Basketball for Development – initially it sounds very unspectacular, like one of the innumerable sports projects the development cooperation scene is chock-a-block with. But a quick peek at the homepage of the young organisation tells quite a different story all about education, training and promoting the rights of the handicapped.

Peter Kreuzinger, one of the project’s founders, talks about how all this fits together and what basketball has to do with the reintegration of prisoners.

Your foundation is not limited to sports alone, you also going to assist in a prison project for the social reintegration of former prisoners – how does that fit together with basketball?

Sport is particularly good for promoting a sense of community and respect for each other, building self-confidence and improving flexibility and fitness. Sport can give you strength and increase stamina – qualities not to be underestimated in these prisons. And when the incentive of athletic activity has awakened a person’s interest – and it makes no difference whether it is a prisoner or a kid on the outside – that is a good time to follow up with educational programmes.

What are conditions in the prison like?

Around 500 people are held in Buea Central Prison in south-western Cameroon. Many of the prisoners have been waiting a long time for their trial, so they have not yet been convicted.

Others were convicted of witchcraft: section 251 of the Cameroonian penal code allows for a prison sentence of from 2 to 10 years and a fine of between 5,000 to 100,000 FCFA (200 US$) for the practice of witchcraft.

Conditions in the prison are critical in every way: due to the very limited budget the prisoners receive very little to eat and hygienic conditions are poor. Many prisoners suffer from a variety of skin, respiratory and stomach diseases, worms and other parasites, malaria, cholera, tuberculosis and many other illnesses and health problems that go untreated.

How did the cooperation with Buea Central Prison come about? Who were the driving forces in the prison administration?

One thing simply led to another – the prison project was not planned from the beginning. We opened the basketball centre and through our work there we established close contact to the Ministry of Youth Affairs. A ministry employee approached us and asked if we could imagine starting a similar programme behind the prison walls. He had developed a project that included setting up workshops, educating prisoners and elementary health education, particularly around HIV/AIDS. Since he also had excellent contacts in the prison, the administration promised us great support – it would otherwise be impossible to set the programme up.

Your project also provides prisoners with vocational qualifications – what is their training like?

A central workshop is the project’s core. Here prisoners are going to receive training in tailoring, carpentry, making jewellery and other basic commodities, printing (t-shirts...). Prisoners in Buea Central Prison can train in an area that corresponds to their individual abilities. During training they learn more than just the practical skills; they also learn to improve social behaviour and life skills. This promotes social integration after they are released back into society.
What happens to the money earned?
It all goes right back into the project:
- 40% will be reinvested in the workshops. It is used to purchase materials, additional machines or for renovations.
- 40% will be paid out to the prisoners who work in the workshops. Since very little food is provided, prisoners can use their earnings to purchase food for themselves.
- 20% will be invested in a hospital ward, so prisoners who do not work in the workshop also profit from the project. Health care is very poor. The most elementary diagnostic tools are absent and there are insufficient funds to buy medicines.

Where are you going to find trainers to work in the project?
That is simple: there are many skilled prisoners. There are painters, carpenters and tailors in the prison population who can pass their knowledge along to others.

So along with vocational training – where does sport come in?
The basketball court is actually still in the planning phase, we have to wait for the rainy season to end. Nothing can be built during it, unfortunately. We are likely to have it finished in the coming dry season.

Issues like conservation of resources, malaria prevention and HIV/AIDS counselling play a huge role outside the confines of a prison project too. None of these are new and education has been taking place for years. What is the real current state of knowledge for the general population though?
Basketball is our Trojan horse here – we are using sport to get through the door, to win young people over for our educational programmes, particularly around HIV/AIDS, and to sensitise them to this issue.
Unfortunately the current state of knowledge about becoming infected with HIV and preventing illnesses is still very, very limited and insufficient, despite the fact that many of the kids have HIV infected people or AIDS deaths in their families.

You are supporting the construction of a basketball centre in Mutengene. Why there?
Mutengene is a problem area. There are many families there who live in very precarious circumstances, quality of life is poor. Mutenge is situated in the centre of three town where basketball is very famous: Buea, Tiko and Limbe. And we have a friend running a school in Mutengene where the centre is attached to.

What do you want to teach the young people there – besides physical education?
Our primary goal is AIDS education and sensitising the kids. We integrate training sessions into our practices and playfully introduce things about AIDS to the kids. In the centre we hold seminars for coaches called “Dunking AIDS out” – similar to the football project “Kicking AIDS out”. These approaches have been developed by the foundation “EduSport” and we have adapted it to our needs.
Of course there are also elements like teamwork and developing a sense of community, the typical goals of sport. But along with HIV/AIDS, environmental conservation is another issue we would like to introduce to the kids.

Why is the centre so popular with the kids?
Besides the fact that basketball is the most popular sport in Cameroon after football – there is not much choice for the kids to spend their free time. Unemployment is high, particularly among young people. So they really have few other ways to fill the day. Sometimes they wait for days just to come to practice. So you can imagine how enthusiastic they are when they get here.

We would like to offer an all-day programme, where the youth can come, feel home, exchange ideas, socialise and find advice, but that is not possible yet. But one of us is always here in the afternoon at least.

In what form?
The kids work on projects independently. We recently held a “fair play tournament” for example. At the
end points from the basketball games counted, of course, but so did a whole host of other aspects and activities that were part of the final evaluation. These included the presentation of a small project on environmental conservation prepared in advance. The teams also awarded each other points for “fair play”.

**How does that work? Doesn’t everyone just vote for their own team?**

We introduced a point system that does not allow that. You are probably familiar with the Eurovision Song Contest system – countries cannot vote for their own representatives. It works like that here – and the teams are really amazingly objective and fair in their evaluation of the other teams. At the end there are sometimes a few winners – one with the highest points in sport, another might take first place for project work, another for fair play. The overall winner of the tournament has to be good in all those areas.

**Right now you are planning a wheelchair basketball project in Cameroon – in contrast to the prison project though, you have run up against some problems.**

Yes, unfortunately. We had some trouble with customs and the import of equipment. There were – and still are – logistical problems and a number of other challenges. I think we should have everything taken care of by spring 2013 though.

**When everything is said and done – what will the project be like?**

Wheelchair basketball has a reciprocal effect. On the one hand it helps people who cannot walk, of course, but it also completely changes the perception of them in the public eye as well. Anyone who watches a game of wheelchair basketball cannot help but be amazed at what the athletes can do! Try it yourself – throw a three-pointer while sitting in a chair. Even professional basketball players are truly impressed. So the sport not only improves the self-confidence of the disabled players; it also increases the respect of the able-bodied.

**Who trains the wheelchair basketball players?** For the starting phase we will work with volunteers from Germany. We are already in contact with a student who plays in a wheelchair team since long and who is interested in joining the program for some month. He will train our local trainers.

**What sort of image do the disabled have in Cameroon?**

You rarely see them, they tend to withdraw from society. The integration of this group of people is a huge challenge for the country. We are currently working on identifying everyone who might be interested in wheelchair basketball there, but it is not easy. We are working with the local health authorities responsible for the disabled.

The Minister of Youth Affairs was recently on the road in Cameroon, advocating for strengthening and promoting the rights of the disabled and for integration. He asked the communities to make a greater effort in this area, which we took as a good sign – here too we are sewing our seeds on fertile ground.

Interview: Sarah Klein