

## **Building Community through a Living Library**

Project for Peace Proposal

Coordinated by: Jhewel Fernandez

### **Background**

The cultural project Grãos de Luz e Griô (Grãos) was founded in 1993 by local women as a grassroots project designed to educate children and adolescents in the city of Lençóis in Bahia, Brazil. Located in the Chapada Diamantina region, this beautiful city has recently entered a period of rapid economic growth, due to investments made in the tourism sector. This expansion of the tourism sector, however, came at the expense of infrastructure-building in many other areas in the city, including education, at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Seeing this need, Grãos quickly stepped in and has been working to ensure that the city's children and adolescents continue to receive educations that allow them to pursue their dreams.

Now, more than 20 years later, Grãos has grown and the organization's mission expanded to include the enhancement of the education, culture and sustainable development of Brazil's peripheral and rural communities through the celebration of life, identity and ancestry of the nation's people. Still operating mainly out of Lençóis, Bahia, the organization does this through workshops and classes centered on identity building, economic solidarity, citizenship, and the development of artistic and artisanal skills.

Grãos is funded by grants and donations given by private donors and organizations in their local community. Though this funding is often enough to help with the organization's day-to-day running, little to none of it is left over at the end of any fiscal year, leaving the organization to have to look elsewhere for the funding of additional projects. While working with the organization during my study abroad experience in the Fall of 2013, I assisted the administration in compiling receipts of organizational spending for an end-of-year budget report, and saw just how little was left in their budget at the close of each fiscal year. This, along with a close friendship with the organization's president, led me to become interested in helping the organization to find funding for projects of theirs that would allow them to most positively affect their community.

One such project, established 13 years ago, is a community library designed to supplement the library currently available in the city of Lençóis in a way that allows it to serve the surrounding rural areas. This library will not only help to increase access to books and reading materials, but it will also help to mobilize children and adolescents in the community by allowing them to be a part of the creation of a number of books about their community. It is a library designed by community members for use by all members of their community, within the city and in the rural areas as well.

### **Project Overview**

Grãos de Luz e Griô's "Living Community Library" was established in 2001 by educators, children, young people, griôs, and leaders from rural, peripheral and quilombola communities in Lençóis, with the help of local and international collaborators. Its objective is to create a source of culture and a pedagogy which has at its center the identity and ancestry of our public school students, giving them the opportunity to read and to write their own histories and legends, through artistic and traditional language. Through initial funding by Amigos Europeus da Suíça, the library was able to be implemented, but additional funding was needed to allow the library to reach the city's surrounding areas. As this funding was unable to be raised, the project has since remained very limited in scope, restricting its ability to complete its objective of serving as a source for culture and education.

Coordinated in association with the schools, and community and public libraries of Lençóis, the library's objective is to democratize access to reading, improve literacy and culminate in the collaborative production of four books. The project will involve 550 children, teenagers, young people, educators, parents, griôs, and community leaders from rural and peripheral areas in the "Group for Shared Reading for all Ages" program. It will encourage dialogue on the literary genres of oral and written traditions, and the project's management will be shared between 20 young actors,

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apprentice griôs, writers, graphic artists, illustrators and film-makers from the community, trained at the Grãos de Luz e Griô Cultural Hub.

### **Community Impact**

On a daily basis, the library will serve the needs of 50 young people and 200 children and teenagers from rural, peripheral and quilombola communities, and on a monthly basis those of 500 children from 7 public schools from communities in the municipality of Lençóis, the rural areas, and the urban periphery, all of whom come from low income families. The library is open to all these communities, for free, from Monday to Friday between 8am and 12pm and between 2pm and 6pm, and offers resources on the following topics: project development and management, the griô pedagogy, community-based tourism, digital activism and social communication, cultural production, theatre, cinema, music, capoeira, dance, toy-making, design and illustration, presentation of theatrical and musical performances, exhibition of visual arts and handicrafts, film showings and film festivals.

The program will also be managed by young adults educated through Grãos as a part of their adolescent and young adult program. This allowed these individuals to develop professional and personal skills in 6 different disciplines, while also providing them with small stipends that they could put towards attending university or supporting their families. Outside of just providing these young adults with skills, the program also taught them leadership skills and allowed them to develop projects to positively impact their communities. Working with this age group is especially important because, at 15.4%, unemployment among individuals aged 15-25 was more than double that of the general population, 6.4%, in 2012. Working in the library will allow these young adults to put into practice the skills they gained through their training, whether that be financial management, graphic design, or cultural productions, while also supporting them financially, and allowing them to gain willful employment.

### **Sustainability**

Ensuring the continued success of the library will be my main project during my time in Brazil. The plan and design for the program was developed 13 years ago by the organization, but without the proper funding the program did not make it more than a year. While I am in Lençóis, I will be working directly with the President of the organization to organize methods for collecting data about the library and its impact. My coursework as a Sociology major as well as experience I have collecting data both for classes and for individual research projects will aid me in designing and implementing this data collection.

Quantitative data about the exact number of community members positively impacted by the library as well as qualitative information about the ways that the program has helped them as well as their opinions about what can be done to improve the library will be collected, analyzed and compiled. Data will be collected after the first 2 months, while I am still in the country assisting with the project, and again after 4 months to strengthen the grants it will accompany. This analysis will be presented to outside sources that Grãos has worked with before, like BancoNordeste and ActionAidBrasil, to aid in solicitations for funding, by showing the successfulness of the program and its positive impact on the community. The Projects for Peace funding will allow the library to function for 6 months to allow for the collection of data until additional funding is received, allowing the program to run beyond 6 months.

Others will be working on formalizing the project in order to share it with the 40,000 people from schools, and public and community libraries in Grãos de Luz e Griô's educational network. The project will also be shared with partnering universities, such as the University of São Paulo, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the Federal University of Bahia, in hopes that these educational institutions will be able to replicate this kind of library in locales around the country.