



Shoqata e Akomodimit Valbonë

zhvillim jo shkatërrim

VALBONA, Tropoja ALBANIA

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Re: General Request for Support for Primary & Middle School
"Shkolla 9 Vjecare: Mushak Haxhia"
Valbona, Tropoja – Albania

Background

"Valbona" describes a remote valley in Northern Albania, historically one of the poorest areas of one of the poorest countries in Europe. "Valbona" is also the name of the main inhabited center of the valley – the location of the only primary and middle school serving 3 large 'clans' or families with a total of more than 40 students, ages 6-14. This year electricity was brought to the school, thus providing lights. Other than that, the sole equipment in the school consists of, in each room currently in use: a small, barely legible black board, an assortment of small desks and benches, and one cheap tin wood stove. Windows are broken, the only bathroom has a non-flushing turkish toilet, with cold water arriving via a small hose run through the window, which drips continually into the sink. There are no books, no teaching aids, not even a clock or a wastepaper basket in any room. Despite this, the children are bright, cheerful and enthusiastic, walking as much as an hour (each way) through the snow to get there.

Rationale

In addition to the universal right that these children have to a decent education, there is significant impending pressure on the next generation of Valbona's maturing children. The Valbona Valley has since 1997 been declared a National Park. This is so far merely a "paper park" with no staff or maintenance, but it does attest to the richness of nature in this hither-to forgotten corner of Europe. With the beginning of tourism in 2005, currently growing by an astonishing 30% each year, the area and inhabitants are increasingly threatened by escalating and unchecked development. Besides the irony that children growing up in one of Europe's most amazing natural environmental sciences "laboratories" are receiving next to no education regarding science, ecology, and the all-too-often dire history of 20th century development, nor encouragement to evolve an aesthetic appreciation of the luxury of their natural patrimony, this ignorance is critically dangerous considering the challenges they will face as the Valley comes under pressure from rapid and ill-informed development.

Current Situation

Since 2011, local people have begun small projects to improve the teaching and facilities of the school. In 2011-2012, an English course was sponsored as part of the UN Joint Programme Youth Employment and Migration (YEM), with a native speaking teacher provided (me – an American citizen and long-term resident of Valbona), and some copies of text- and work-books. With small sums donated by tourists during the summer one large, previously unused room is slowly being repaired and fitted as a “library.” To date the walls have been patched and painted (a cheerful yellow), wooden bookshelves have been constructed, and Albanian language books have been purchased worth some 300 euros (it's a little daunting how few books this amounts to). Encouragingly enough, the students clamor for more encyclopedias, atlases – they seem to be particularly hungry for facts, and information about the world around them. We are currently awaiting a gift of books from Toena publishing, the largest publisher in Albania, as well as having 3 sewing machines which have been donated by a British-based charity on our promise to provide classes on how to use them.

Request for Assistance

In response to Christine Breitenmoser's kind offer to pursue assistance for the school, I am writing to suggest that I think the most useful donations would be:

Cash to Purchase Books: While many kind people offer to cull their shelves for books, what the children really need are books in Albanian. The capital city of Tirana boasts an encouraging number of bookstores, and several Albanian publishers are doing an excellent job of translating successful international children's books. Several publishers have indicated that they would be prepared to sell directly to us at wholesale rates. While we will like to concentrate on feeding the children's stated preference for non-fiction, we also feel it's important to include novels and other general interest books, in the hopes of turning them into life-long readers, with the curiosity and empathy (and addiction to books) that this implies.

Cash to Purchase some Basic Furnishings: Several large, solid tables and some comfortable chairs would transform the “library.” We believe strongly with Virginia Woolf that “One cannot think well ... if one has not dined well.” Or at any rate without at *least* a comfortable chair in which to do the thinking.

Direct Donation of Videos – Documentaries, Educational Series, Inspiring Films: Most of these children have rarely left the valley, and only then to visit neighboring, similar villages. They are staggeringly unexposed to many things which are considered basic experience, nevermind education elsewhere. Therefore, we are purchasing a DVD projector with funds from a private donor. However, despite the availability of material on the internet, there is only computer access via a single 2G USB-modem which runs off the weak local telephone signal, and is simply not fast enough to permit downloading of video. Even the shortest of youtube videos can take hours to download, when it's even possible due to the frequently breaking signal. Thus a collection of suitable material, delivered on USB stick or DVD would be invaluable. Obviously, more images and less complicated talk would be better, as one the whole they mainly only speak Albanian (though of course the exposure would help with the on-going English language course).

Purchase and Delivery of Science Kits: From what I've learned from teachers in the International Schools and Universities of Tirana, there is (not surprisingly) no source for purchasing basic chemical or laboratory equipment in Albania. I can see online that there are many attractive and affordable "science kits" ranging in cost from \$15 to \$60 (our search engine is unfortunately American). The American company Thames & Kosmos (a branch of the German publisher Franckh-Kosmos) for example offers mouthwatering kits for \$60 with 100 experiments in biology, chemistry and physics ("A broad yet elaborate introduction to the physical and natural sciences, this kit is intended to expose children to the full spectrum of science and show first-hand how these three core disciplines interrelate.") Such kits seem able to surmount the problem of having no facilities, and are furthermore happily designed to peak their interest. If they could be obtained in English language versions, I would happily commit to working with the students and 3 teachers on staff (one of whom concentrates on "sciences") to work through the experiments, perhaps in a sort of extra-curricular "science club" (my undergraduate degree is in Biology, and I feel up to the challenge of interpreting the accompanying English-language text). While one problem is being able to afford 1 kit for (say) every four students (around \$600), an even more insurmountable problem is simply purchasing them and getting them here.

The children here (as their parents before them) are really amazingly clever – one young man has provided "electric" lights for his family's (non-electrified) house by wiring together the small led lights from cigarette lighters (and anything else he can find) to old cell phone batteries which can be recharged, and the cheerful strands of lights are strung among the hanks of onions and garlic drying near the ceiling.

I sincerely feel that exposure to any additional sources of education could be very immediately and directly life-changing, and thank you very sincerely for your consideration.

On behalf of the Shoqata e Akomodimit Valbone (NGO)
and the Mushak Haxhia School,

Catherine Bohne
Valbona

Photographs



The children huddle for warmth in the unheated school.



The school is large but empty, built years ago to accommodate the pre-exodus population



Students in the "library" (note half-painted wall)



The entry hall – large but empty and in need of repair.



Typical Window and the Bathroom



Looking to the future?