

I have been in Namibia for 3 months now and cannot believe how quickly time has passed. What started out as a foreign, unfamiliar, place has steadily become my home. Through my travel with work, I have, overtime, seen a side of the country that most visitors never experience. Having the opportunity to see the country through the eyes of the capital and those of a quite village has helped me to understand a country with a complicated past and hopeful future.

As you walk the well-developed streets of Windhoek, you can see the look of surprise on tourists' faces. Clad from head to toe in safari gear, armed with Nikon cameras and maps, one can spot a tourist from a mile away. A common statement that settles over the city is, "this isn't Africa". In reality, this well-groomed city is part of Africa; in fact, it is a glimpse of Africa that often goes overlooked. It is a place that should provide hope; in a 20-year period of independence great strides have been made. Africa is not one country and the problems that plague one of its borders do not appear on others. Westerners have a view of Africa that is centered on extreme poverty, HIV, death, and a severe lack of development.

Field Visit to the Caprivi Strip August 9-24: A learning experience

Once again I cross the red line and am reminded of how different Windhoek is from the rest of the country. The main road is lined with sheet metal houses, small villages set back in the fields, and sheebans (informal bars). As the sun disappears and night falls over Rundu, the only lights visible are those of small campfires illuminating the otherwise dark villages.



The purpose of my recent visit to the Caprivi Strip was to facilitate a two-week workshop to train a new group of community rights monitors. In addition to the current child labor project in the Central North, the Legal Assistance Centre has taken on two new regions, Caprivi and Kavanago. Like the original project, 6 monitors based in Caprivi and Kavango are responsible for identifying children in, or at risk of, falling into child labor and taking the appropriate action. The target group of beneficiaries is orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs), a group understood as being the most at risk population.

The primary activities of this visit included:

- Training new monitors how to use Frontline SMS and wheels
- Training new monitors on child labor policy and action
- Meeting with the chancellor to notify him of our presence and the challenges we faced with our sister project
- Create an action plan with chancellor to address the issue of child labor in the Kavango region (with a focus on issues surrounding birth certificates and identity cards)
- A full day visit to open air markets in the area. Monitors practiced their newly acquired skills and tools in the field

- Meeting with the Child Protection Unit in Rundu

In addition to training, it was my job to observe and explore the challenges that this particular region presents. When traveling to the North Eastern regions of Namibia, I expected to encounter the same challenges that the monitors in the Central North face. With the exception of a few lingering issues, the environment in which the new monitors are working is completely different. Some of these new issues include:

- Many children do not have birth certificates because they were either born at home or one of their parents is from Angola. Without a Namibian birth certificate, it is impossible for a child to enroll in school, receive social grants, or exercise their rights as a citizen.
- There is a much higher concentration of people in these areas than the Central North. Although this makes it easier for monitors to identify cases of child labor, they are somewhat overwhelmed by the numbers.
- With the Angolan border being so close (and porous), the local Namibian government is sensitive to issues relating to citizenship. It appears as though it is difficult for children with only one Namibian parent to get help.
- In many instances, a child is a single or double orphan but cannot prove it because their parent(s) died in Angola and no death certificate was issued.
- Economic hardship is the most contributing factor for child labour in Caprivi, as most of the parents prefer their children to go fishing or harvesting than going to school.
- Although OVCs (orphans and vulnerable children) are supposed to be exempt from school fees, in reality they must pay. Most parents cannot afford the \$60 (less than 10USD) to send their children to school.
- Rundu is a major stop off for truck drivers entering the Caprivi Strip. The high volume of truckers has led to an increase in prostitution. Young girls that have little money are drawn into the escort business and often cannot escape.
- In Katima, large portions of children involved in labor are trafficked from neighboring Zambia. Children are sold by their parents to do farm or domestic work. Most of these children are paid in kind or, alternatively, their parents come once a month to collect the earnings.
- The other challenge when it comes to child trafficking is that people from Katima or Zambia are allowed to travel with a border pass within 60 km radius of both countries. In the case where an adult is travelling with children, the immigration officer only asks for the pass and the ID of the adult and the number of children he/she is travelling with; they do not ask whether it is their children or not and whether the parents permitted the children to travel.



- Another scenario where children were used as child laborers was at home by their stepmothers. We came to learn that in Caprivi, stepmothers don't take care of stepchildren as if they were their own. Most stepchildren are left to do all the hard work at home in exchange for being provided with something to eat.
- There are no places of safety for children that are withdrawn from child labor.

Field Visit to an Open Air Market:

After a week of training the monitors about child labor and teaching them how to use the wheels and Frontline SMS, we split up the group into pairs and dropped them off at different open-air markets to practice their new skills.

After having dropped off of the monitors, we visited the markets to check in with each group. Our second visit was to the Okahanja market. We arrived at the same time as the trucks carrying the day's fresh vegetables. There is movement everywhere, women effortlessly carrying baskets of produce on their heads, men using every bit of their strength to unload hundreds of kilos of meat, and small children ducking beneath their parents tables and backs trying to stay out of the way. There is something about the market that is so tremendously alive. Color, movement, light, and energy fill every inch of the space. *At first glance it looks like a scene of chaos, but with just a moments observation, one can see that everything is organized, every piece in place, and every person in their rightful spot.*

Josephine and Charity approached young mothers and children to tell them about the services they offer (help with school fees, birth certificates etc). To our surprise, there appeared to be a growing tension within the market. In their native tongue, women were spreading the word quickly that the monitors should not be trusted- "they are just trying to get information from us but its just empty promises". Recognizing the great importance of helping these people, Josephine approached the manager of the market, Maria, an elderly woman with great importance and respect in the community. She explained to the manager what the project was, the services we offer, and why it is different from other programs. She explained that she lives in Katima Mullilu and that her community is plagued with the same problems- parents cannot afford to pay their children's school fees, sick relatives leave families with no means of income generation, and children without identification. As I watched this conversation unfold, despite my inability to understand the language, I could see the dynamic shift from tension to trust, respect and most importantly, hope for the future.

Within moments of their conversation coming to a close, I witnessed, for the first time in my professional life, a community mobilize in the most powerful of ways. The manager rounded up all of the women in the market and explained the conversation she had just had with Josephine. The sincerity and conviction in her voice empowered the group. Women and children were clapping and cheering as they collectively talked about the day-to-day problems they face.

As the crowd grew, Maria (the market manager) organized the group into a line and she stood in her office where she wrote down each of their contact information, children's names, and the services they needed. Two days later when we returned to the market, we found Maria with a line outside of her office and the names of approximately 300 (and counting) children that needed help.



The Angolan- Namibian Border: A key challenge in addressing child labor issues

The Kavango River represents the border between Namibia and Angola. One evening after finishing our workshop for the day, we drove down a windy, pothole filled road to the border. The border is lively and people can be seen loading boxes of supplies onto hand carved wooden boats and rafts. As we approach the “border post” we notice that it is nothing more than an old wooden desk with a sign taped to its front boasting the word “customs” in bold sharpie marker. The border is porous and people from both sides cross with ease.

One of the key challenges we identified during our time in the Rundu markets is that there are many children that are born in Namibia while their mothers are from Angola. According to Namibian law, these children are Namibian citizens and should enjoy the rights attached. Unfortunately, most of these children lack official birth certificates and have no way of proving they were born on Namibian soil. Without identification, these children are unable to attend schools and as a result are immensely vulnerable to falling into child labor.

This challenge quickly became a top priority for our program in that region. After a meeting with the chancellor, we created an action plan and organized specific days/times that the home affairs office would work solely on this issue. In addition to working with local government, we also trained our monitors extensively in how to deal with these cases. During the workshop, monitors practiced: identifying cases of no identification, interviewing people without documents, and filling out the necessary paperwork with home affairs.

Pilot Project Results:

The Frontline SMS platform brings with it a communication and data collecting system that does not require additional resources and does not change any of the core components of the original EWFCL program. During the first 6 months of the project, the monitors in the Central North completed only 76 forms in total. Since the implementation

of the Frontline SMS system the same monitors have completed a total of 86 forms between the dates of 25 July and 18 September (2 months). The monitors in Caprivi and Kavango that have recently joined the project have also completed an impressive number of forms in a short period of time using the Frontline SMS system. Between the dates of 1 September and 18 September, these monitors have completed a total of 69 forms. In addition to a clear increase in the number of forms being completed and sent, we have found that the quality of information collected has also increased.