

Groundwork Institute Newsletter

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HEALTH AND HOUSING IN CAMEROON: *How a Project Found Groundwork*

It all started with what could have been disregarded as an internet scam. Huck Rorick, Groundwork Executive director, received an email from a man in Cameroon asking if Groundwork would be able to offer assistance. The man's name was Orock and said he ran a non-profit in Cameroon called United Action for Children (UAC). Huck responded with interest, and explained Groundwork's philosophy: to offer guidance, technical expertise, and management support for low-income communities. The community must provide the labor, local materials and land. While this project is focused on construction expertise Groundwork's desire is always to build whole communities: not just houses but whole neighborhoods, with sustainable infrastructure and ongoing community involvement. Orock agreed with all of this and said he had the land and resources to move forward. Their mission did in fact fit well with Groundwork's, as UAC aimed to "develop a caring and sustaining society for children and young people through innovative programmes."

Huck researched UAC and saw that Orock had built two schools and was working on a project funded by FIFA to build a Football for Hope Center, a follow-up project after the World Cup in South Africa. Talking with Architecture for Humanity and PeaceCorps volunteers, Huck began to meet other people working on the project and to learn more about the country and the village. If the resources were there, Groundwork would partner with UAC to build a demonstration house, built by people in the village with local resources, which could then be replicated for other villagers. The construction techniques would be taught and supervised by Groundwork to insure it was completed to a high standard. But before any of this could happen, Huck needed to go to Besongabang.

Besongabang is a village in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. It is run by a tribal council, which operates as the local political system. While no official statistics exist, the council estimates the population of Besongabang to be approximately 5,286 people. The average family has 4-12 children. For children under five years, the third leading cause of death is diarrhea, along with malariaⁱ. The average life expectancy in Cameroon is 56 years compared to 79 years in the United States and 70 years for the 2012 global population^{ii,iii}. Average income ranges from \$1.60-\$5 per day for an entire family. In Besongabang, with no access to clean water sources, lack of running water, and a dearth of sanitation options, it is not a stretch to say this is contributing to health problems.

Part of Groundwork's mission is to find solutions to community problems in living conditions. Through extensive investigation, research and asking questions, several of these issues became clearer. We knew water wells and latrines were far from adequate, but had no reliable data. How many wells are there? Are they contaminated? Where are the latrines? Who uses them?

Rogério Costa, an Architecture for Humanity associate working on the Football for Hope Center in Besongabang, offered to help answer some of these questions. This is where involvement began to grow. A PeaceCorps volunteer, Carybeth Reddy, was also working in Besongabang. Her

project with the PeaceCorps had been encountering difficulties so she was not able to work on it full-time. Huck meanwhile was looking for ways to get more information on Besongabang. Rogério had been looking into the well water systems and it was clear they were subpar.



Typical well. Pauline Takang pulling water out of her well with a rope and bucket

As Rogerio continued to correspond with Huck about this, speculating on the well depth from conversations with villagers, and some of the wells they were aware of, Rogerio finally concluded in an email to Huck: “I guess the only way to do this is to get your hands dirty.” So he did it. He wasn’t getting paid. He just did it. Since Rogerio was already working with Cary, she was able to help, along with Takor, a local village resident. So the three set out to map all the wells in the entire village of Besongabang. Together with a single camera and a GPS, they measured the location, depth of each well, depth of water and surveyed people on their uses. For every well, 8-10 photos were taken, which then had to be sent by email to Huck to map out. This may sound like an easy task, but in Besongabang, it is an overnight process to upload photos via internet. Sometimes it would take several attempts, meaning several days, just to send a handful of photos. But they got it done. Later on, as we learned of the contamination issues caused by latrines, water samples were collected, analyzed and included in a community health class for the village.

Because of their efforts, an accurate map now exists of the water and sanitation system in Besongabang, along with a map of the water table in the rainy and dry seasons. This can now be used to determine future actions around water resources and decontamination.



Map of Besongabang wells and latrines: Red dots- Latrines, Blue dots- Wells, White rectangles- Buildings

Part 2: Huck had been corresponding solely through email to Cameroon. With the progress that was happening, it became clear he needed to visit. So with one last round of research, he booked a flight to Douala and made his way to Cameroon.

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