

*Gemura Kitchen & Solid'Africa Honor Society:  
Sustainable Solutions to Poverty in Rwanda's Public Hospitals*  
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Section 1:

This summer, I worked with a team of young Rwandans to address poverty in Kigali's public hospitals. Together, we developed the construction of a sustainable soup kitchen, and the implementation of an educational program that selects and trains Rwanda's brightest secondary school students to address social constraints in hospitals across the country. The Gemura Kitchen will have the capacity to serve two meals to 700 to 1000 hospital patients every day, but more importantly, it will function as a symbol for advocacy to push the government to require hospitals to serve food to patients. The "Solid'Africa Honor Society" will train youth to solve problems in hospitals at the district level and, through a partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, honor and encourage the growing movement of young Rwandans who serve their communities.

When I initially connected with Solid'Africa, I did not think I could address its biggest and most pressing goal: to build a "Gemura Kitchen" ("Gemura" means "to bring food" in *kinyarwanda*) with the primary goal of increasing the capacity to serve vulnerable patients in Kigali's public hospitals. (At the time, the use of two volunteer kitchens limited the amount of food that could be served). Instead, I focused on addressing the sustainability of food aid, and the creation of a sustainable reality for hospital patients. I visited the public hospitals to serve food and hear the individual stories of patients, and I worked with Solid'Africa's leaders to design an internal structure for the organization and develop more efficient means of serving food. In the meantime, I focused on creating and implementing the "Solid'Africa Honor Society" within a new "Education & Information" commission.

However, one of my greatest initial challenges was a statement from one of Solid'Africa's leaders, Patrick: "Educational programs are wonderful and important, but when we cannot even address hunger, our first priority must be to serve food. People need to eat before they can learn." I began to doubt whether I was truly spending my time, effort, and money in the most meaningful way, and I questioned whether I was remaining too much within my own comfort zone and experience, instead of taking the risk to tackle more urgent needs. Fortunately, my chance encounter with Osman Elsek, a successful Turkish businessman, changed the landscape of my summer, and permanently altered the fortunes of Solid'Africa and Kigali's hospital patients. Over cups of African tea, Elsek and I discussed the challenges of sustainability for Solid'Africa's soup kitchen and he offered his company's partnership in the development of a chicken farm. As a business investment, building a chicken farm is a promising venture in Rwanda because chicken is high in demand, but low in supply and poor in quality. In terms of sustainability, the chicken farm would generate enough income to grow as a business while continuously supplying Solid'Africa (and Kigali's public hospitals) with chicken.

I flew to Mombasa, Kenya to observe Elsek's chicken farm and construction company. There, I took Patrick's advice, and convinced Elsek that we should first focus on the most immediate needs (the Gemura Kitchen) before working on more long-term projects (the chicken farm). Elsek agreed to donate all construction materials for the kitchen as long as I/Solid'Africa covered the cost of shipping. We gratefully accepted and after arranging meetings between the architects and project managers, construction began. The kitchen is projected to be completed in December. Elsek and I continue to work on the construction of the chicken farm, which I will oversee during my year-long stay in Rwanda with the Fulbright.

My second concern for Solid'Africa, creating a sustainable reality for patients and communities, led to the development of an "Education & Information" commission within Solid'Africa, which partners food aid with educational programs, and has as the main objective to educate Rwandans to be more informed and active in the resolution of social issues within their own communities. What I love most about Solid'Africa is their commitment to a philosophy I also embrace: real, sustainable change does not come from outside (through external aid or support), but from within through the efforts of individuals and communities. I came with my own beliefs in the power of education, but when it came to designing and implementing the Solid'Africa Honor Society, I did a lot of listening, collaborating, and facilitating to

guide ideas to fruition. Currently, the "Education & Information" team is working with youth in the district of Kigali (the first "Solid' Africa Honor Society" members) to train and support them in their work in district hospitals, but we plan to fully implement the program in all thirty districts of Rwanda by December. With Solid' Africa Honor Society members spread across Rwanda, Solid' Africa can create a strong movement among the younger generation to value service to their communities.

## Section 2:

Peace does not imply the absence of conflict, but rather the quiet and appropriate resolution of all problems relating to community life in order to build future plans through respect and dialogue. In Kinyarwanda, peace is defined as "inner serenity, harmony and tranquility which allows one to manage one's assets, to work, to build excellent relationships and to have access to other resources in total freedom." As such, Rwandans consider access to wealth and building excellent relationships as key to attaining and sustaining peace.

While in Kigali, I attended a forum by the Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace (IRDP) which asserted that poverty remains one of the major challenges to achieving peace in Rwanda. Post-1994 genocide, Rwanda has implemented social, political and economic measures which, under strong leadership, have encouraged citizens to rebuild a new Rwanda. However, 57% of the population still lives under the poverty line and despite the government's significant strides to improve the standard of living for its citizens, poverty continues to hinder Rwanda's efforts to work toward peaceful coexistence.

Government initiatives such as "Mutuelles de Sante" continue to carry flaws that widen disparities in wealth. "Mutuelles de Sante" ensures universal access to quality healthcare, but public hospitals *do not provide food to patients*. As such, many patients receive medical treatment but then suffer from hunger, which inevitably worsens their condition. Add to this the already overwhelmed public hospitals where much needed space is occupied by patients who cannot pay their medical bills, patients whose conditions are prolonged due to hunger or unavailable medication, and patients who have recovered but cannot even afford the cost of transportation to return home.

This is the urgent issue that gave birth to Solid' Africa in April 2011 and became the issue I chose to address with the *Davis Projects for Peace* award. Both of my projects – the sustainable Gemura Kitchen and the Solid' Africa Honor Society – tackle poverty through mobilizing Rwandans to channel the resources of their own communities to address social constraints in public hospitals. The impact of the Gemura Kitchen is immediate: Elsek's partnership allows Solid' Africa to focus their energies on food support while also opening sustainable opportunities to serve greater numbers and push for policy change in "Mutuelles de Sante." The impact of the Solid' Africa Honor Society is less easy to measure but has the potential for greater impact; through educating Rwanda's youth, Solid' Africa will change mentalities toward service and help to create a new generation of citizens committed to addressing issues within their own communities.

Originally, I came to Rwanda to address a different challenge to peace: education and unemployment. However, the changed fortunes of the Rwanda Multi-Learning Centre decreased the importance and urgency of my project, and the abrupt departure of my contact and project partner forced me to look in new directions. Fortunately, the most difficult and frustrating aspects of my summer turned out to be the greatest blessings. In the midst of stress and despair, I met extraordinary Rwandans and ex-pats who taught me and inspired me – they introduced me to important issues, they dedicated their ideas and resources to assisting my new project, and they encouraged me and pushed me to take risks and persist despite my fears and uncertainties. During my time here, I was hospitalized and also ended up in Nairobi (after several airline fiascoes in Mombasa) where my belongings were promptly stolen (from my own hands no less). But through all of this, I have learned lessons in humility and gratitude. I learned about the inefficiency of public hospitals through personal experience, and also later realized that a delayed flight from Nairobi saved me from the deadly pipe explosion on September 12. Nothing turned out the way I had planned, but my project has truly tapped into the needs of the community to accomplish more than I had initially hoped. I am glad that initial disappointment led me to a project of greater urgency and import. With another exciting year ahead, I look forward to working with Solid' Africa to continue building peace through addressing social constraints in Rwanda's hospitals.



Mama ZuZu: The woman who started it all. She fed hospital patients from her own pocket and inspired young Rwandans to create Solid'Africa in April 2011.



[Top]: The assorted plates, bowls, and pots that patients used to bring for food.

[Bottom]: The standardized metal tray that we will use with the new Gemura Kitchen.



Coordinating the distribution of food at Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali (CHUK).