

**International House of Chicago**

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*Social and Academic Integration for Visually Disabled Youth*

**Gitega, Burundi**

### **Project Description**

This project aims to build peace by empowering visually disabled youth by fighting social marginalization through community engagement and psychological assistance, as well as through the support of academic success. The country of Burundi has three schools for the visually disabled, all of which formally end at the conclusion of elementary school. Children who finish this foundational education have meager options for the continuation of their education. Indeed, the only option heretofore available to them is some form of technical training, and only so for those who are partially blind. As a result, most visually disabled youth are left to the care of their families as soon as they finish elementary school. Opportunities such as the pursuit of secondary, let alone university education, along with the career prospects that such an education affords are unreachable for these young people.

Starting three years ago, a small number of the disabled students have been granted access to high school education in only one school in the country, located in Gitega, the *Lycée Notre Dame de la Sagesse*. However, there lacks effort for full integration as well as a great shortage of material support for academic success. The visually disabled students sit in classrooms and follow lessons with other abled students and take notes on braille slates. The students lack sufficient braille slates and styluses—loosely the equivalent of a notebook and pen—which are not easily obtainable locally. The school does not have any braille books or audio books, meaning none of these students gets to read books like their abled classmates. There is also a total lack of programming for integration and fight against the social stigma attached to disability in the community. What we have then are students who are technically in school but whose education stands incommensurably behind the expected course in relation to their peers. Not only does this hinder the academic education, it also creates further marginalization, which is a hindrance to peace.

I grew up in the town of Gitega, in the center of Burundi, the location of a collective of three schools for children with physical, visual, and hearing/speech impairment. Over time I noticed that most students finished elementary school to then pick up a trade, most often for sewing or street-vending. High school or college studies were out of reach for them. The project's proposal to support social integration and academic success comes from this personal experience.

### **Proposed Activities & Goals**

The goal of this proposed project is to counter the particular challenges in a way which enables peace through academic support and social integration for visually disabled students. The vision is to brighten the prospects of the students both in terms of social belonging and academic success. Whereas they are not fully integrated into the school community, the project seeks to provide social and psychological support and give them a voice through engagement with the local community at large. And whereas they currently experience a marginalizing shortage of school essentials, the contribution of the project is to empower them with the hitherto needed support.

In terms of logistics, the project will last for eight weeks. It has two components, one academic and another social, using education and a fight against stigma for the building of a peaceful society. (1) To ensure that the students are able to follow their education as a tool for peace, further material support is needed. As mentioned already, the students do not have enough writing slates and so have to share a very limited number. Moreover, the school lacks enough braille writing equipment. There are only a couple brailers (i.e. braille typewriters) and not a single embosser (i.e. an electronic braille transcription

device). This means that the school is unable to provide sufficient copies of teacher notes for all visually disabled students. As the first part of academic impact, therefore, we will purchase slates and styluses for

students, two computers, and two portable embossers. This will allow the students to take class notes easily and the braille typists to transcribe enough copies of class materials. For the second academic impact, the project will provide audio listening devices and build a comprehensive audio book library from free resources which are readily and legally available on the internet. I will undertake this task to compile and organize the resources on the computers and will train the students and braille instructors on how to use the resources. This will allow the students to also get the added value of reading books, an essential to an education for peace.

(2) Beyond material support, and at the same level of importance, the project is concerned with the social integration of the students. This will help build a peaceful society where disabled students are not left at the margins. For while they may succeed in the classroom, social stigma currently follows them outside the classroom. The project will initiate programming aimed at (i) allowing the students to share their experiences in a facilitated supporting environment, (ii) to educate the larger community about the challenges of visually disabled students, and (iii) to give an empowering voice to the disabled students. The process will be two-fold. Firstly, facilitated focus groups will be held weekly in partnership with *Remuruka*, a local organization of social workers who offer services on a volunteer basis. In the summer I with a volunteer social worker and a braille instructor will facilitate the sessions on a weekly basis. After the summer, the focus groups will continue to meet regularly once a month for a year. The social workers offer services free of charge, and so the continuation will not require financial support. A school staff member will schedule the sessions and gather the students, and a social worker will lead the discussions.

Secondly, to give voice and involve the larger community, we will start a recurring talk show in partnership with *Radio Humuriza*, a local radio station. We will purchase airtime for eight weekly episodes, for the duration of the summer project. More free episodes will be negotiated with the radio station. The hope is to facilitate conversations with the community regarding the perceptions of disability and stigma around it. We also will, at the end of every episode, call on the members of the community for more support of the program. At the end, the episodes will be archived in the student's audio library for public access and for later airing on radio.

(3) As an additional point, since the project's location is in my hometown, no expenses will be incurred for lodging and food. I will stay at my family's home for the duration of the project. This will allow for a maximal use of the funds towards the project proper.

### **Sustainability**

To enable education of disabled youth is to build peace for the larger society. The project furthers this goal by fighting social marginalization based on disability and opening up new opportunities for the students. The provision of focus groups will allow much needed social and psychological support to the students. This will forge a greater sense of belonging. Moreover, the involvement of the community will help eradicate stigma around visual disability. This will lead to greater peaceful cohabitation. The partnership with the social workers at *Remuruka* and with *Radio Humuriza*, will ensure the sustainability of this peace-building initiative. The school materials that will be purchased are of durable quality. Braille slates and styluses, made of plastic and metal, need no maintenance and last for a long time. Braille embossers also require minimal maintenance. The project will purchase Apple computers and audio devices, since they have built-in screen reader functions. They are also durable and can be repaired locally. The audio book library will have a lasting impact and the training of the students and braille instructors on how to access the resources and use the devices will ensure the longevity and sustainability of the audio library program. The project, as proposed, will have a lasting and sustainable impact on the students, the school, and the community.