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

Country of project implementation: Madagascar – Sponsoring College: Bennington College, VT
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PART A. FINAL WRITTEN REPORT
Section I: Narrative

We set out to build a library in Bekitro, my father’s home village in the region of Androy, Madagascar. This library is set up as a platform to empower Bekitro schools in reinforcing and transforming their educational systems, offering continuous support and opportunities to both students and adults.

Bekitro is where my father was born, a place I had often visited over the years, and its place in my heart made me choose it as the site. Over time, however, it became clear that this would be a long-term project. Bekitro, as a first step, was ideal because it was challenging (geographical isolation in the poorest and driest area, complicated local politics) yet comfortable in its familiarity, as my family and I are part of the community. We did not come off as outsiders trying to fix the village, but more as children of Bekitro coming back to help, which aligns well culturally.

Our timeline for the project spanned from March to August 2021, where I started recruiting volunteers at home to collaborate with on the delivery. I organized our team into departments, each tasked with one aspect of the project: Construction, Programs & Activities, Budget, Research & Social Impact, and Communications. Volunteers met in Toliara on July 15th, then came down to the site to build the library on July 25th, and remained there until the inauguration.

The Projects for Peace grant was the largest source of funding for this step of the project and was accompanied by a $1000 GoMakeaDifference grant in 2019, as well as pre- and mid-project social media fundraising campaigns amounting to $1140. Total budget expenditure since we began work on the library in 2019 has been $12,130, with $1,220 spent before this summer on our bookshelves and book collection, and $10,910 spent this summer.

The project began with a drive to support the community of Bekitro, and the idea of building this library came as a result of our preliminary research phase in 2018. After visiting Bekitro and conversing with its community, the team decided that tackling education to resolve conflict and poverty would be relatively novel in the context, yet would be a very sustainable driver for peace in the region.

The issue of the critically outdated Malagasy educational system prevents educators from accessing the resources they need to hold a productive teaching environment that brings change. Just as importantly, the system does not entice students to find and flourish in the fields that suit them best. In 2018, people in Bekitro did not believe that school would lift their children out of poverty, or that it would better conflict around them.

Pandemic travel restriction in Madagascar prevented me from going home as planned. Thankfully, the team I had been working with since the beginning of the year – they are mentioned at the end of the report – has taken on the on-site work while I organized and led the project from the US. Two on-site project managers assumed responsibility during the fieldwork: Angela, leader of the research and social team, and David from the construction department. The on-site trip took place in two stages:
• The volunteers met and stayed in Tulear to prepare and held team-building activities focused on team spirit and our project values. It was an opportunity to get to know each other since this was the first offline interaction. Our volunteers came from four large Provinces of Madagascar: Toamasina, Fianarantsoa, Antananarivo, and Tulear.

• After 10 days, the volunteers took the 240 miles road to Bekitro, with the books, equipment, and material. They arrived at the end of July to prepare and build the space and left after the inauguration. In that time, they hired the current librarian as well as a security guard. They held a few workshops for children as well, to introduce them to the new resources.

All on-site team members took part in the renovation of the building, painting, technical installations, archiving system development, space usage etiquette, invitations, DIY & craftwork, and courtesy visits. The team met with local Political, Law Enforcement, Health, and Education authorities, which allowed us to collect updated information on the region, namely the reality of the kéré - an ongoing famine of the desertic south. Nevertheless, political players of the village saw our project as an opportunity to strengthen their footing by taking credit for our work or being overly cooperative. Additionally, underlying tensions were reignited between public and religious schools officials since the library is set up in the former.

During the inauguration, the team and my parents prepared the ceremony, which saw performances, speeches, and a cocktail take place. Children also took part in this speech and performed a dance. We then organized educational activities, games, and videos for the rest of day.

There were a few times where it definitely felt as though we would not make it through, such as the last time I attempted to fly home, a week before the project start date on July 15th. My failed special authorization request via my embassy was definitely a moment of lost hope. But my family and my team were reassuring, and we always found a way to make it work, through the many setbacks and surprises we encountered. Team members also felt that the trip to Bekitro was an opportunity to strengthen the team spirit and the conviction of the Vahombey Project volunteers.

Members of the team were involved to various degrees and communicating with them was made difficult by my absence from the site as well as the 7 hour time difference that made me sleep around 2 or 3 am most nights during June and July, in order to talk to them in the morning there and make sure things were getting done.

To me, peace is a societal state where people are free to thrive individually and communally, free of pressure from war, systemic oppression, natural disasters, poverty or lack of awareness, or other obstacles. With this project, I recognize poverty and lack of literacy as two large obstacles holding Bekitro’s people back from peace, and our hope is to plug into the village’s environment and work on taking down these walls one step at a time.

In the short term, I hope that Vahombey Project will ignite the interest in learning and exploration in the children and adults of Bekitro, that they get invested in their passions and are enabled while doing so, inspiring others to follow. In the long term, I hope that Vahombey will be a network of libraries and cultural centers, supporting education around Madagascar, and allowing knowledge and people to exchange more freely, connecting different cultures around the country and creating a supportive environment, a peaceful one at that.

Right around and after our inauguration ceremony, which was held on August 4th, the volunteers held multiple workshops to introduce children to the use of the library. They also organized accompanied reading sessions, helping children pick their books and reading with them when words were too difficult.
This was the first time in Bekitro that lessons were given with a video projector, or that people had a local source of knowledge, already asking for more book options in the library.

Since the project this summer was to set up a platform, a library to be used, we have a plethora of anticipated changes that will happen in the community. In the future, teachers at the schools will gain more access to our equipment, meaning they’ll be able to project maps and videos in their classes, or have allocated slot times each week to use our space. We are preparing forms that will enable library members to request specific books each month, allowing us to tailor our collection to their needs. We have already received demands for more science and agriculture books. During this back-to-school period, we are giving away 10 school kits to children, using a $55 donation received on-site during the inauguration. We want to have many smaller similar programs take place in our library.

Vahombey is a transformative journey for me, as it has been going on for over 3 years. The step that Projects for Peace has enabled was the largest undertaking of my life and has made me enter many worlds I was not aware of before. One of the biggest changes for me this summer was my sense of responsibility and my understanding of what that means in my position. Leading a team of people who are on-site together was very different from an online team, being responsible for people and the stakes at hand. This demystified the workings of institutions or companies for me, whereas as a young person it can seem like they are these giant immutable entities when they are to a great length invested people continuously trying to make something happen. I feel more ready than ever to take on the challenges ahead of me and this has transformed my approach to my work.

A lesson that I hope to have learned and I want anyone to have, is that a vision or project is nothing without the people who believe in it, and that surrounding yourself with people who have the passion to make the vision reality will save the endeavor. One of the scariest yet most fulfilling times of this summer was a couple of days before the inauguration. At the time, my team was in Bekitro with very limited internet, our schedule was locked in and there was not much I could do anymore from my small room in a different country. The way in which the team and everyone involved doubled down on making the project a success, even in my absence just showed me that the hopes of the project were no longer in my heart alone.

The 21 members of our team this summer were: Jullian Androkae, Project leader kandrokae@gmail.com; Angela Rasoandalana, our Research & Social Dept. leader and her assistants Heriniaina Randriambahoka & Tsilavina Miandra; Cathy Raharison, our Communications Dept. leader and her assistants Martia Ravelondraibe & Fitia Rasandimisa; Liva Razafimahazo, our Budget Dept. leader and his assistant Christopher Levitason; Vola Kastner, our Programs & Activities Dept. leader and her assistant Mihaja Rakotonanahary; Sakina Moustake, our Human Resources Dept. leader; Romuald Alimana, our Construction Dept. Assistant, Elyse Andriamanantenaoasoa, our Communications Multimedia Assistant; as well as our on-site Volunteers Jeannie Rabefaritra, Jonathan Andriamalohery, Lydie Rabotovao, McLiola Seth, David, and Séraphin.

My parents Jules Androkae and Eugene Virginie Rasoamanarivo have constantly been of tremendous help, regularly joining the team and helping with the tasks I would have taken on should I have been home.

With Davis Projects for Peace, we were able to set a strong foundation for educational work moving forward, empowering the community of Bekitro in bettering their educational environment and fostering the flourishing of new and established interests.