

Planting the Seeds of Peace Ambassadors: Post-conflict Recovery Through Vocational Training of Children Affected by War in Northern Uganda

Uganda

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Section I

Our main goal was to promote post-conflict recovery in northern Uganda by addressing the needs of rural youth who were affected by the LRA war. The project aimed to promote peaceful livelihood through agricultural training, nutritional education, and the establishment of a mentorship and seed exchange network.

We held several fundraising events and used crowd-source fundraising websites to supplement the project grant. In addition to a \$2,500 grant from our school president, we raised \$3,946 through a fundraising dinner event and a silent auction with donations from local stores and community members. We also set up GoFundMe and YouCaring pages to receive online donations.

Going into the project, we prepared for difficulties arising from the new surroundings including a lack of infrastructure, scarcity of resources, and cultural challenges with our local partner organization, Children of Peace Uganda (CPU). Some of the biggest unanticipated challenges were with our team dynamic, such as managing different visions of the project and determining individual roles while working on the ground. We found that we needed to work tirelessly to resolve conflict and ensure all voices were heard equally, keeping the best interests of the project at heart while putting personal grievances and egos aside. Another unanticipated difficulty came from the busyness of CPU over the summer months with hosting guests and running other programs. It was often difficult to coordinate transportation and stay on schedule with the project while CPU staff were pulled in different directions.

We experienced budget constraints largely caused by inflation. When we did our initial budgeting, we based costs on CPU's estimates and our experience from the previous summer, but when we arrived in Uganda, many day-to-day costs had almost doubled. We ran into unforeseen transportation safety costs, including the purchase of helmets for our daily motorbike rides. The last major budget constraint came from class-size increases; there were four incredibly eager individuals who heard about the program and began attending class. As a group, we decided these students should receive all class benefits, so we expanded our food and supplies budget to accommodate them. Thankfully, our fundraising efforts outside of Davis Projects for Peace allowed us to have a discretionary fund we could use to cover these additional expenses.

We faced a language barrier because most of our students did not speak English, although some could write it. We had the lectures and pre-tests conducted orally in Luo with written materials and notes written in English. Although our team learned basic Luo, we used CPU staff and English-speaking participants to help translate conversations. Another unexpected and challenging cultural issue we faced was gender discrimination. This manifested in our male teammate getting consulted much more than the female members in the group. The CPU staff often turned to the man in our group to speak on behalf of the group, start meetings, or make decisions. Since female members took charge of the coordination of day-to-day project tasks and problem solving, gradually the team was treated more equally.

Using both lecture-based and hands-on, field-based learning worked well for engaging participants. Providing a nutritious meal before class was especially important to the students, who typically ate only one meal a day otherwise. It allowed them to focus in class, made sure they had enough energy for working outside in the field, built community, and served as a way to educate about nutrition. The agricultural specialist, Calvin, was also crucial to the success of the program. He was able to share his local expertise and help translate conversations with the students to ask questions and get feedback about how the course was going. Over the course of the program, the students opened up to him about their personal lives, and this helped create supportive relationships within the group.

One thing that was challenging about the design of the program was our partnership with CPU. Working directly with a local nonprofit was critical for our project's implementation and effectiveness,

but we did have to reconcile their organizational framework with our project's particular structure. During the project, we learned to manage cultural differences in conceptions of time management and work ethic. For example, setting deadlines earlier than we was necessary helped us stay on track, and having the meal served at the beginning of class ensured everybody showed up on time.

Our project was designed to target the generation that grew up during the LRA war and were adversely affected in different ways. The design of our project included a mentorship program that will leave a cascading impact in the community. Each participant has selected five to ten households in their immediate community to mentor and share their skills with. While we had to limit our class size to 44 people, with these learners becoming ambassadors to others, the project will reach over 200 households with agricultural training and nutritional education. Each of the participants, most between the age of 13 and 25, is typically part of a household with many siblings.

The long-term sustainability of the project will be ensured through a continued relationship with CPU. The local staff will continue to be in relationship with the students, conduct well-being surveys, and assess the continuity of the mentorship program. As more funds become available, future seasons of the program will be run with new groups of students using the curriculum and model we co-created. Our team has established a non-profit called KareMeKuc to continue fundraising, developing, and supporting the program as well as CPU's operating needs. We hope that within the next few years, the program will be brought under CPU's wing and sustainably funded through its international sponsor organizations. The mentorship program and the seed-saving network we created will also serve to multiply the resources provided and spread the impact in the community.

Section II

Through the lens of our project, we approached peace as a social state that minimizes tensions and allows people to live their fullest lives. Peace has many different definitions depending on the context and the individual, but a common theme is a sense of security in a community through which one can meet the basic needs of sustenance, shelter, and safety. This allows individuals to then consider the needs of others and promote the successful coexistence and understanding of differing perspectives.

Our project contributed to peacebuilding in two main ways. In the short term, it brought together youth from different sides of the LRA conflict and fostered connections by empowering youth to work together to meet a common need, which contributed to lowering stigmatization against formerly abducted youth. Furthermore, many of these youth were ostracized, and providing this training gave "low-status" individuals in the community a coveted opportunity to learn. In the long-term, promoting understanding across difference and working to meet common needs will hopefully help address some of the root causes of the LRA war.

Together, this close-knit group learned new skills that will help increase their crop yields and provide more nutritious food. This helps youth obtain proper daily nourishment, gain more economic freedom, and keep social tensions from being further exacerbated by scarcity. Addressing the issue of food security is the starting point for dealing with so many other rehabilitation issues, including nutrition, self-esteem, livelihood, and physical and mental health. The program also contributes to post-conflict recovery in helping youth return to a traditional peaceful livelihood. The participants in our program were robbed of a childhood and the opportunity to grow up learning by experience how to tend the land. As abducted soldiers, the army provided sustenance, survival, and community. By teaching the farming skills that these youth should have learned two decades ago, we help empower young farmers to have another option for making a living besides using a gun.

Living and working in Uganda helped us better understand different perceptions and cross-cultural interactions. It has influenced the way we view the resilience of the human spirit, the privilege of educational opportunities, and nature of truth from different perspectives. Befriending people our age who have survived such a horrific experience as a child abduction helped us learn to connect on a more fundamentally human level. This opportunity has empowered us to trust that even as individuals, we can make a difference in real-world issues.

“A state of political peace is not the same as an individual’s sense of peace in their daily life; that takes seasons of tending to. When the dust settles after a conflict as long and cruel as the LRA war, sometimes the best thing to do is start putting seeds of peace in the ground and wait for the rains.” – Seren Villwock
Photos by Saskia Sichermann.