

Tzu Chi to Build Seven Classrooms for Open-air School in Zimbabwe

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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A team of Tzu Chi volunteers have gone thousands of miles to the southern African country of Zimbabwe to build seven pre-fabricated classrooms for a primary school. The Rusununguko Primary School, in a suburb of the capital Harare, is so poor that it has no buildings and holds its classes outside. The hands of the students shake in the winter, they bake in the hot summer and have to go home if it rains. With the love they bring from Taiwan, the volunteers want to change this situation and give the students a better studying environment.

Getting the team to Zimbabwe was an enormous effort. Seven flew from Taiwan to Hong Kong and then to South Africa, a journey of 14 hours. There they joined six volunteers and together continued the journey to Harare; in total, it was a marathon that lasted almost 24 hours. Then they encountered a major obstacle at Harare International Airport; customs officers were suspicious of the large amount of baggage they were carrying. They believed that they had come to sell it. It took an hour of investigation and patient explanation before the director of customs gave the volunteers special permission to enter the country.



At the airport, volunteer Zhu Jin-cai was waiting nervously for their arrival. "I am very moved and happy," he said. "When the team arrives, I can say that the students will be blessed. What they are going to do means that the students will no longer have to study in the sun or the rain."

Children most precious asset of Zimbabwe

Zhu cares deeply about the children; they are the most precious asset of Zimbabwe. It has the highest literacy rate in Africa, 91% -- despite the fact some of the children have to study in an environment as difficult as that of Rusununguko. It has only open-air classrooms for over 1,000 students, from first to seventh grade; each grade has 80 to 180 children. Because of the limited space in the tents that serve as classrooms, some students are forced to sit outside.



One example is the fifth grade, with 92 students, who do their study outdoors. They have a single blackboard, which is held up by a fellow classmate. During the class, everyone focuses on the teaching and there is no chit-chat. But they are often affected by the weather.

Fifth-grade teacher Precious Dzutu said: "When the weather is not good and it rains, students are forced to go home. When the weather is cold, they shiver and complain that their fingers are

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numb, so they cannot write. When it is a hot sunny day, they will try to hide in the shadow. But they still are often exposed too much to the sun and get headaches.”

The tuition is only US\$15 per semester, which the poor families in the area can afford. But the money is not enough for the school to build a decent classroom.



Zhu Jin-cai is a businessman from Taiwan who has lived in Zimbabwe for many years; he is also a Tzu Chi volunteer. He has taken on the responsibility of building these pre-fabricated classrooms. “I am doing this for the sake of Buddhism,” he said. “If I do not take on the job, who will? Can I not do it? This is what I often remind myself.”

Wei Liang-xu, a volunteer from Taiwan, said: “This is the first time that Tzu Chi has sent out pre-fabricated rooms overseas from Taiwan. We hope that, after years of research, these rooms can be used effectively in other countries.”

How to assemble the prefabricated classrooms on this rocky land is a big project. The challenge for the Tzu Chi construction team has just began.

(Article by Hou Chi-lin)