

Muranderera Project

September 2004 trip to Burundi

Dear Friend and Supporter,

In my *June 30th Update*, I mentioned to you that I had written to the General Managers of two international airlines, asking them to consider supporting our HIV/ AIDS orphan children's Project by donating the necessary air tickets to make happen my trip to Burundi. Regrettably, their response fell far short of my expectations. Yet, as you may recall, the meetings as planned in Burundi were very important for the future of Muranderera Project.

The chairman of the board had repeatedly insisted on my presence there and that it would be highly appreciated to participate in the decision making of the two critical issues before the board, namely allocation of the first major grant following clearly defined and fair criteria and choosing the site for the construction of the multipurpose facility-classrooms.

My family has contributed the funds for the trip and a small group of friends back home has kindly written off most of the living expenses. Moreover, my son Gilles who lives in Newark, DE, also a co-founder of Muranderera, was able to make the trip with me.

We left Newark, NJ on August 23 in the evening, to arrive in Bujumbura on August 25, at 15:50. A surprisingly large group of friends, family members and the chairman of the board had organized an exceptionally warm welcome at the Airport.

On August 29, we held our first meeting with the Executive Committee, opened to other members of the Association present in Bujumbura. I gave them a full account of all the donations received and the details of all expenses incurred, as per the June 30th Update. I informed the Committee of a first amount of \$US500.00 I had already handed over to the chairman, and of another \$US1500.00 that should arrive shortly through bank transfer, which has proved to be an interesting learning experience for our future transactions. I also informed the Committee of two boxes sent as gifts by a friend and strong supporter of Muranderera: one carried Burundi flag from the finest selection of fabrics and the other contained a hundred buttons specially designed for members of Muranderera. The gifts were beautiful, and an order has just been put in for a couple hundred buttons plus car stickers! No doubt about it, these are helpful tools in recruiting and fundraising

At that same meeting, the decision was made to go on the site of the Project and meet with the children, their parents, relatives, friends and with the local administration officials; and then proceed with the distribution of school supplies. September is traditionally known to be the beginning of a new school year. September 4-5 weekend was the only available, if we were to reconcile the many time constraints and families' obligations that most members seemed to have. Practical arrangements had to start right a way, in order to be ready on the set date. Various tasks were assigned to members of the Association and additional volunteers were being sought with the cooperation of the local administration officials. For the invitations to reach in time every one concerned, word had to be sent out via the National Radio.

On September 4, the chairman of the board opened the meeting at 11:00 AM. There was a large gathering of children, their parents and relatives; local officials lead by the Head of Bikanka zone

and Representative of the Administrator of Mukike Commune. Muranderera delegation received a standing ovation, with a special reference to Gilles and I, “who have made the trip from far abroad in America to bring us *igikemanyi*”, a major grant in Kirundi.

Speaking in his dual capacity, the head of Bikanka zone reiterated the request that Muranderera assist, not only 140 orphan children who are being raised by their elder siblings or grandparents, but all the orphans who have been identified through the entire Bikanka zone, bringing the number of orphan children in the zone to 275!

The issue had been recently raised with the chairman of the board, who conducted his own investigation and advised me, after consultation with the Executive Committee. So, I had started to give it some thoughts: I saw it as an opportunity for Muranderera to be truly inclusive and in the best interest of the orphans; I thought that it was a great seed for our cooperation with the local administration officials, and that it will serve us well, when we mobilize and rally the populations in Bikanka zone around the Project.

The chairman’s address to the assembly followed, and referring to the Head of zone request, he turned to me and said: “our guest of honor is going to respond to it”.

Having passed swiftly through the usual words of courtesy, I acknowledged the concern expressed by both the Administrator and the Head of zone, and gave them our positive answer. I recalled briefly Muranderera mission and insisted on its inclusiveness. Then I called the attention to this clarification: every HIV/AIDS orphan child in Bikanka zone shall qualify for assistance, but regrettably Muranderera was unable to accept at this stage any child on the grounds that his/her parents are poor! Such a clarification had become necessary, in view of some high expectations Gilles and I have been hearing since our arrival, including from my own friends and family members. I closed my remarks by thanking the members of Muranderera, in particular our chairman for the excellent volunteer work done.

I also thanked the children, their parents and relatives and friends, and the local authorities for the exceptional warm welcome given to us, and I promised that I shall convey their expressions of thanks and deep gratitude to their other friends and supporters in America, who sincerely care for them and have generously contributed to make *ico gikemanyi* happen.

The chairman then proceeded with the distribution of school supplies. They were bought locally and packaged in sets of notebooks per child and school year level. Schools supplies are a big concern, definitely the most deterring factor, even for the well-off parents when it comes to sending a child to school. Please, keep in mind that there is no such thing as a monthly check for our peasantry!

Children, parents, local officials and carefully selected neighbors were allowed to take the sets of notebooks for any absent siblings and children whose names were called.

Nevertheless, at the end we heard several claims, some were asking why they did not receive any school supplies, others wondered why their names, although submitted through the local official, were not on the list. The chairman thought it wiser to request the Head of Bikanka zone to hear the claims, ensure that every eligible orphan child is on his final list and report to him within a week. University and senior High School students still in summer vacation were also asked to help if and where needed.

A representative of the orphan children spoke last, expressing eloquently their deep appreciation to Muranderera delegation for such a big help to them. He asked the Association to also consider helping them pay school uniforms, tuition and health insurance. These three points were effectively still under review in the Executive Committee, which for many obvious reasons has already agreed to give a priority consideration to the health of the children. The meeting adjourned at 3:00 PM.

Thereafter, a drink and collation was offered by the Executive Committee to the local administration officials and to members of Muranderera, allowing us to continue exchanging informally on the Project, in a much more relaxed setting at the home of one of our key supporters. Gilles and I stayed overnight and spent the next day visiting and reuniting with family members. Gilles had left Burundi fifteen years ago and had not returned since!

The visit to Mr. Bitabuzi Mathias was high on my agenda, for he and my father are old friends. You may recall the grandparent you saw in the 15 minutes video projected at our benefit reception in March this year. He is a widower raising his grandchildren orphaned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Bitabuzi family was the single social success case in our village: seven sons and one daughter all trained in one specialty at least! The old man could have been spared any kind of worry, but it is quite the opposite today. Anyone would like to hear him tell his so sad story: how in the w... is he managing to survive after so many mourning periods he has gone through? Gilles and I walked about four miles down a long stretch of hills to his home. We sat and talked for four hours, including one hour spent together this time walking up the hills. Mr. Bitabuzi remembered me very well; he told us that he is 91-year-old and that he is about ten years older than my father; he took his pen and a piece of paper to correctly write his first and last names; he told us one of his *corvee* stories in mid-thirties... At his age, his mental and physical health appears to be as good as it can be, with no sound of bitterness! We both had a great time, and especially very rewarding to me personally.

With regard to the other critical issue, the site for the construction of the multipurpose facility, consultations have been ongoing during our stay in Burundi. They involved above all the founding members of Muranderera, the neighbors, parents and relatives of the orphan children, the local administration officials, including the Administrator of Mukike. By the end of September when I left Burundi, the matter seemed to be getting much closer to its conclusion; and based on my understanding of the stakes, the chairman's recommendation will be approved.

Let me conclude by speaking on behalf of those children: Gilles and I take it seriously as our duty to convey to you the many expressions of appreciation and deep gratitude we were privileged to hear during our entire sojourn. But, we are convinced that those words express only partially all the smiling and joyful faces we witnessed, particularly the faces of the orphan children. We also want to express again to you our own gratitude for having helped us care for those orphans. Enabling them to embark on the right track towards regaining hope for a better future truly means a rebirth for every one of them!

We still need, and therefore ask for your continued support, as our good work has just started.

Ambassador Benoit Seburyamo, co-founder