

Report on working visit, October 2017

Our ambassador, Coby van Stipdonk, visits Beira

In October, we were privileged to receive a visit from Coby van Stipdonk, ambassador of the Doctors for Mozambique foundation, together with her husband Frank. In four days, we showed them as much as we could of the faculty, the health care clinic in the slum area, the city and the countryside outside Beira, as well as introducing them to our students. On the Saturday morning, we visited two different residences that offer extra protection to female students and where three of our girls live. Then we went to the faculty for a meeting with all 38 students in the machesa (a large, open rondavel with a thatched roof). Nice and cool. We had asked the students to prepare a morning session themselves, as they do at the end of every six-week period. This particular session was highly interactive. Each year group had selected a theme for a 10-minute discussion in English.



Themes included:

What is traditional life like in Mozambique and what backgrounds do our students come from? All the students attended missionary secondary schools because their parents or guardians could not afford school fees. Most of them lived so far from school that they had to board there too. They come from large families with lots of mouths to feed, in many cases because the father has more than one wife.

What happens during the selection weekend? Promising pupils who have just completed secondary school are invited to get together and compete for a Doctors for Mozambique scholarship. This entails participating in various activities.

How does medical training at this faculty work? Students here engage in problem-based learning, a system that is also used at Maastricht university.

These and other themes were addressed. The atmosphere became increasingly warm and lively, especially when the four of us were asked to speak and to answer students' questions.

After one-and-a-half hours, we all went to the faculty canteen for lunch. For these young people, who seldom get to eat a proper meal and certainly can't afford to buy soft drinks, this was a real treat. Over the meal, Coby and Frank were able to sit and chat with different small groups of students.

After lunch, we accompanied some of the students to the slum area where some of the students live, adjacent to the faculty. Living so close by means that they can walk to the university each day, which saves them travel expenses. This was a special opportunity for Coby and Frank, because foreign visitors are not normally allowed into the slum area. It was interesting to be told about life in such an underprivileged community. At the time of our visit, there had been no running water for four weeks. Water had to be pumped from the well. A makeshift cinema in a wooden shack with black plastic sheeting was full of children watching violent action films that we would consider 16-plus, but judging by their enthusiastic responses, the little ones were enjoying them too. There were market stalls selling tomatoes, onions, dried fish and corn porridge, the main staple food. We visited the rooms of some of the students. Rents tend to be high, around € 30 per month, because the locals know that medical students have money. Since our scholarship students are on a tighter budget than most, they share two, three or even four to a room, and sometimes two to a bed. That doesn't leave much room for anything apart from sleeping, so they often study in the faculty library until late at night, and cook outside.



That afternoon, we saw a lot and laughed a lot. The students are very open and approachable, and have a great sense of humour. They enjoyed the outing too.

During their short visit, Coby and Frank gained a clear impression of Mozambique, the medical faculty in Beira, our students and how our foundation operates at local level. It impacted them deeply.

November 2017,
Gitta van der Meeren