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“You need an entire village” - Delivering Educational Assistance to Children in Weija



Classroom lesson at Helen's International Preparatory School (HIPS) in Weija, Greater Accra Region.
(Photo: Honsel)

Text: Brigitte Honsel

If you want to preserve knowledge and let it stand the test of time, entrust it to the children (African proverb). It was this old African saying and the conversations with my Swiss friend Helene Jäger that marked the beginning of this story. Both of us were attracted by the idea of getting personally involved and contribute to the development of education in a foreign country. Education, we were and are convinced, is a resource that allows each individual to strive for a status suiting his or her own abilities. We also believed that educational assistance is particularly important in areas remote from major cities. These considerations led to our decision to initiate a kindergarten in Ghana in 1998.

Starting out in Ghana

Why Ghana, you might ask? At first, there was no preference for a certain country in Africa, but then we felt that a nation with a stable and well managed Government would be the best place to start our project. Ghana, for example, has proven that it is willing to depart from the old structures and move towards a positive and successful future. Since we did not have working experience in any African country, it seemed to make a lot of sense to go at least to a place where the political system was in good order.

Our first opportunity to deliver educational support was the establishment of a kindergarten in Weija, a village near Accra. After having raised additional funds, the kindergarten was expanded, and a primary school was added to it. Today, the certified Helen's International Preparatory School (HIPS), which is run by our registered non-governmental organisation, the HIPS Charity Organisation, looks to offer the foundation of a qualified education for some of the children in Weija.

Our teachers are currently educating 75 children from underprivileged families. By 2012, HIPS shall be expanded to a nine grade school with a capacity for nearly 140 children. The land for the school has been donated by the local chief. All other expenses, including cost of buildings, infrastructure, maintenance of the kindergarten and the school, salaries for teachers and staff, food, and school clothing are covered by donations from Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

The challenge of finding sponsors

It is here, in fact, that we experience one of the limits of our project. Our hope to find selected Ghanaian sponsors who would be interested in supporting the project's progress was not fulfilled, except for the support by a Dutch company operating a local subsidiary in Ghana. This means that our organisation has to provide itself for all the services required to handle its everyday activities, e.g. the compensation of local staff. Twice a year I am present in Weija for about one month helping out. Since Helene left the project some two years ago, this has become even more necessary.

But, to be fair, limits exist on both sides. It is very difficult for a private person to find individuals or organisations in Europe who will donate money to a project like ours. A project which is organised and supervised on a day to day basis by a private person is not able to gain the confidence of sponsors very easily. It is also not easy to find people willing to travel to Ghana and provide practical support onsite for some time, especially since in Weija we can not provide lodging to a standard expected by a European visitor.



Kofi Agosor, who is a well-known artist in Ghana and abroad, painted the project's kindergarten as a gift to the children. (Photo: Honsel)

However, after almost eight successful years of work in Ghana, the situation appears to be improving slowly but surly. One major asset and a real potential is the nearly unlimited willingness of the people working with and for HIPS. This also applies to the parents of the children cared for by our organisation.

Their dedication is even more precious since there are many little things that make every day life complicated. Weija is a small, poor village without organised access to transportation and without an infrastructure to a Ghanaian standard. It is therefore not easy to find qualified teaching staff for both the kindergarten and the school.

The importance of role models

One of our challenges is to teach the children the discipline to come everyday to kindergarten or to school, and to be punctual. Most of the children and also many of the adults are not accustomed to that discipline. But if the parents, who have the assignment to help on the school compound, do not keep to their jobs, then how shall we teach the children?

We also keep a close eye on the children's hygiene and on the tidiness of their clothing. A doctor regularly visits the kindergarten and the school and takes care of any sick children. If necessary, they are taken to the hospital. It is not easy in a surrounding like Weija to keep hygienic efforts up. There is no hot water coming from the tap and the hygienic standards of the clothing that people wear in the village are far from the ones we try to establish for the children's school uniforms. However we are working hard since we

consider this aspect an important part of education.

Support by authorities is essential for success

A very positive sign is the personal interest taken in our small project by the new village chief and the newly appointed Assembly Man. Being supported by such leading representatives signifies real potential for our project's development but also for any other undertaking in the country. For a foreigner seeking to educate some children in a little village, this can be of great help. An old African proverb says: *If you want to educate a child, you need an entire village.*

Of course, one's enthusiasm also encounters hindrances, and sometimes this can be disturbing. But seeing the sparkle in the children's eyes when you enter our project is compensation enough. In our opinion, this is the real proof that assistance from the developed countries for the education of the children of Ghana, and especially of the rural areas, is urgently needed and appreciated by the local communities.



By 2012, HIPS shall be expanded to a nine grade school with a capacity for nearly 140 children. (Photo: Honsel)



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