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# A Look Into Cape Verde Save Our Children: The African Way

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A Look Into Cape Verde

Save Our Children: The African Way

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## **A Look into Cape Verde**

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### Abstract

Cape Verde is an island nation off the coast of Senegal, Africa. It served as a pivotal way station during the slave trade to the “new world.” Famine has plagued the nation as recently as the 1940’s, resulting in 10% of the population starving to death. Until 1975 Cape Verde was part of the European country of Portugal. After gaining their independence, Cape Verdeans were hopeful for a new future. At this point, teen pregnancy is on the rise. With this problem also comes the socially accepted occurrence of abandoning children. Children in Cape Verde are growing up wandering the city streets begging for food and forced to find shelter in the most unconventional ways.

This summer I traveled to Cape Verde for 21 days to experience the culture of this unique nation. While in Cape Verde, I got the chance to visit an SOS village in Praia, Santiago, Cape Verde. The SOS program, founded by Hermann Gmeiner in 1949, gives care to children in need. The SOS village showcased hope for abandoned and poverty stricken children. This project will highlight the mission of SOS, and the nurturing environment it offers for these suffering children. This project culminated in an on-campus fundraiser for the SOS program in the Spring Semester of 2008.

Kristin MacDougall

December 18, 2007

## **Save Our Children: The African Way**

Cabo Verde – Cape Verde in English – is an island nation that has struggled immensely throughout history. This group of islands began as a vital way station during the profitable slave trade to the “new world.” Many renowned explorers set foot in Cape Verde including Vasco de Gama and Christopher Columbus. Portuguese colonialism at its finest seized Cape Verde as their own territory and began a 400 year long relationship as an absentee mother to the Islands. The European power of Portugal suppressed this nation for four centuries. Portugal turned its back on Cape Verde many times through periods of devastating famine. This tiny group of islands engaged in a very large independence conflict, which culminated in the achievement of defeating Portugal and driving them out of their country. With PAIGC’s (Movement for African Independence in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, later renamed PAICV) victory in Cape Verde as well as Guinea-Bissau, the citizens of Cabo Verde regained control over the country. Along with independence, Cabo Verdeans also got straddled with problems that the Portuguese refused to solve. One of the most heartbreaking problems that exist in Cape Verde is the plight of children. Children are the future of the world, and many Cape Verdean children are engaged in a devastating cycle that could halt progress in the country. The background of this issue shows a sad history for many children in Cape Verde.

### Teen Pregnancy in Cape Verde

To examine childcare issues, it is important to view the problem as a cycle. Children are abandoned to be street children, and in turn grow up to produce street

children at an alarming rate. About 45% of the population is younger than 15 years.<sup>1</sup>

Urgent attention needs to be paid to this vast, rising but neglected generation.

Adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age will double between 1990 and 2020.<sup>2</sup> These future children will shape the nation of Cape Verde in whatever way they choose. It is up to the older generations to insure the education and growth of the children so that Cabo Verde's future is a positive one. At the moment, the future of these children has become a growing concern. Specifically, adolescent pregnancy is on the rise throughout the islands. A UNICEF study done in Cape Verde indicated that 45% of women had their first child when they were 20 years or younger.<sup>3</sup> This is an alarming rate of teen pregnancy, and signs show that this problem is rising. During my own visit in Cape Verde, I noticed several young girls with more than one child in tow. It was not uncommon to see a woman of around my age (21) caring for two or three of her children. The question which now arises is, Why is this devastating phenomenon occurring so rapidly in Cape Verde? Several cultural factors explain why teen pregnancy is on the rise.

There are several reasons for this problem is unique to the islands. Migration patterns within the islands can be one factor in explaining this problem. Many Cape Verdean citizens are making the move from rural, poverty stricken areas of the islands to the urban centers, in hopes of creating a better life. Also, with the establishment of universities in the major cities of Praia and Mindelo, students travel to the cities to continue their studies. Youngsters who migrate to the cities in search of economic

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<sup>1</sup> Chelala, Ceasar. "Concern Grows About Adolescent Pregnancy in Cape Verde." The Lancet 355(2000): 128-129

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

opportunities, or who move there to continue their studies, frequently end up living in marginal areas, with inadequate social and health services, overcrowding, and diminished parental control.<sup>4</sup> The lack of parental control presents the opportunity for adolescents to experiment sexually without the fear of parental discipline. Because of the lack of parental support, some women eventually end up abandoning their children. These abandoned children grow up to become the street children that are forced to beg for their supper. In Mindelo in particular, I encountered street children all over the city. These children wore the same outfits from day to day and clearly had no parental guidance. In several cities in Cape Verde, particularly Praia and Mindelo, the number of street children is on the rise.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from migration to the marginal urban centers, the campaign to prevent AIDS in Cape Verde has backfired with interesting results on teen pregnancy. Sociologist Victor Borges finds that Cape Verde's campaigns against HIV have perhaps unintended collateral effects. The campaigns seem to have encouraged sexual experimentation among youth people.<sup>6</sup> The campaign intended to promote safe sex to adolescents who were going to engage in sexual acts anyway. Instead of promoting safe sex, the campaign has unintentionally ended up promoting sex itself. Many teens seem to ignore the message concerned with using condoms, and concern themselves with the message indicating, "You can have an active sexual life."<sup>7</sup> For this reason, teens now feel supported in having sex with multiple partners. Obviously the biological implication of this is an increase in adolescent pregnancy.

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<sup>4</sup> Chelala, Cesar. "Concern Grows About Adolescent Pregnancy in Cape Verde." *The Lancet* 355(2000): 128-129

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The rise in teen pregnancy can also be attributed to the unconventional family structure prevailing in Cape Verde. The traditional household structure of a mother, father and children under one roof is not present in most Cape Verdean families. Statistics from studies performed in Praia and Mindelo indicate that 80% of children were born out of wedlock.<sup>8</sup> The older generations of males in Cape Verde do not motivate young males to be responsible fathers and providers. Males in Cape Verde are not deemed responsible for the children they produce with Cape Verdean women. In practice, unions with multiple partners are frequent, and many fathers do not accept economic responsibility for their children's upbringing and education.<sup>9</sup> Having this familial family structure encourages boys from these households to bear children with many females without the economic or social implications of raising children. Males in Cape Verde find it culturally acceptable to produce as many children as they desire with as many partners. Males in Cape Verde also emigrate to find work elsewhere as a result of the lack of work in the country. Their absence leaves women as the head of households, and responsible for supporting the children emotionally and monetarily. This results in less time to devote to their children.<sup>10</sup> These children are growing up without the parental support needed to break the devastating cycle, and more and more teens are becoming pregnant.

### SOS Cape Verde

It is clear that there is an intense and growing problem with the children of Cape Verde. With more and more unfit parents emerging, the question becomes: what shall be done with these children? How can Cape Verdeans break this cycle and promote a strong

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

future for their nation? One program has vowed to provide children with the support they need to grow up a success. SOS has established a nourishing environment for these children to flourish and grow to important members of society. The SOS program has given children back the childhood that they would not have enjoyed without the program. Though the problem of teen pregnancy is on the rise in Cape Verde, SOS offers a glimmer of hope for the future of the children.

SOS creator Hermann Gmeiner was born in Austria in 1919. Though Gmeiner was not an orphan himself, the plight of orphans after World War II inspired him to establish homes for children who have no conventional home. The first SOS village in Austria was established in 1949. The SOS program made its way to Africa, and particularly Cape Verde, in 1980. SOS-Kinderdorf joined forces with the Instituto Caboverdeano de Solidariedade (ICS), a non-governmental organization (NGO). NGOs have played a vital role in African development all over the continent. After the pressure from ICS and SOS-Kinderdorf, the Cape Verdean government signed an agreement and the land for the first SOS village was chosen in the mountain village of Assomada. This agreement sparked a real step in the direction of changing the course of street children and impoverished orphans. The Portuguese government never even envisioned incorporating such a vital program as SOS-Kinderdorf when it ruled Cape Verde. It took the independent Cape Verdeans themselves to start building a real solution to the problem.

One year after signing the agreement, construction commenced in Assomada. The village was to be equipped with a kindergarten, along with homes for suffering children, offering a new life. It was not until 1984 that the first 15 children moved into

their new home at the SOS village in Assomada. These children became the first of many to cross paths with the hopeful SOS villages in Cape Verde. One important philosophy of SOS is to emphasize self-promotion. Their main focus is to insure that the children of SOS become educated members of society. Instead of simply pampering the children, there is a stress on having a life plan. For example, if a child desires to become a cosmetologist, the SOS program will support this child mentally and financially. To get the financial support, the children must present a life plan. This serves as a way of making sure that the children grow up and better themselves. One example of how this philosophy is implemented is the existence of a carpentry workshop on the premise of the SOS Assomada village. This workshop teaches Cape Verdean men the trade of carpentry, which can serve as an important income for Cape Verdean families.

Aside from teaching children life lessons, education is a critically important part of the SOS program. With independence Cape Verdean citizens have definitely realized the importance of education. In the early 1990s, the SOS program in Cape Verde began serious steps towards educational improvements for Cape Verdean children. One step in the process was the establishment of several small schools in rural communities. The children of these rural villages did not have the convenience of attending school in their town prior to the establishment these small rural schools. Previously, if the children sought education, they had to travel many miles to nearby towns. Children in America enjoy the convenience of a public school system, and a bus system to bring them there. There is no bus system for Cape Verdean children, so the establishment of these schools was very vital to ensure wider reach of primary education. SOS also handed over these

schools to the national school authorities, to fuse their education ideals with that of the nation.

After the establishment of the first village in Assomada, a second SOS village was established in the capital city of Praia. Praia has been suffering economically with the trend of rural refugees moving to the city in search of better opportunities. As a result the city of Praia has been overflowing with children in desperate need of help. SOS established their second village just on the outskirts of the city, seven years ago. This village houses 78 flourishing children, with ten houses. Each house is named after a country, with names such as “Brazil house” and “Luxemburg House.” Each house operates like a family. One “mother” is the head of the household for each of the eight or nine children in the household. This mother is a pivotal part of the development of these children. The mother is usually a woman who has raised her own biological children, who have already left the house. This mother sacrifices her life to the SOS children that she raises. The mothers live in the village with children seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. One mother that we met stated that she felt raising children in the SOS program was much more stressful on her because she was continuously made to answer to the social director. This social director ensures that the mothers are doing their job with the children assigned to the house. From personal experience, when I visited the SOS village in Praia, I got to see the intense bond that developed between the SOS children and their House Mother. This bond is a critical aspect that explains why SOS children have historically been so successful. Strong relationship between and SOS mothers and the children under their care minimize the psychological impacts when the children leaving their homes in SOS villages. When I saw a three-year-old child with her

SOS mother, I was overjoyed at how affectionate and comfortable the child felt in its SOS household.

The SOS program is completely dependent on contributions from sponsors of the program, and from individual donors who are interested in helping. If one is interested, they may sponsor one particular child, or an entire household. It is important for me to explain that the SOS village is anything but a depressing place. Though the children there come from intensely hopeless situations, the SOS village is a small glimmer of hope amongst a desolate future. The children that I encountered were wonderful, thriving beings. The boys and girls were incredibly loving, and insisted on kissing our cheeks when we arrived. It was personally fulfilling to see such a nourishing place for children to grow up. When I was driving to the village itself, I was very anxious as we passed by overflowing dumpsters and houses made from rotting wood. The children I saw along the way had looks of desperation in their eyes as they watched our van drive by. As soon as we arrived at SOS, however, I got the feeling that this place was different. When we left, I felt that we were leaving the children in the perfect place for them. I had absolutely no feelings of fear for the children we met. The only sad part of leaving was the thought that I may never see these children again. One little girl looked up at me and asked “You will come back, right?” This broke my heart. I knew that more than likely, I would never see her again. As a result of the visit, however, now I have a face to tie me to the SOS program. I hope to sponsor a household, and quite possibly sponsor one of the children I met on my trip. I feel very lucky to have been welcomed into the SOS program with open arms. This wonderful program has spread throughout poverty-

stricken countries in Africa and today there are SOS villages in The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Cape Verde.

Since the SOS program runs primarily on donations, it is vital for their cause to be known throughout the world. With these donations the program has the potential to be enhanced in many ways. For example, instead of having crowded houses with 10 children, donations can help the program hire more “mothers.” In this case there would be more one on one attention between children of the SOS program and their house mothers.

For the future, one aspect of the SOS program that could grow is the psychological help for children. Some of the SOS children are coming from environments where abuse, neglect, and tragedy are ways of life. The SOS program can look to provide these children with psychological help that can supplement the nurturing environment that they already provide. Psychological help can be a pivotal way of breaking the cycle of abandoned children in Cape Verde. I think the importance of this help is perhaps pushed aside on the list of priorities for the SOS program because of its limited resources. I would like to see the future of SOS holding the integration of psychological help for the children in the program. These changes can be made possible by donations, which is where you come in.

#### The Fund Raiser

After I returned from Cape Verde, I felt compelled to do something for the SOS program, and specifically the SOS village in Praia that I visited. In the Fall Semester of 2007, I joined the URI chapter Cape Verdean Students Association (CVSA), soliciting their help in terms of assisting the SOS village in Praia. Through meeting with CVSA we

developed a plan for how to raise money for the children that we had visited over the summer. A plan evolved to hold a fundraiser on campus to raise money from the student body. Not only would we raise money for the SOS village, but we would bring awareness of CVSA as an active campus organization as well.

Ultimately we decided to have a booth at the Memorial Union to set the stage for our fundraiser. The premise of the fundraiser was to offer a slice of pizza to any donor, with the minimum donation being one dollar. Altogether, Kingston Pizza, International Pizza, and Ronzio's pizza donated a total of 11 pizza pies to the event. Our goal was to sell out of all eleven pies during the fund raiser. Around our booth we featured posters with pictures of the SOS children so that people would know who they were helping directly.

On Monday April 7<sup>th</sup>, we held our fundraiser titled "Pizza for a dollar?" in the Union from 11-3pm. We sold out of all eleven pizzas by 2:15pm. The support for the event was great, and many people donated to our cause without partaking in the pizza. When all was said and done, we raised \$140 all in one afternoon. Together with CVSA, we have also held fundraisers since then which have raised a grand total of almost \$500 for the SOS village in Praia. It has been a dream-come-true for me to make a difference in lives of Cape Verdean children. The fund raiser took a lot of planning and organization, and would not have been possible ultimately without the University of Rhode Island student body.

Kristin MacDougall

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