July 2020, which will be marked with a week of various events kicking it off. The month and a half left until I leave for College again will allow me to monitor the library’s progress and make strategic adjustments.