

DESERT VOICEBOX

Learning for Freedom

An early-learning project in the Saharawi refugee camps



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Introduction



We believe in the right of every child to learn, dream and fulfill their aspirations.



What, Where and Who

Desert Voicebox is an afterschool project providing English and music education to Saharawi refugee children, based in desert camps, near Tindouf in SW Algeria. It offers a unique opportunity for primary school age children to acquire new skills to promote their voices and give them greater freedom of choice regarding their future. Training young adult women to teach the 4-year long program, to high standards, is a key goal.

The project is led by Sandblast, a UK-based charity set up in 2005. It counts on the support of the local educational authorities in the camps, qualified volunteers and various international educational institutions to carry out its project mission.

Why afterschool; why English and music?

School hours are short in the refugee camps and days long and empty. As an afterschool program, Desert Voicebox responds to the need for extra-curricular activities that engage children in fun ways to learn, grow and be regularly stimulated, and also tackles the problem of rising youth delinquency associated with too much free time.

Teaching English and music to the Saharawi children equips them with powerful tools to open new doors and express themselves and their culture to wider audiences. Yet neither subject is taught in primary schools. English, in particular, has recently become an important language to learn. Due to the limited possibilities to study in the camps, after primary school, many children have to leave to do their higher education in different parts of Algeria. There, English is replacing French as the main classroom language. Desert Voicebox addresses this language barrier to improve the children's ability to thrive academically outside the camps.

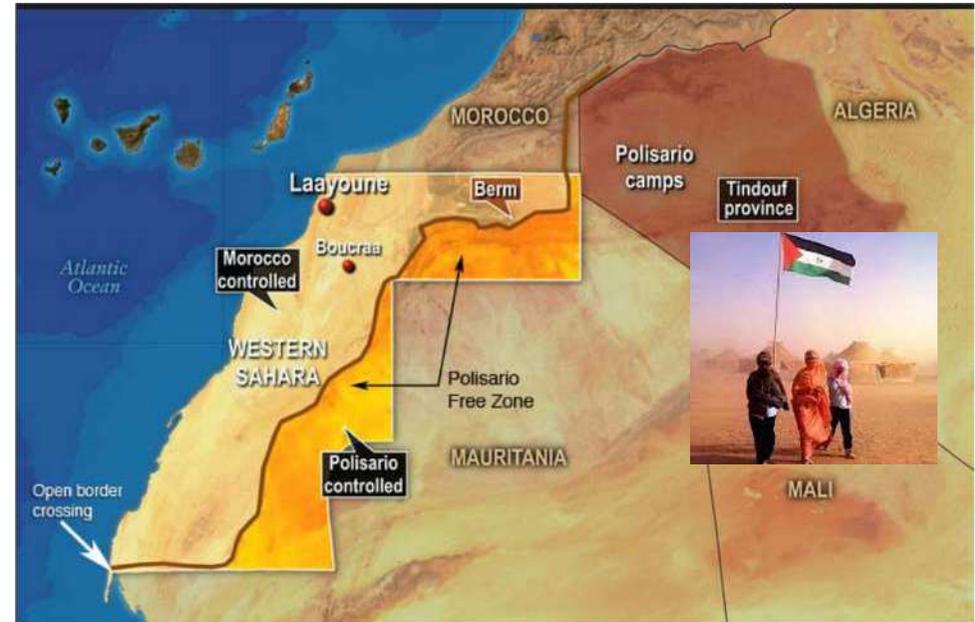
Since the Saharawi struggle first began, in 1973, music has been at the forefront of expressing the quest for freedom and self-determination. Nowadays, it symbolizes a commitment to non-violent resistance and plays a vital role in reinforcing Saharawi cultural heritage, which has eroded badly in exile. By providing high quality music education, in both international and their own traditional music, Desert Voicebox is promoting their cultural identity and voices in a positive and creative way.

The context

More than four decades ago, tens of thousands of Saharawis - a former nomadic desert people- became refugees in a harsh desert corner of the Tindouf province, in SW Algeria. They were displaced to this region when war broke out, at the end of 1975, in their homeland of Western Sahara. Located along the Atlantic coast, in NW Africa, the territory had been a former Spanish colony for nearly a century. But when Spain hastily withdrew, it became the site of a protracted conflict between the Polisario front, the Saharawi liberation army and the Moroccan kingdom, which invaded and claimed the territory as its own. The invasion ignored the International Court of Justice, which had rejected the Moroccan claim in its legal opinion of October 1975 and went against the will of the Saharawi people, who had been fighting for independence since 1973.

In 1991, after 16 years of war, a UN-brokered ceasefire was meant to lead to a referendum for Saharawi self-determination by early 1992. Until now, however, this has yet to take place and Western Sahara is officially Africa's last colony. The territory and every Saharawi family are divided by a 2,700km long wall built by Morocco to defend its occupation of 2/3rds of the Saharawi homeland. Under the occupation, the Saharawis have become a suppressed minority. No country in the world recognizes Morocco's sovereignty claims over the resource-rich territory.

Today, the 173,600 Saharawi refugees (UNHCR figures of 2018), dependent on aid to survive, live spread out between five large camps. Women play a central role in running all aspects of life in this desert exile. Named after main towns in Western Sahara, the camps function as a state-in-exile under the leadership of the Polisario Front, which self-proclaimed the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), in 1976. A government and administration have been set up in the camps with the support of the Algerian state. The SADR became a full member state of the African Union in 1982.



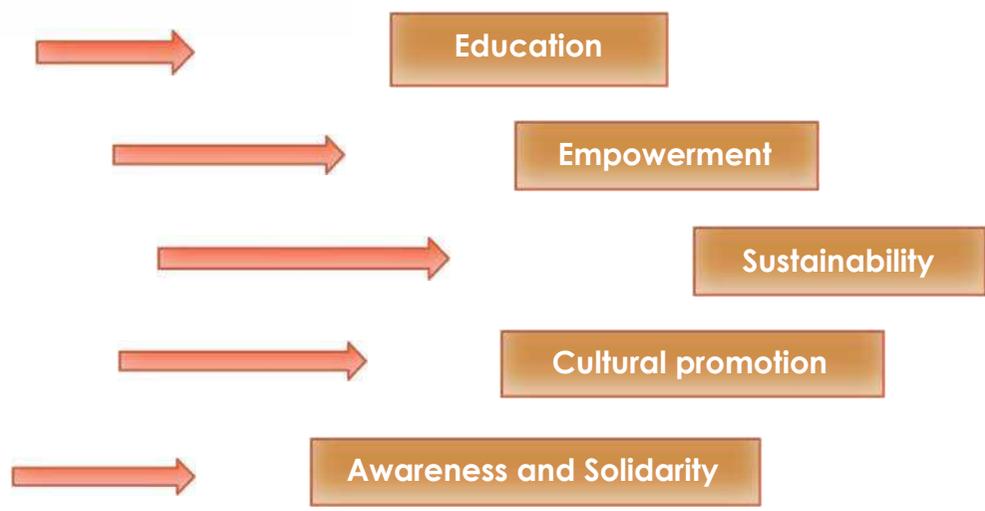
Our mission

To equip the Saharawi refugee children and the young women we train with tools to help them turn their dreams into reality. We seek to provide opportunities for them to become ambassadors for their community, play a role in promoting international awareness of their plight and their culture and transform their future.

OBJECTIVES

1. **Inspire** Saharawi refugee children to learn and develop their potential
2. **Provide fun and stimulating activities** for children to grow outside school and be better prepared for higher education.
3. **Equip children with powerful skills** to express themselves to reach new audiences
4. **Promote knowledge** of their own culture and that of other cultures through music
5. **Train** young refugee women to teach to high standards to gain certified qualifications and be able to project lead
6. **Empower young women** with the skills to earn an income and reduce aid dependency
7. **Facilitate** opportunities for the children and women to access international platforms to become ambassadors
8. **Foster skills-sharing** and the growth of international support links with the Saharawi people

OUR FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES



MAIN ACTIVITIES

- **Teaching** English and music to primary school children in a 4-year program
- **Training** our local female teachers on an ongoing basis in program content and management skills
- **Recruiting** volunteers to train the teachers and deliver special workshops for the children
- **Providing** internationally recognized certification to the students to mark their progress
- **Organising** international annual workshops in music led by professional artists
- **Working** with local musicians to teach Saharawi music and traditional instruments
- **Engaging** local community members and parents through events with the children
- **Collaborating** with like-minded projects/ individuals in the camps to enrich the educational program
- **Promoting** the project on our website, blog, in regular newsletters and social media posts
- **Developing** support links with international stakeholders such as music academies, schools and universities



“As teachers, we are learning a lot of skills about how to deal with students, how to teach and we are still learning”

Nanaha Bachri, Desert Voicebox English teacher



Why we focus on young adult women

Although Saharawi women play important roles in camp life, and in the peaceful advocacy of their rights, they face socio-cultural forces that undermine their development and fuller participation. They are expected to be the main carers of the family and this leads to higher drop rates amongst female students who leave the camps for higher education. Rising conservative trends in recent years have been discouraging young women from fulfilling their ambitions even more. Through Desert Voicebox, women aspiring to develop professionally will have real chances to do so, without leaving the camps, and will be able to transfer their skills anywhere they go.

Our story so far

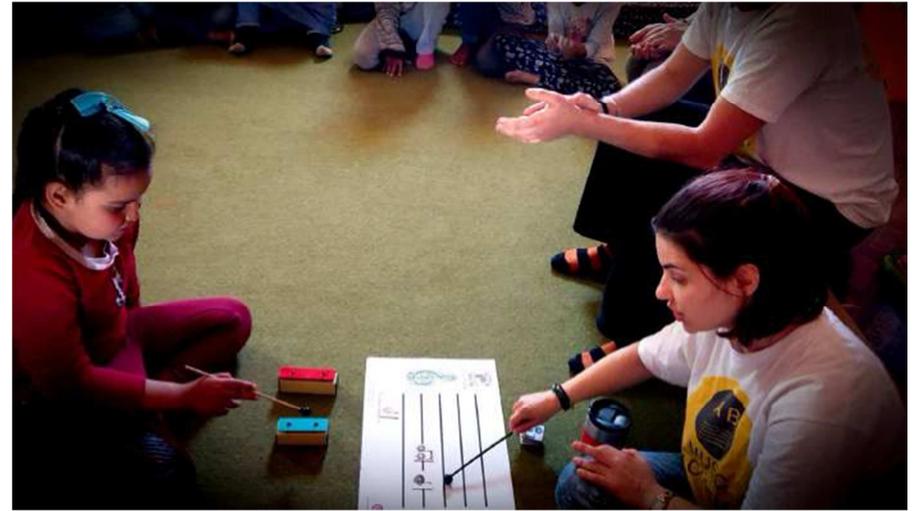
Desert Voicebox (formerly known as Stave House in the Sahara) has run as a pilot since 2016, on a shoestring budget. The project is currently based in only one location - in the Lal Andala primary school- in Boujdour, one of 5 camps housing 173,600 exiled Saharawi. Initially, it used an assigned school classroom to teach, then got support from Oxfam to refurbish one large dedicated room and in 2019, after a successful fundraiser, built its own independent centre on the school premises, with 2 large classrooms and 2 smaller practice rooms.

The afterschool program teaches music and English to children between the ages of 7 and 11. Both subjects are taught 5 days a week, in 45 minute long classes, during the academic year. The project, throughout, has been training locally employed teachers, all women, to gain the knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach the full 4-year program. The existing 4 teachers now teach up to level 3. With further training, they are expected to have the capacity to teach level 4, in both subjects, by the student intake of Sept 2021. The local staff run the centre as a team of equals and have rotating roles.

The pilot began by teaching the Stave House music method in English, but soon taught English separately. The innovative music method spans 4 levels and uses storytelling and interactive elements to engage young minds. Children passing each level get certified by the London College of Music at the University of West London. By the 4th year, they are expected to read, play and compose music using the international notation system. A bespoke English program, also of 4 levels, is being developed by TEFL-qualified volunteers to achieve good speaking and listening skills and a solid foundation in reading and writing. It takes into account weak literacy skills amongst Saharawi primary school children and in the future, will also certify student passing each level.

From late 2018, special annual music workshops, led by international artists were integrated into the program as well as Saharawi music classes given by a local multi-instrumentalist musician. The former, of which 4 have taken place to date, aim to develop the children's ear-training and singing skills and introduce diverse music styles.





The role of volunteers

Our volunteers have been central to the mission of Desert Voicebox. It's thanks to their generous contribution of time and skills and the loving dedication they've shown the children and local staff that the project has been able to progress to its current stage. Due to our limited funds, this would not have otherwise been possible.

Volunteers, of all ages, have been recruited through our **Friends of Desert Voicebox** scheme, which provides living stipends while they are in the camps. Often spending months at a time, in the desert, they have supported the project in diverse ways: teaching and stimulating the children by intro-

"I've met some incredible people, although the heat has been tough to deal with at times. This has been one of the best experiences I've ever had, and you can really really make a difference if you invest and come out here and spend time engaging with some of the most eager- to- learn kids I've ever met and some of the most fantastic teachers."

Jack Morgan Jones, TEFL qualified volunteer, Sept 2019.

ducing new content and activities, training the teachers to become more proficient in their subjects, improving their teaching and self-management skills, developing the educational program further and, during the pandemic, training remotely by WhatsApp.

Living with host families and being immersed in community life offers our volunteers a life-enriching experience, a chance to gain new friendships and to grow personally and professionally. But, ultimately, knowing that you are having a positive impact on the lives of others is the true reward. The benefits very much flow both ways!





Main Outputs so far

- 4 local teachers and 1 local musician are teaching 78 students
- 3 levels of students learn English and Music 5 days a week, afterschool, in 45 minute long classes in each subject
- 4 special international music workshops have been organized
- 11 qualified volunteers recruited to support the project
- 3 volunteers currently remotely train our local teachers in 2 hour sessions a day, 5 days a week
- 58 students have been examined and certified in Stave House level 1 and 24 in level 2



"I have learnt a lot of things about music teaching that I had not been able to learn otherwise."

Fatimetu Melainin, Desert Voicebox music teacher

Main Outcomes so far

- Children are reported to be performing better in their regular school studies and express new aspirations to become English teachers, musicians, translators and even political leaders
- Children attend the afterschool program more consistently than regular school and are enthusiastic to do extra classes and work longer hours when there are special workshops
- Children are eager to engage with English speakers to express themselves and enjoy learning about their own music traditions
- Local teachers are keen to work hard and show more competence in their subjects, skill in lesson planning and self-management and initiative in problem solving
- Parents and camp education authorities express interest in the project to expand
- Two music academies, one in the UK and the other in Spain have established ongoing supportive links

"Desert Voicebox is something different. Not all children in the camps have this chance of learning English, of learning music, and also having fun at the same time"

Nicole Lehib, Desert Voicebox music teacher



The Next Chapters

In the next two years, we would like to:

1. Develop the Desert Voicebox pilot to its full operational capacity, with four teachers delivering the 4-year long curriculum in English and Music to a maximum of 100 primary school children, 25 students per level. Reaching this stage, would give us the experience basis and template for future project expansion.
2. Create a Desert Voicebox choir to perform in the camps and even tour regionally and internationally, giving the children the opportunity to put their musical knowledge and skills into real-life practice and a platform to showcase their talents and culture.
3. Find sponsors for a small group of 4 graduated Desert Voicebox students and a teacher to do a month-long summer camp in music and English outside the camps.
4. Build more support links and establish affiliations with primary schools, music academies and English language institutions.

With additional funding, we would undertake activities to upscale and expand the project to all the camps in Sept 2024. It would entail 3 main stages to provide training and resources to expand the program reach from its current, 78 kids in one school in 1 camp, to 1000 kids in 5 primary schools across all 5 camps by 2027. Specifically we would:

- Produce a bespoke 2-year training program for teachers
- Recruit, train and certify 20 teachers
- Set up 4 teachers per 2 classes in 4 new partner schools
- Teach 200 students in the launch year
- Ensure local capacity to train future teachers by delivering an advanced 'train-the-trainer' module
- Secure international partners to fund the expanded program and grow its reach in the long-term



Finance Matters

Annual budget

Local teaching: £4,720

- 4 Local teachers' salaries (£110/wk x 32 x 4) £3,520
- Teaching materials £1,200

Teacher training: £2,240

- Living stipends for International volunteers (3x8 weeks) 2,240
-

Music development: £3000

- Local music workshops (2/week/6 months) £600
- 2 10-day international music workshops (with 2 people each time) £2,400

Maintenance of learning centre £1,140

- Electricity and wifi £420
- Repairs and supplies £720

Management and Communication £7,900

- Project management (7.5hrs/week) £5,500
- Social media communications (5hrs/week) £2,400
-

Assessment trips (4 per year) £2,000

Summer programme: £2800

- Local workshops (4 x 2 weeks) £800
- Month-long International workshops (2 people) £2,000

TOTAL

£23,800

Expansion budget (2021-2025)

Core Staff £90,500

Project documentation £3600

Training program development £11,500

Training delivery £121,000

Expansion delivery £30,000

Capital purchase £11,650

(NB. A more detailed budget is available upon request.)



GRAND TOTAL

£268,250

The Team

Local teachers

- Fatimetu Melainin and Nicole Lahbib – Music
- Tekwen Mohamed and Nanaha Bachri – English
- Mahfoud Othman – traditional Saharawi music

Project leaders

- Dr Violeta Ruano – Project Manager and Ethnomusicologist
- Danielle Smith – Project Director and Sandblast Founder

Volunteers and workshop leaders

- Beccy Allen – taught English and developed Level 1 curriculum over 6 months, 2017-2018
- Sara McGuinness – consultant, music professor at University West London, musician (piano), leads and manages two bands and big band at SOAS. Did piano workshop in Oct 2018
- Ben Cooper – taught children, developed level 2 curriculum in English and trained the teachers, Jan-Mar 2019
- Janet Davis – Trained teachers and assessed children in Stave House, Jan-Mar 2019
- Andrada Brisc and Florin Pascu – music workshop in Stave House L 2 music theory, singing, ensemble, Feb 2019. Long-distance teacher training in music theory, April 2020-to present
- Maite G. Heres – music workshop in singing, developing musicality, music theory and teacher training, Apr 2019. Long distance teacher training in ear-training, April 2020-to present
- Jack Morgan Jones – taught English, developed level 3 curriculum and trained the teachers, Aug-Oct 2019
- Georgia Lomax Thorpe – Music workshop on singing and choir, Jan-Feb 2020
- Andy Pitts – English teaching, teacher training and curriculum level 4 development, Jan-Feb 2020
- Farida Alvarez – English teacher and language specialist at St Giles International, London, UK. Training the teachers long-distance 5 days a week for 2 hours. April 2020-to present



Partnerships

INTERNATIONAL

- Ruth Travers, Stave House UK – official Stave House examiner and mentor
- London College of Music (University of West London) – Stave House exams certifier
- Oxfam Solidarité (Belgium) – funded first Desert Voicebox classroom
- AB Music Academy (London, UK). Founded by Andrada Brisc and Florin Pascu music teaching, teacher training, Stave House music theory
- Centro de Artes Escénicas 440hz (Gijón, Spain). Founded by Maite G. Heres – music theory, teacher training, choir mentoring

LOCAL

- Salka Barka Mohamed Busafa – Director of Lal Andala primary school
- Direction of Education of the Wilaya (camp) of Boujdour
- Saharawi Ministry of Education
- Bubisher (local children's library) – use of their premises and resources
- Studio Tidnit - local recording studio in Boujdour-recording support
- Mohamed Sulaiman – multi-media artist, fluent in English, helps document Desert Voicebox activities and runs creative workshops

About the project leaders

Danielle Smith - Project Director

Smith graduated with an honorary degree in Biochemistry from Mount Holyoke College and then studied Arabic and did a MA in Anthropology at Haifa University. She first visited the Saharawi refugee camps in 1991 and from then began her long career in educational activism on the conflict in Western Sahara, speaking widely at universities, the UN, the UK parliament and on radio and TV. In 1993 and 1994, she taught English in the camps and began learning the spoken Saharawi dialect of Hassaniya, adding to her fluency in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and French. She also made two documentaries about the independence struggle *Song of Umm Dalaila* and award-winning *Beat of Distant Hearts: the art of revolution in Western Sahara*. In 1998, she was the associate producer for the BBC 2 Correspondent programme *A Forgotten War*.

Her growing interest in the role of the arts in the Saharawi struggle led to the creation of Sandblast, in 2005, which organized the first ever arts and cultural festival on Western Sahara, at Rich Mix, London, in 2007. It featured over 25 artists from the refugee camps and produced *Sandtracks*, the debut album of the camp-based Tiris band, to critical acclaim. Between 2010-14, Smith ran the Studio-Live project to provide training and resources to facilitate the growth of a local music industry in the refugee camps. In 2016, she set up the Saharawi Artivism Fund to encourage young people to engage with their local community to bring about long-term positive change. In that same year, Smith launched the Desert Voicebox pilot in partnership with Ruth Travers, the creator of the Stave House method, and Dr. Violeta Ruano. Smith provides intellectual input and direction, does promotion and fundraising, recruits and manages volunteers through Friends of Desert Voicebox and assists with remote Stave House music training.



Danielle Smith, Project Director



Dr Violeta Ruano, Project Manager

Dr. Violeta Ruano - Project Manager

Dr. Ruano is a Music and Languages Education specialist with over a decade of experience in researching, teaching, project development and management. She has a PhD in Music Research, with her thesis focusing on Saharawi music and resistance, as well as a MMus in Ethnomusicology and an MA in English as a Second Language Education. Throughout her professional career, she has collaborated with international organisations such as the British Library, the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, and the Volkswagen Foundation. She has also published about Saharawi music in numerous publications such as *Transposition; Sahara Occidental: Conflit Oublie, Population en Mouvement*; and *Culture and Politics in the West Sahara (Mauritania, Mali, Western Sahara): Arts, Activism and the State in a Conflict Area (France)*, *Memory, Power and Knowledge in African Music (Germany)*, the *Journal of the International Library of African Music (South Africa)*, *Songlines (UK)* and more.

Dr. Ruano has been working with Sandblast since 2011 and was charged with setting up the Desert Voicebox pilot on the ground. Between 2016 and 2017, she spent over 8 months in the camps training the local teachers, teaching the first year of lessons to the children, overseeing refurbishment of the project's first independent classroom and donations of materials. Since then, she has been in charge of online fundraisers, communications, social media, local teachers' coordination, project assessment, and the coordination of official examinations and certifications.

Sandblast is a London-based non-profit organization working with the Saharawi people of Western Sahara to raise awareness of their self-determination cause and refugee plight. Through skills training and educational, cultural and artistic projects, it seeks to promote and empower their voices to tell their own story.



Desert Voicebox Centre



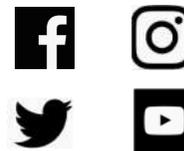
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