Abaarso Tech Quarterly Update

Rising Up

"Abaarso Tech provides an opportunity to make a sustainable impact on an entire nation at a price too cheap to ignore."

Jonathan Starr
Director, Abaarso Tech

In April 2008, a couple Somali-Americans and an American sat at dinner in Hargeisa discussing projects they might do together. At one point someone mentioned a school catering to the ultra-talented regardless of their location within the country or financial situation. Within a week a poor village called Abaarso donated 150,000 m^2 of beautiful land in return for building the school close to them. In just 17 months since that dinner, Abaarso Tech is making a visible impact on the community and the vision for our future has expanded far beyond a school. We are proud to pause for a moment to share where we are and where we would like to go from here.

Beyond a School

Construction on AT's Main School Building (September, 2009)

Community Building

At Abaarso Tech we are opportunists. While Somaliland clearly needed a world-class school to develop its most promising students, it was not long before we realized that there would be a win-win in pairing Somali apprentice teachers with our internationally trained faculty. The apprentices would receive English and teacher training while Abaarso Tech would get help in the classroom and the ability to make a broader long-term impact. From there we considered that these apprentice teachers would have time to staff the currently unmanned village school in Abaarso. Helping this underprivileged community is clearly an end in itself, but on top of that, this relationship will endow our students with the joy of helping those around them. Separate from teacher training and underprivileged community development, below we describe another example of Abaarso Tech expanding its reach to fill Somaliland's needs.

It is a bit wordy but we try to sum up our broader vision this way:

Abaarso Tech assists development in Somaliland by creating an intellectual stronghold that attracts top local and international minds. These intellectual leaders train Somaliland's most promising youth, provide intensive specialized development for teachers and professionals, and indirectly work to serve the especially deprived rural population. At its essence, Abaarso Tech is an intellectual center that radiates world class education to the rest of Somaliland.

At the heart of our vision is bringing new international talents to Somaliland in order to cultivate the local talent. To this end we are close to completing the 1st stage of a beautiful campus including a large teaching facility and high quality faculty housing. The teachers are expected to move into the campus by the start of November with students relocating there shortly after.

To our pleasant surprise, even with an unfinished campus, and in one of the worst imaginable years for Somalia news, we were able to recruit a stellar first class of teachers. From a physics PhD, to Phi Beta Kappa math to Ivy League history, our first class far exceeded our expectations.

Making an Immediate Impact

We launched our Somali apprentice teacher program at the start of August, just three days after our first teacher arrived in Hargeisa (for those wondering why we would wait so long please understand that we did not finish the apprentice teacher recruiting until two days after our first teacher arrived). We have ten apprentice teachers in total including six biology/chemistry graduates from Hargeisa University, three graduates of the prestigious Sheikh Secondary School, and one Somali who studied in Kenya. The apprentices spent the majority of August split into two classes of five students with experienced teachers from the US and UK leading the classes.

While our apprentices had been taking English since primary school, all their text books are in English, and English joins Somali as the official language of Somaliland, one cannot overestimate how starved these bright students were to learn from properly trained native speakers. A major challenge in teaching English to these twenty-something Somalis is that they are by no means new to the language but much of what they know is incorrect. For example, our teachers realized that many of these apprentices had impressive vocabularies but failed to understand usage of the basic articles the/an/a. They might know a specific written chemistry term used in their studies, but since they have not ever heard it spoken, they stare at you blankly if you say it to them.

Visiting instructor James Tucker conducting a training session with AT's new apprentice teachers

So, after months of preparation, our teachers had to throw their original plans out the window and refocus on cracking the code to fix the defects in the apprentices' language. James Tucker, a visiting teacher from the UK, worked a bit of magic on the verbal side and by the end of August the improvement in his pupils speaking and listening skills was undeniable. At the same time, our liberal arts chair, Vigdis Asmundson, focused on grammar that American teachers take for granted in 3rd grade. Like James, the growth in Vigdis' students was a pleasure to behold.

Head of Liberal Arts, Vigdis Asmundson, teaching an English grammar class

On the 1st of September, with four of our teachers in Hargeisa, we began an intensive one month program. We accepted two types of students into these courses. First, we put together an English/math/physics curriculum for 9th graders interested in joining Abaarso Tech's year round day school that began in October. While only half later qualified for the day school, all the attendees gained from direct exposure to talented native speaking teachers and the special attention one can get from classrooms with fewer than ten students (even private schools in Somaliland are known to have 100 students in a class).

Making an Immediate Impact *(continued)*

Rather than asking that you trust our claims, consider this interesting data point we just received. As mentioned, our year-round school has just begun and 8 of our 50 students come from this 1-month September program with the remaining having placed in as being in the top 1% of the country as judged by the Somaliland 8th Grade Exit exam. Now there certainly were some bright kids in our September program but there wasn't an examination to prequalify those students. As such one would certainly not expect these students to compete with the recently anointed elites of their grade. In this case one would be wrong. On the first day of classes our teachers were commenting about our September students running circles around the other kids. This was further confirmed when the September kids actually scored a bit higher than the overall class average on a math exam. It seems that in just one month our teachers were able to make great strides.

The second set of September pupils were older high school students who wanted to use their vacation month to improve their English. The vast majority of these obviously dedicated students are planning to take the British IGCSE examination later this year and historically even the brightest Somaliland students score poorly on the English section. While we cannot be sure just how much our short period with these students will help their grades, the students were very hopeful and they requested further training during their next vacation.

September students enjoying their English reading class

Fulfilling the Potential

On a personal level, perhaps the most attractive aspect of education in Somaliland is how easy it is to make a difference. With students and families so hungry to learn, and the existing system so overtaxed, even small changes lead to significant improvements. Of course, we have no interest in doing just a little bit of good; we are off to a terrific start and we want Abaarso Tech to be a great asset in society. The staff of Abaarso Tech promises to do its share but we are limited by funding. Even with our teachers accepting well under 10% of what they could earn elsewhere, and a tireless effort by our managers to minimize other expenses, we still need donations to get the necessary facilities in place. Currently our primary concern are dormitories for the 2010/2011 school year. For the 2009/2010 school year, we won't require separate dormitories because we are able to house our students in the school building. However, as our 9th graders become 10th graders and we accept new 9th grade students, this will not be a sustainable solution. Proper dormitories for our eventual 200 students will cost approximately $250,000, and we need to raise $140,000 of that by April 2010. We are pleased that Dahabshiil has kicked off our dormitory fundraising drive with a $26,000 commitment and we are hoping that others will follow their lead. Please email us or visit our website for options on how to give. We greatly appreciate your support.

Check out our new website...

...at http://www.abaarsotech.org/