

The Echo Group

The staff and associates of [The Echo Group](#) share a passion for Africa, especially rural Africa – its beauty, its people, its endless potential. The Group is comprised of former Peace Corps Volunteers and Fulbrighters who have spent years on the continent. Most are themselves from rural backgrounds with experience and expertise in a wide array of educational disciplines. All share a commitment to effect lasting change in the lives of host-country students and teachers through innovative and practical education programs which are designed to achieve both immediate impact and long-term sustainability.

Our name reflects the lasting impact we seek to create. We like to think that excellent programs don't diminish but grow stronger day by day as they are replicated in new surroundings. For example, a recent 12-month project involved establishing methods for improving literacy in four elementary schools in Okahandja, Namibia. We selected a central site and opened a BEAR (Be Enthusiastic About Reading) room with an initial 1,000 books. After school each day, hundreds of students flocked to the BEAR Room, eager to hold and read a book. Simultaneously, cadet teachers were selected from recent local high school graduates and trained to help students learn to read under the supervision of licensed teachers. Parents began coming to the BEAR room to learn just what had excited their children about reading. As word of the programs' success grew, other communities clamored for them. Okahandja teachers trained in the BEAR and Cadet Teacher approach are now helping surrounding communities establish the programs.

Okahandja was the ideal choice for this project, as it was for an earlier project in *Entrepreneurship Education*. It is rural but near the large capital city of Windhoek. It is filled with history, lying in the heart of the traditional Herero homeland. It is on the major routes to Etosha, the world-famous wildlife park and to Swakopmund, the summer capital of Namibia. An easy day's drive and one can be in the beautiful Waterberg Park. There are countless game farms completely surrounding Okahandja.

Echo Group personnel are so impressed by Okahandja and its citizens that we are planning another two projects in the community in cooperation with the [International Development and Education Advancement \(IDEA\) Foundation](#) of Portland, Oregon. These projects include a multicultural center and a model farm.

Multicultural Center

Given the strong similarities in the history of the Herero, San, Ovambo, Damara and other groups to that of many Native American tribes, a multicultural center modeled after one or more of the successful interpretive centers and institutes in the Western US could do much to improve the lot of native Namibians. Exhibits showing the past, the present and the future of each tribe of the region will draw thousands of visitors to the center annually.

An interpretive center can help develop a new sense of pride in one's culture and history, a sense of ownership, and a true sense of belonging. But a center must not look only to the past but to the future; otherwise it can become a center of bitterness and lost opportunity. Ideally it will also provide incentives, opportunities and assistance to present members of the larger community. It can be a catalyst for new businesses -- gift shops, snack bars, restaurants, and eventually hotels and larger businesses.

The breadth of employment opportunities which can be developed through a

cultural/interpretive center will encourage young adults to further their studies in fields they perhaps are not even aware of at this point.

The Okahandja multicultural center will gather oral histories from the elderly of all tribes, histories which can be told only in the indigenous languages. Once gathered, the histories will be recorded in a small recording studio at the center.

Staff will sell recordings to university linguistic departments worldwide, and will also maintain a website where recordings can be purchased. The recording studio can quickly become an income-generating operation for the center by recording local musicians and marketing CDs internationally. The IDEA Foundation will assist in this endeavor and will help tribal leaders conduct the research necessary to plan and develop new efforts of sustainability for the center.

Model Farm

Over 7 million farmers in southern Africa have died from AIDS during the past decade. If Africa is ever to feed itself without massive donations of food from the international community, it is essential that a new generation of farmers be trained in modern farming methods.

The IDEA Foundation has the opportunity to purchase a thriving 13-acre vegetable farm in rural Namibia to use as a training facility for young men and women who wish to pursue farming and agribusiness as a career. An additional 500 acres have been offered to the project at no cost by a local organization via a 99-year lease.

The Foundation has worked with Namibian schools to introduce vocational agricultural programs but has great need to add practical experience to supplement the classroom activities. The model farm will answer that need, and students will learn and practice farming fundamentals -- planting, raising and harvesting crops.

In addition, students will learn small business principles in locating markets, in actual selling, establishing and extending a customer base, keeping and managing financial records, tracking the cost of doing business, cash flow, profit margins, etc.

Students will gain skills that are marketable, that can be utilized in working for other farms or for establishing future farms -- skills that are essential in all lines of work.

Crop sales will provide immediate revenue which can be utilized by the public schools themselves, enhancing educational opportunities for all students.

Innovations in farming techniques and the subsequent expansion of the crop base (e.g., spices, herbs) will contribute to the overall economy and health of the region and the country.

Food sources will be increased as more graduates skilled in agribusiness apply those skills to new farms. This can play a significant role in alleviating the devastation of periodic famines and from the food shortages which have come as a result of the collapse of the agricultural economy of neighboring Zimbabwe.

Over the period of the project, IDEA will establish a Namibian Entrepreneurial Education Foundation and provide training in operations and management of a non-profit organization, transferring to it management of the activities and businesses developed by the project.

Utilizing profits from the model farm, the Foundation will establish a community-based

scholarship fund to provide financial assistance to needy students wishing to further their education.

IDEA will work with appropriate schools to establish a student and teacher exchange program between Oregon/Washington high schools and Namibian secondary schools, specifically in agricultural education.

The IDEA Foundation will encourage volunteers from the US to spend one or more months on the farm helping trainees in farming, reading, business, math, and other subjects.

Sylvanette Guesthouse

During the four years we have worked in Central Namibia, we have always stayed at the Sylvanette Guesthouse. Why? Well, the reasons are countless, but let me list a few. First, it provides outstanding quality – food, comfort, cleanliness – for a very reasonable price. Second, the entire staff treat you like family and you soon believe you are. Third, Mrs. Hanekom can either answer every question you ask or will find the answer for you within minutes. Four, the premises are safe and secure, something becoming more and more important in all of Africa.

Echo Group personnel have lived and worked in dozens of countries around the world. We all feel that if we can't be in our own homes with our own families, then we'd rather be at the Sylvanette. It is truly our home away from home.