

**Title: Building a Sustainable Future, Uganda (Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement)**

**Nominating institution: Wellesley College**

**Student Leaders: Laila Pearson: USA; Wellesley College**

**Nisrine Benhaddad: France; Science Po Paris**

**Anushe Sheikh: Pakistan and USA, Wellesley College**

Our project brought South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan host community members together to build lasting bonds of peace through working together and learning a new sustainable building technique known as the Nubian vault technique. Due to heavy rainfall, the pilot construction could not be finished, however, the project validated that the technique is culturally and contextually feasible in Rhino Camp and built long-lasting relationships that will result in new partnerships and projects.

**Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support the project?** Our team member Anushe attended an MIT D-lab course in which she worked with community members at Rhino Camp to understand the challenges faced by South Sudanese refugees and local Ugandans. Rhino Camp is a settlement community in northeastern Uganda for refugees from nearby South Sudan. They had mentioned that housing, particularly the scarcity and high cost of current materials, was a significant source of tension between host and refugee communities. This project generated a lot of excitement with our partners because it promoted peaceful social cohesion as well as sustainable alternatives for the growing housing problem. The concerned population identified the challenge of sustainable roofing, thus our choice to pursue this project at Rhino Camp was informed by local leaders. We relied heavily on our partners in the planning and execution of the project. We served as coordinators and communicators to make sure that our partners had all the information and resources needed. Association la Voûte Nubienne (AVN) offered the technical expertise, and Kulika Uganda and YSAT were already familiar to the community and known for their work in adopting and showcasing innovative technologies.

**How did you decide what issues you wanted to address and what approach(es) to implement?** The community identified housing as a challenge because they saw a need for a more sustainable, easily accessible, and long-term solution. Refugees often hope to return home, so they often construct fast homes, which unfortunately require costly upkeep. In order to get more durable materials like cement, refugees often left the camp area in order to acquire expensive and scarce resources, causing tensions with members of the host communities. The faster thatched grass or tin roofs also cause hardship as they require regular maintenance. In addition to the repair time that temporary roofing solutions require, it also continually depletes local timber and water resources, resources which are already strained amongst the growing population.

The AVN technique is durable and locally sourced, which can reduce conflict between host communities, promote cooperation and long-term communal benefits. It consists of earth bricks that are sun-dried and includes a brick arched roof called the 'Nubian Vault' (NV). Through AVN, the Nubian Vault technique has been implanted into the Sahel region, and through our Project for Peace, it was attempted for the first time in East Africa.

We were very intentional about the recruitment of participants, ensuring that 3 refugees and 3 community members were present. Drawing women into the project was crucial as they are the majority of the camp's inhabitants despite being underrepresented in construction. As women are especially affected by inter-communal tensions and insecure housing, this project also enabled women to weigh in on communal and peace-building activities.

**What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans? Why?** There were many adjustments made throughout the project, from the salary of the participants and masons to the timeline

and logistical aspects like the budget. These changes required consistent and timely communication from all partners and participants. For example, once we realized how much physical labor the project required, we hired more people to help make bricks and increased the stipend of participants to make it more equitable. This mutual understanding and respect for their time and contribution resulted from several difficult conversations about the project and what it entailed in reality. The biggest change in our plans was the heavy rainfall which halted our project and the construction of the NV home. This led us to reframe the goals of the project, reflect on what worked and what didn't, and work together to make sure everyone's contribution was still recognized and appreciated.

**Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project?** To ensure that PFP funding could be dedicated to the project, we received funding from the Madeleine Korbel Albright Institute of Global Affairs and used it towards travel and living expenses in Uganda.

**Are there opportunities for continuing your work?** This project was intended as a pilot because the community has a longstanding interest in the technology. Although we were unable to complete the construction during this implementation period, the documentation and process that we used is being used to plan the next round of implementation, a process familiar to the community which routinely engages with MIT-style innovation cycles.

**How do you define peace?** Throughout the project, we defined peace as collaboration. Collaboration which is possible not in spite of difference but due to it. Over the summer the project employed 20 people, about half from the host Ugandan and half from the South Sudanese refugee community. The positive experience and familial nature of the interaction extends beyond this project. Throughout the project, individuals who would ordinarily not need to come into close contact with each other relied on each other as teammates. Seeing someone everyday, eating and laughing with them makes people more familiar, and by extension the communities that they represent.

The project trained and exposed 6 Masons to the NV technique will help them think more creatively about their own building strategy. Like many participants, the main coordinator with YSAT was excited by the technique's potential implementation in South Sudan, where the climate is even more favorable to Nubian Vault construction.

**In what ways might your project contribute to peace?** The project contributes to peace through the construction of relationships, bringing a diverse group of people together and fostering connection, conversation and understanding. By facilitating the interaction between two communities, they were able to learn from each other's similarities and about each other's strengths. The local Ugandan women knew the best places to gather water for mixing bricks. The chef served the South Sudanese adaptation of the local saltfish. Both groups had multilingual participants, and in the right context everyone was fluent. This exchange of culture and skill sets incentivizes participants to reach out to each other on personal or organizational projects in the future, both to the individuals they met and to giving a chance to those they haven't met.

**What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?** Non-masons, including two female participants, gained hands-on construction skills and the confidence to put them to use. Participants from different communities bonded over learning, working and eating together and seeing their efforts take shape. Participants that entered the project as strangers left with terms of endearment, like Lugbada FM for our most vocal participant. In a small community, such familiarity is bound to be maintained, as you pass each other in the market or at the water pump. It is a familiarity that can be strengthened and expanded as you engage around other members of both communities. The project also taught us from a practical and technical perspective what is needed for NV implementation in Rhino Camp. Although completion of

the construction has been paused, all partners have learned immensely through this experience and can apply it to similar projects related to peace-building and construction.

**What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issue?**

The challenge that underlies the targeted issue is a lack of exposure. In a neutral environment, with abundant resources and a shared goal there was no hostility from or toward either group. Outside of this project, interactions between these diverse groups are limited to when they are seeking our scarce resources, thus transforming neighbor to competitor. Some examples of these sources of tension are sourcing water, expanding land, or receiving the monthly supplements of food and clothing from NGOs. Through the lens of competition, such venues allow people to see others as less deserving; one community member told me that women only had children to receive the childcare perks given to refugees. Working together helps break such stereotypes and build trust. As this engagement in a neutral and participatory setting was largely positive, it can foster future partnerships and collaboration that build upon this trust and collaboration instead of suspicion and competition.

**Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed or inspired you?** “Ugandans are very wealthy.” Over breakfast, that is one of the first things we were told about Uganda. “They are wealthy because they have land and land is wealth.” This would only continue to reveal itself; every meal had fresh produce and every day we passed fields of crops and herders with their chickens and goats. The western world often encourages pity towards those that grow up in different circumstances. While this experience opened our eyes to some of the challenges that refugee communities face, it also opened our eyes to their resilience. In highlighting the resilience of communities around us, we also acknowledge that we came into the camp with funding. We were able to shield ourselves, and while on the clock our colleagues, from some of the challenges and realities of life in a refugee camp. Thus, while the narrative around refugee communities lacks the agency and sense of “make-do” that is felt on the ground, we were still able to see the benefit of non-profit support, such as in the excitement around clothing deliveries or UNHCR food distributions. Observing and implementing taught us that rather than running in thinking you know the answers, or staying away for fear of unintended ‘western savior’ consequences, long-term development work and peace-building must be a collaborative process, involving local leaders at every step.

**Personal Statement**

*Nisrine Benhaddad*, “This project challenged me to expand and exploit my skills; translating and coordinating live conversations with ease is one of the skills I learned.

*Anushe Sheikh*, “The best part of this project was working with our incredible partners. This project would have not been possible without their care, enthusiasm, and dedication at every step of the journey.”

*Laila Pearson*, “This project was a lesson in the power of incredible team members and partners, an opportunity to navigate changes and to learn what successful implementation means in a dynamic work environment.”