

## **Social and Academic Integration for Visually Disabled Youth**

Gitega, Burundi, Summer 2021

International House of Chicago

Kévin O. Irakóze, Burundi, University of Chicago

[Associated Project Blog](#)

### **PART A. FINAL WRITTEN REPORT**

#### **Section I: Narrative**

The aim of this project was to empower visually disabled youth at a high school in Gitega, Burundi. This would be done by fighting social marginalization through community engagement and psychological assistance as well as through the support of their academic success. I imagined this in terms of peace which requires equal consideration and conflict-free cohabitation of everyone as well as the provision of all that is needed for the success of each and every member of a particular community. The implementation of the project was solely funded by the Davis Projects for Peace and its full impact, detailed below, is to be attributed to the provision of these funds.

A couple years ago, while reading news from home, I came across an article that spoke of a new program of the national education ministry of Burundi. It was a pilot program for an integrated school. The idea was to bring students of all kinds of disability into a regular high school to follow the same curriculum, be taught by the same teachers and live in the same spaces as other students. Prior to this, education for the disabled was provided through specialized school. The program caught my attention as I thought it was a wonderful idea with a great potential to contributing to the integration of disabled people within the larger society and for a long-term impact. My interest was even heightened as I learned that the one school chosen for the pilot program was one that I was familiar with, the *Lycée Notre Dame de la Sagesse* in Gitega, my hometown. However, the reality of the everyday life of the students was not in par with the expected impact of the program. Indeed, the article sought mainly to raise awareness about the state of education and everyday life in that school. Notable was the reported lack of sufficient school material suited to the needs of the students as well as a lack of proper training for the teachers in specialized education. The case of visually disabled youth became of particular interest. Among the disabled students, they had the greatest difficulties for obvious reasons: they cannot read with their eyes like other students can, which makes it harder for them to follow their studies, especially when there is a lack of sufficient braille equipment. Moreover, their visual disability makes harder their integration within the physical and social structure of the school. This seemed to me like an important issue that needs to be addressed in one way or another. I was aware of the yearly Projects for Peace awards, so I immediately thought of presenting this case as proposal. Both the problem and the site were clear, and the Davis funding would make an important impact on the condition of the students.

When it came to implementing the project, my familiarity with the town and the school made things easy. When I presented the project to the school's principal, he was very excited not only for the project and the funding that came with it, but also for the fact that I was a native of the area, with my childhood home being down the road from the school. This created a relationship of responsible trust: the principal would make himself available whenever I needed him and he would provide all the resources (e.g. access to spaces, staff) in a timely fashion. Meeting the students was the highlight of the summer. It was one thing to learn of their life challenges and it was another to hear it from their own voices. It was heartbreaking to see the excitement they have for their academic and social life but have to face a lot of challenges, many of which are out of their way to solve. Some of the challenges like academic standards and procedures required the attention of the national ministry of education. Despite all this, it was a joy to learn at the end of the year that the students were excelling in their studies beyond expectation: one of them held the first place in her section at the school for the recent national examination.

To contribute to peace, understood in terms of equal consideration, integration and support for success for everyone, the project aimed at responding to the needs above. The concrete idea was threefold: (1) to provide some academic equipment, (2) to give psychosocial support and (3) to raise greater awareness about the condition of the students to a larger national audience. The provision of equipment in the form of computers, braille writing machines and the creation of an audio library provided an elevated academic experience and greater success for the students. For the psychosocial aspect, we held a one-week camp for the students where they shared experiences to create a sense of community and learned about rights that protected them and the many professional opportunities available to them. This created an

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immediately noticeable effect, as one could notice changes in the students' relations with one another as well as great excitement for the things they learned in the space. Conversations from this one-week camp were recorded by a journalist of a national radio station to be aired in their programs. This last item will allow the experiences and grievances of the students to be heard by the larger society. All these combined will create both short and long-term effects. Starting this academic year, the school now has sufficient computers for the braille instructors to take notes for the students in a very timely manner. The students now have access to computers which will give them familiarity with the technology available to support their disability. The audio library which is an invaluable resource will allow them to listen to books of their choice, and this will provide an academic experience which is more or less similar to those of their non-disabled students. Education is key to peacemaking and so the project leaves a great impact both for the students and the national community at large. Doing this project and being with the students created in me a greater awareness of the various needs that different groups of people have and a commitment to support young disabled persons as much as I am able.

Despite COVID-19, I was able to implement the project more or less as it was proposed. The main challenge that I faced was the procurement of the needed equipment. The initial plan was to purchase the equipment in the US and carry it with me to Burundi. But due to the pandemic I had relocated to Burundi by the time the project was approved. However, I was able to get the equipment that was needed locally. Minor changes were brought to effect also as I listened to the particular needs of the students and the school situation. Rather than hold one time group counseling sessions we settled on a one-week intensive camp, both to create new momentum with the students in terms of self-esteem and bonding, but also to judge the immediate impact of the project. On other non-COVID-related changes, a small part of the funds was used to provide accessible bathrooms, as the students had voiced this concern.

Disability is a key consideration for peace within communities. This project has allowed such consideration to manifest for the benefit of a small group of visually disabled students, but its impact will be of great substance. We need a lot more of such work to make this world comfortably livable for all.

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