

Second report of the volunteers Lia Büttner and Benedikt Poser

In this report, we describe our work of the last month before the end of the year for the NPO Actions de Solidarité.

In the week of 18.11. -24.11. we worked a lot at the secondary school Gbetagbo in general, as well as for the German club there. We planned a presentation project for the students of the club, where they would learn about the reunification of Germany and the ability to give presentations. We



prepared four different information sheets in German to be able to divide the students into groups, as well as an instruction sheet in French, on which all the steps of preparing a presentation were described in detail. Although the German info texts caused some difficulties, they also showed the students that good preparation (here in the form of translating with the help of a long vocabulary list) is essential for a successful presentation. The four different topics were:

- 1) The GDR
- 2) The Federal Republic of Germany
- 3) October 3, 1990 (Day of German Unity)
- 4) 11.9.1989 (fall of the Berlin Wall)

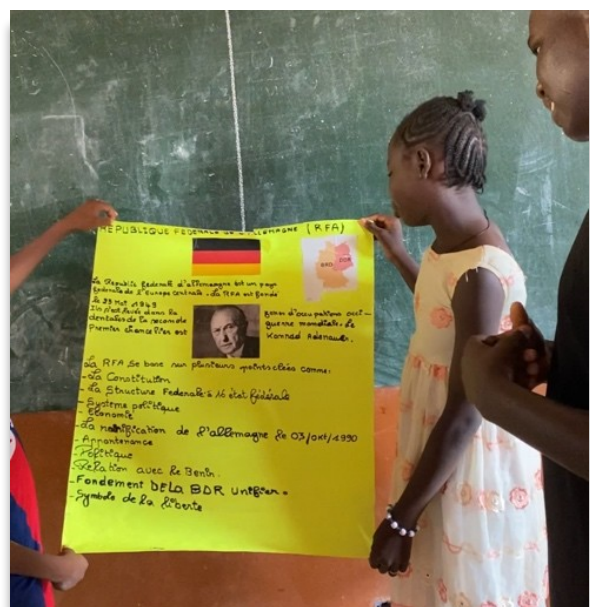
We taught this method because the schools work almost exclusively with frontal teaching. However, speaking freely during presentations, creative work on tasks and group work are essential for future professional life.

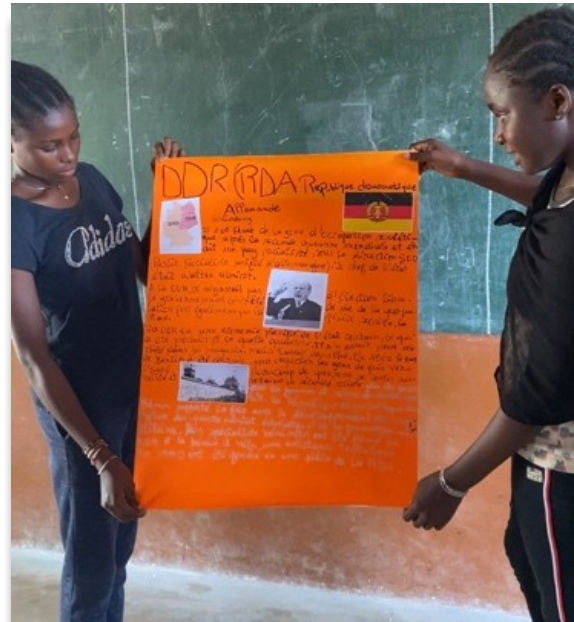


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On Wednesday we were able to put our plans into practice. First, we slowly explained what the students had to do exactly. We divided them into groups and realized that four groups were too few, as there were about 15 students per group. We will improve this for the next presentations. After that, they worked on their own and we only helped with questions and explanations. However, we noticed very big differences in the different groups. In one group, the task was quickly understood, whereas the other groups had difficulties with either the translation or the work assignment. Next time, we will divide higher-performing students better among the groups. We also improve the info texts by writing simpler sentences or helping with a second information text in French, for example. Despite these difficulties, the students matched the individual paragraphs of the texts to the pictures and one group even finished it.

On 12.12., the students were finally able to finish and present their posters. The students who had already finished helped the other groups without being asked by us, which made us very happy. After half an hour, all posters were labelled and pictures glued on, so that the presentations could begin. Unfortunately, no bullet points were used and most of the time only the translated texts were read from the poster. It was difficult for them to summarize the text. We will practice this with them in more lessons so that the next presentations go even better. A group of students was very interested in the topics and asked good questions about the presentations of the other students. This has created a dialogue about the topics and Benedikt has added more information. In the end, despite the difficulties, the presentations were a complete success and we were pleasantly surprised with amazing progress of the students and a proud feeling, we were able to start the weekend after the first preparation lesson of the posters.



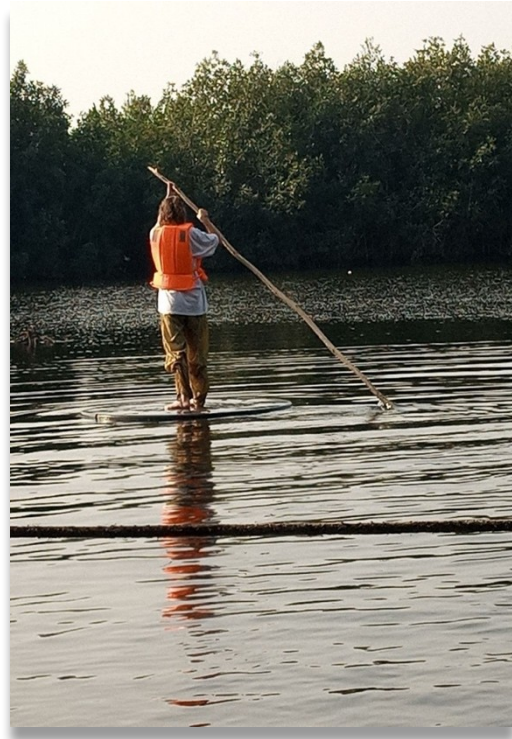


We got a visit from a friend of mine, who is a VIA volunteer from Togo. We greeted him with a plate of pineapple. On Saturday, we witnessed our first Benin-style wedding together, where we were able to experience the influence of sect-like groups in Benin up close. In the beginning, we were led into a church by a reception committee including a pastor and seated directly in the front row. Even after protests from us, we are assured that these wooden benches are only intended for friends, while the majority of the guests sat on plastic chairs. We felt even more uncomfortable when we noticed at the wedding ceremony and the "bride handover" that the father and uncle of the bride had sat right behind us. Regardless, up to a certain point, the wedding was quite classically Christian, with a Benin-style addition. Everyone was dressed in colourful clothes and there was dancing from time to time, because there were actually only more than ten minutes without music during a one-hour speech by two pastors directly after the wedding ceremony. This speech was translated directly and with the same screaming verve into Fon and the content of the speech did not really differ from usual wedding speeches in the first few minutes. But then it took on very controversial, conservative and sexist features.

Afterwards we went to Ouidah, where we went sightseeing together with friends. The "Temple de Pythons" was really very touristic. With a souvenir shop and photos with a python around its neck, it was reminiscent of a hands-on museum. Nevertheless, you could learn a lot about the history of Ouidah and the origins of the temple, as well as about voodoo. Afterwards we drove to the "Porte du Non-Retour" on the beach. It was much more impressive and emotionally moving than the temple, because from here many of the affected people of the region were shipped into enslavement and forced to leave their homes forever. Amazingly, we also experienced the typical Beninese hospitality from a Christian pilgrim group there. They gave us all some Bissap, a hibiscus flower juice. It is astonishing that despite our skin colour and the connection to what happened, the Beninese

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population makes a differentiation between us and what happened in the past, whereas in Europe, for example, prejudiced dogmas can still be found more and more today. With these thoughts, our friends led us to a small inhabited island by means of a hike and nightly river crossing, where we spent the night outdoors as a large group under palm trees in hammocks. The stay in Ahouandji seemed like paradise.



The next day we went to work, still moved by the island, but motivated. This time to Yékon-Do to watch a sensibilisation for the first time. This also went very well because the headmaster is very interested in the topic and is willing to show his commitment. The teachers also asked many questions, which led to a lively discussion. The following day we started in Aitchédji at CEG 4 with the same sensibilisation, which unfortunately did not have the desired effect as the first one. We are looking forward to further developments. Afterwards we went with our friend from Togo to the art market in Cotonou, which was very nice and practical for Christmas presents, but also a bit too long, so that we arrived completely exhausted at the end.



The next day the volunteer returned to Togo and Dassi showed us how to make palm kernel sauce. It's so much fun to learn how to cook the dishes from here. This week was a lot about food anyway. We ate Atcheke for the first time and baked cookies on Sunday with

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volunteers from Cococodji. Even with loud Christmas music and the smell of cookies in our noses, it is very difficult to get into the Christmas spirit at 33°C. We live in what feels like an endless summer.

The next week, Lia went to the “Direction de l'Emigration et de l'Immigration” to extend her visa. Unfortunately, this application proved to be very nerve-wracking and exhausting, as she was repeatedly told that another document was still missing. But Benedikt had all the necessary information the following week and not quite as much stress, although a lot went wrong with him, too. In the meantime, however, we both have our passports with valid visas for another six months and can forget about this authority for the time being. On Tuesday, December 3rd, we drove to Ouaké with a construction team, Benoît, Christian and Moïse. We spent the nine-hour drive almost exclusively looking out of the window, as we were finally able to drive further north of Benin and were hoping to see monkeys. We noticed the effects of Harmattan, a dry and cool wind, right away. It became much drier and at night we even froze. We never have thought that we would experience something like this here.

We were provided with two rooms to spend the night, where we rested for the village meeting the next day. At the meeting, we could see the strong Muslim influence in the north. No woman came without a headscarf, women sat separately from the men and always talked after them. But everyone agreed that the contract should be signed and with the singing and dancing of some women, the construction of the string scaffolding was started immediately. Together with the others, we bought building materials in Djougou and were able to see the city a bit. It is remarkable how old Djougou is and we definitely want to see the mosque there from the 18th century next time. Otherwise, we didn't really have much to do in Ouaké, but we were able to enjoy



nature and eat well. On the last day in the north we drove to a small village near Kouandé. We drove for an hour on sandy roads through the bush until we arrived at 2 small mud huts where about 120 children are going to school. The conditions were frightening. In class, the children had to climb over tables to get to their place and could not see the blackboard at all because of the lack of windows. There were almost no girls in the

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school. We asked the village council, which consisted of 20 men, all of whom had given themselves some title and in reality had no idea what was going to happen, why there were so few girls in school. We were very shocked, although we actually already knew the truth. The girls are already promised to their future husbands at primary school age, so that they "would not have to go to school". The headmistress, being the only adult woman, was the only person who had an idea of what was to be built and where resources would come from. She was very enthusiastic about our commitment. We already know about these conditions in many villages, but seeing them in reality triggered completely different feelings in us. Now we hope that the children can get new school buildings as soon as possible and that the girls will also be sent to school. With a queasy feeling, because we can't help them immediately, we went back to Golo-Djigbé.



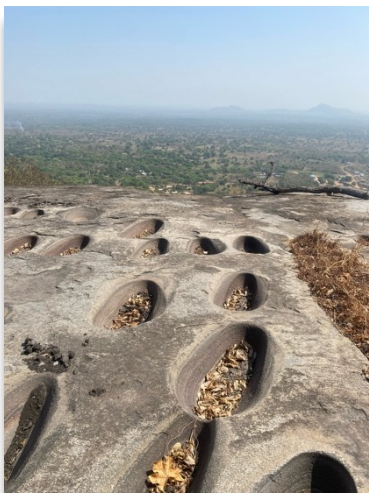
On Saturday we had a Zoom meeting with the Erftgymnasium, the German partner school. Our and the German students have already prepared questions about school and life in Germany/Benin a few weeks before. In the Zoom meeting, the children then asked and answered each other's questions. Since we unfortunately had no more time for spontaneous questions, the meeting had a slightly forced effect because the answers were already prepared. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of interest in (school) life in Germany, at least from our students. To enable even more understanding for our students, we could translate better and more at another meeting, as well as get the students to be quieter and listen better to the answers of the German students. We were very proud that each of our students was able to introduce themselves in German before the question or answer and read aloud in a very understandable way.

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The following week, we were able to help a sensibilisation among the pupils of a primary school for the first time. We helped with the technology and were able to give a lot of feedback through our observer function, which the others always implemented very quickly. In the German club, the children gave their presentations, as mentioned above. We were able to learn a new dish again this week: Igame Pilée avec sauce d'arachides. What we were looking forward throughout the week was our weekend trip to Dassa with Franck.

At 2 p.m. we left for 4500 francs in an unfortunately very slow and stuffy bus to Dassa, so we were only there at 7 p.m. and didn't manage to see the city. But that wasn't very bad, because the Jeco hotel where we stayed offers so many places and activities that the hotel tour alone reminded us of a walk through the city. Since sleeping in the bus was somehow also very exhausting, Lia went to bed earlier after we had a beer at the pool. Benedikt and Franck then took a nightly walk through Dassa and met many old friends of Franck.

On Saturday morning we went on a hike through the Collines of Tchakaloké together with a guide. The hike was an interesting insight into the culture of the inhabitants, who have adapted to the special living conditions on the mountains. Some have settled on the mountains between the rocks to better spot approaching enemies and have a better defensive position. This was important because the region around Dassa is very central. The landscape is also beautiful and we were able to learn so much about the different plants that grow here. With



the leaves of the teak tree, you can wrap food like Akassa. In addition, you can make blush with the young leaves by rubbing them together. The special thing about the Collines are the hollows that the women used to rub into the stone to grind corn, for example. It was impressive to see the testimonies of human life from hundreds of years ago still so present. But the manual work behind it still exists. The inhabitants knock

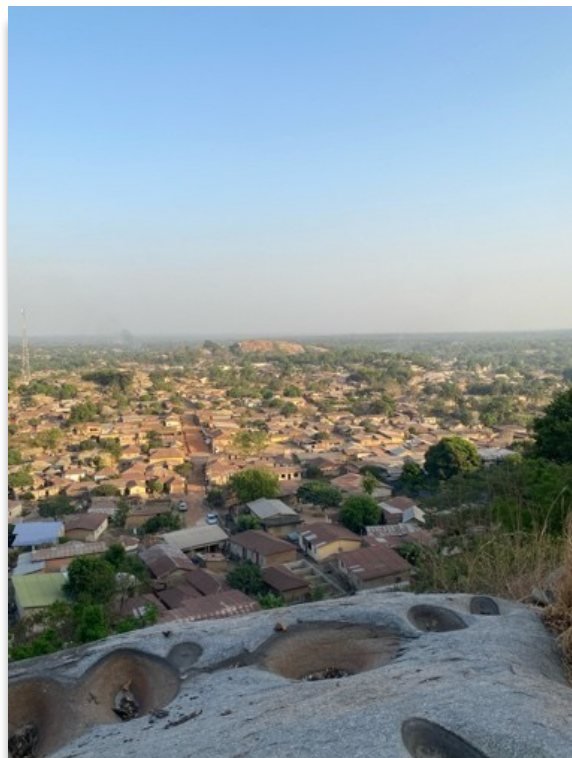
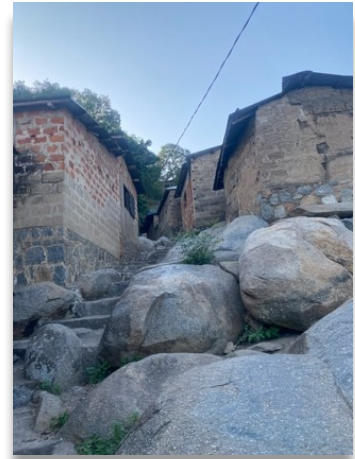
chunks of granite out of the stone, which are then smashed into small stones with hammers and sold. Faith was also very interesting. People put a piece of iron or tool in their field or crop to protect them from thieves. They believe in the "Dieu de Fer". Should a stranger take some of the harvest, the iron spirit will pursue them and bring great misfortune upon them. So you don't need fences or locks, but protect your goods with the help of an iron tool. In general, out of



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respect for someone else's work, you would never simply take a part of the harvest and harm another person. We have been told so many more stories and knowledge shared that we can't write them all down.

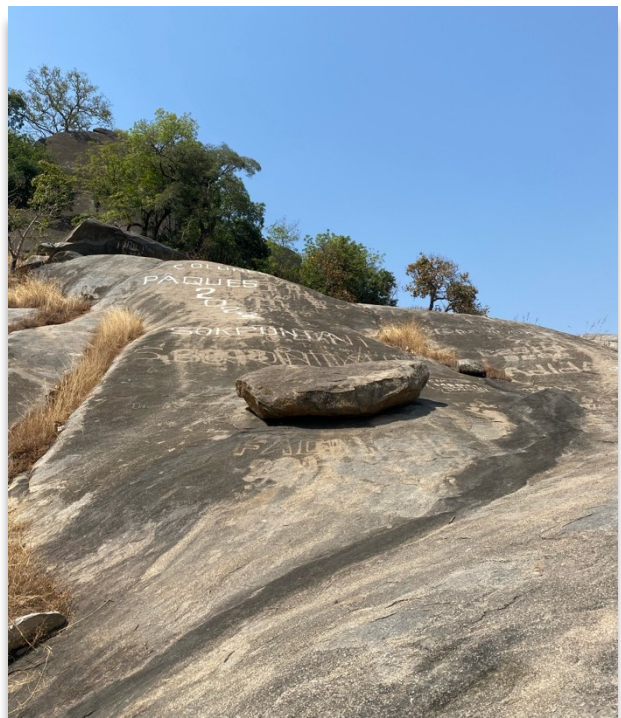
In the afternoon we drove to Dassa, where we visited the Collines des Princes of the Djagou family, which can be reached via a beautiful stone staircase. Here, a wide variety of rituals are very often performed, in which the lineage of the Djagou plays a very important role. For example, there is a sacred forest nearby that only members of the family are allowed to enter. We were again told a lot of stories about the creation and various rituals. The view and the sunset were of course beautiful and impressive again. We both think that Dassa is the most beautiful city we have been to in Benin so far.



When it got dark, we did some shopping for next day's cooking and drove to Glazoue, where we were surprised at a concert by Benoît and Christian and celebrated together. Franck came from Sokponta. We went there the following day to eat the best Ignames Pilées with sauce d'arachides at his family's house. As long as the sauce was boiling, we hiked to the Collines de Sokponta, where Easter is celebrated every year. You can still see the inscriptions from the last few years on the large rocks, on which the whole village and guests from all over Benin

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come to celebrate. We are really looking forward to Easter and Sokponta. Especially because we were able to meet so many people through Franck and he has already shown us the village. In any case, we will also remember the long greeting ritual and that every second person we meet has the last name Batcho. Unfortunately, the weekend went by much too quickly. At 5 p.m. we were already sitting in the car loaded with tapioca and honey in our luggage to drive back. The anticipation of another visit is already huge.



On 16 and 17 December, we helped a lot with sensibilisations at primary school of Golo-Djigbé by preparing the technique and giving feedback to the lecturers after each class. You can already see very

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big improvements in the presentations, but we would like to change the PowerPoint presentation a bit to make the new information easier to understand. Otherwise, we were given the management of the Instagram channel, which we now want to run more actively.

On the last day before Benedict's visit to Germany, we watched "Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella" with the German club to get into the Christmas spirit together with the children and snacked on some sweets. It was a lot of fun because the students, although it was in German, understood the film well and cheered for Cinderella. In addition, we did a small feedback meeting with the students in order to be able to adapt our work in the future if necessary. The students told us that we should stay longer and that the German club is great. They only complained about their grades in the tests we created.

All in all, the last few weeks have been very exciting. We were finally able to take part in the awareness-raising activities, which we really enjoy, travel to different regions and learn to cook new dishes. Our German club has done a great job and is already looking forward to the small gifts that Benedikt will bring for them from Germany.