



Dear Readers

On the flight approach to the Comoros Islands, if you are lucky, you can have a glimpse of coral reefs in all colours in the turquoise blue water of its atoll. However, the postcard idyll of coconut palms and beaches is deceptive. For the 700,000 inhabitants, the islands in the Indian Ocean are anything but a paradise: political instability, ailing economy, deficient health and education systems, dwindling fish and forest resources, pollution of nature and water – the problems are diverse and overwhelmingly complex.

Under the sign of solidarity, a PartnerAid team has been working in the Comoros since 2012. Together with the local association Naipenda Comores, it runs a literacy and recycling project and, with the cultivation of the medicinal plant Artemisia, it participates in the fight against malaria.

In this issue, besides a background article on the Comoros Islands, we report on the history and development of these three projects. I thank for your interest and wish you a good start into the new year.



Martin Gurtner-Duperrex, PartnerAid Switzerland

The Moon Islands – anything but a paradise

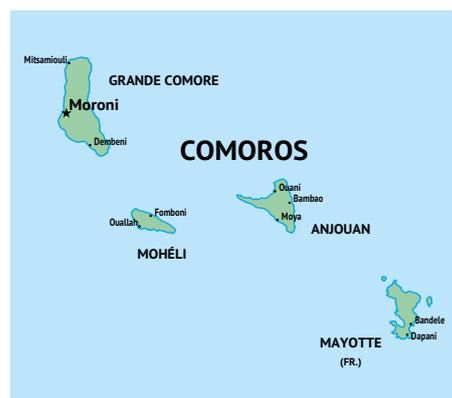
This tropical archipelago in the strait between Mozambique and Madagascar has been called “Comoros”, which means “Moon Islands”, by Arab sailors since the Middle Ages. Exploiting the monsoon winds with their sailing boats, the dhows, they created a huge trading empire, which stretched from the coasts of Arabia, India and East Africa via Madagascar as far as the Comoros.

Besides trade, they brought their religion, Islam, and their language to the islands. Even today, in most countries of the region, people speak Swahili, a mixed language of Arabic and the Bantu dialects of Africa. The Arabs also introduced the cultivation of spices such as pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and especially the cloves, which are still today the islands’ main export product.

By the grace of France

From the middle of the 19th century, the strategically important archipelago became a French colony which was only released into independence in 1975. Only the island of Mayotte decided by referendum to remain with France. As a result, the Comoros became the setting for countless coups d’état where for years French mercenaries convened and dismissed heads of state at will. And their protecting power France let them have their way as long as they were discreet enough and did not endanger its interests. However, in 1995, when they tried to overthrow the democratically elected president again, the Elysée had finally enough: a French elite commando put a quick and inglorious end to the nightmare. But otherwise, the former colonial power did little to help this impoverished country.

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Union of the Comoros

3 autonomous islands: Grande Comore, Anjouan, Mohéli, and the French overseas department Mayotte

Population: approx. 700,000

Languages: Shikomori (related to Swahili), French, Arabic

Capital: Moroni

Political System: Islamic Republic

President: Azali Assoumani (rotation principle among the three islands)

Religion: Sunni Islam



After approximately 6 months, the leaves are harvested, dried, processed into a powder and taken as a tea. An important aim of the project is to ensure that even the poorest people can buy the treatment. Now malaria is on the rise again.

Unexpected advertising

In April 2020, Covid Organics, a herbal mixture based on *Artemisia annua*, was promoted by the Madagascar president as a remedy against Covid-19. For this reason, the *Artemisia* project in the Comoros, known via social media, was successful as never before. Within a few weeks, the total yield of the last few years was sold out, although the project staff had clearly pointed out that *Artemisia* could not treat and heal the virus. However, as the plant strengthens the immune system, it is helpful against any viral disease. The hope is, now that the project is well established, that *Artemisia* continues to be used because the locals are very happy to treat themselves with natural plants.

Artemisia annua named has been proven to be a very good remedy against malaria – for this reason, it is fought by the pharmaceutical industry and the WHO – but loved by the African population.

Purpose of donation:
Comoros, Artemisia

Artemisia: fought by the pharma industry and the WHO – loved by the Africans

“Malaria affects nearly 200 million people every year, of which 500,000 children die mainly in Africa,” says Tu Youyou, Chinese Nobel Medicine Prize winner 2015 for her studies about the medicinal plant *Artemisia annua* (Annual Mugwort). According to the WHO, more than 1200 people die of malaria every day.

2000 years old medicinal plant

The medicinal plant *Artemisia* has been used for almost 2000 years for the prevention and treatment of malaria. In Chinese folk medicine, it is known since 168 BC as anti-malarial drug and was first described in 340 AD. When the whole plant is used in the treatment, resistance does not occur. In contrast, the carrier mosquito, called plasmodia, becomes increasingly resistant to the common drugs used against malaria.

The project

In 2013 a small team of PartnerAid collaborators started growing *Artemisia annua* named together with native peasants in the Comoros, as malaria was one of the most important health problems at the time. However, shortly afterwards, the Chinese carried out a mass treatment with a new drug. Apart from various undesirable side effects, it was largely successful and curbed the disease for a few years. This gave the team the necessary time to build up the project and to develop it further.

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Mass grave in the sea

Every year, thousands of Comorians try to escape poverty in unseaworthy ships to French Mayotte, where, only 100 kilometers away, the standard of living is ten times higher. In the last 20 years, at least ten thousand people, including many women and children, drowned in the sea. The Comorian government lets the traffickers do because it luckily relieves the overpopulated islands. Meanwhile in Mayotte, the authorities are dealing with over sixty thousand illegal migrants, not to speak of a hundred thousand Comorians who live and work in France. Their families at home have long been accustomed to their money transfers.



Reading and writing: a right for all

The Union of the Comoros is a country where almost one third of the population is illiterate, which affects the majority of women. In rural areas, the rate is even higher.



Since 2012, on the island of Anjouan, we have been coordinating a literacy project for adults in the local language and French, in which women have the priority. In different villages, we coordinate 16 classes with about 20 pupils in each and trained 32 teachers. The reading books for three levels were compiled and revised in the meantime.

Literacy courses have a positive and sustainable influence on the lives of women and their families. Literate, they are in a better position to take decisions about hygiene, the raising of their children and their school education. They also have a more important role to play in the solution of various social problems. The success rate of the classes is 73 per cent for women at an average age of 33.

Getting to the root of the problem

At the same time, the Ministry of Education of Anjouan asked us to create a reading and writing book in the mother tongue for children of pre-school age and to train all teachers in its methodology. In fact, 74 per cent of the girls can neither read nor write at the end of the primary school. To date, more than 400 parents have bought this textbook for their children.

A big task among secondary school students

Sad, but true: the majority of secondary school students have difficulties in reading and writing. We have developed a suitable learning program and started some support classes at the schools. But the problem is that many schools do not have additional classrooms and some teachers are not willing to liberate their students for private classes, even though when they are completely illiterate.

However, there are some teachers who voluntarily, outside school hours, offer support courses to pupils. We have trained three of these teachers at their request and provided them with the books.

In order that children no longer end up their school education as illiterate people, we think about how the teachers of the public schools can be better supported and voluntary participants be coached and accompanied.

Purpose of donation:
Comoros, Literacy

This year, a young athlete is running for PartnerAid's water project in Chad.

If you want to support this project, you can find more information on social media.



Partner Aid

Bastien Huguenin

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Instagram: Bastien_hg





project management was quite happy that it had not won the competition.

The problem of plastics

After several months of research on the subject of plastics – probably one of the most problematic type of waste – it was decided to purchase a plastic shredder and an extruder this year. The latter warms the shredded plastic in order to obtain a usable plastic mass. The latter is used to make elements for the construction of small furniture for example.

Making the unusable usable

In Anjouan, there is no infrastructure to dispose of waste in an environmentally sound manner if at all. As a consequence, the motivation to collect waste is not very great among the population. Therefore, it is understandable that the rubbish is simply set alight or thrown into rivers and at beaches, where it is washed away by the waves of the sea. In the recycling project, we try to find a way to recycle certain wastes such as cardboard, plastic sandals, aluminum and, since more recently, also other plastics and revalorize them. The aim is to show that not everything that seems to be unusable is really unusable.

A look back

The project started 2016 collecting aluminum all over the island. So far, six tons of aluminum cans have been brought together. At the end of 2017, four tons were transferred to the main island to be compressed and exported. However, this has proved to be very laborious. Therefore, for two years now,

the collected cans have been sold to local craftsmen who make cooking pots out of them. With the help of artists, the management had also decorative bowls manufactured. Furthermore, old plastic sandals were turned into doormats and fuel was made from discarded cardboard.

Competition not won

In 2019, the project participated in a competition of a Swiss bank for the financing of a project which consisted of the construction of a recycling center and the acquisition of a machine that transforms plastics into diesel. We hoped that this would create a sustainable source of income with which the financial independence of the project would have been guaranteed. Although we were able to present the project, it was not taken into account. After more thorough investigations of the machine, which had probably promised too much, and negative experiences with the customs clearance of machinery here, the

The goal

The aim of the project workshop is to create a model in which upcycling ideas can be developed and implemented. These ideas should be made available to all the inhabitants of the island so that they may upgrade their waste themselves in the future. In this way, they may generate a small income and in the same time protect the environment.

The project management also aims to a close cooperation with local associations already working in the area of waste collection. Together with them, we are able to sharpen the awareness among the population in the villages and promote the principle of sorting recyclable and green waste.

Purpose of donation:
Comoros, Recycling

CONTACT

PartnerAid Switzerland
Route de la Villa d'Oex 53
1660 Château-d'Oex

Phone: +41 71 858 57 00
Email: info@partneraid.ch
Website: www.partneraid.ch

BANK INFORMATION

St. Galler Kantonalbank
IBAN: CH92 0078 1255 5017 6030 5

Specify purpose of donation

PartnerAid International
20 avenue Beauregard
74960 Cran Gevrier
France

