

Vocational Training Facility: Building Opportunities for Child Soldiers in the DRC
Democratic Republic of the Congo
International House, NYC
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This summer I interned with Justice Rising International, a small non-profit based in Goma, DRC that specializes in building schools in conflict zones. While my internship involved many different activities, the Davis Projects for Peace grant was specifically allocated towards the construction of an 800 sq. ft. vocational training center for former child combatants. The cost of construction utilized the entire \$10,000. A \$2,100 travel grant from my university and provisions from Justice Rising, including free housing and food, covered my personal expenses.

Overall, the project ran very smoothly. Thanks to the diligent work of local staff, there were no significant difficulties that conflicted with the fulfillment of the project. The land where the center was built was a bit swampy though. Thus, many hours of strenuous preparation were dedicated to the foundation alone. This took about three and a half weeks in total. After the foundation was in place, however, it only took three weeks to construct the frame and finalize the center.

One of the interesting aspects of the project was that it took place in the rural village of Kalembe, which is located nearly 7 hours from Goma. The need of those living in Kalembe is very great, especially for children at risk of military recruitment. Thankfully Justice Rising has a long history there and is well connected with local leaders. The long distance did make it difficult to oversee the daily construction of the facility, but our organization was able to check on the status of the building ever two weeks. What worked well was being able to confide in and trust local experts to transport materials and equipment from Goma to Kalembe. This could have been a major difficulty, and yet, thanks to the organization and insight of local staff, I was able to delegate the responsibility and focus elsewhere. That being said, the 7-hour trip also created other difficulties. Many weeks were spent just trying to coordinate drivers to transport the supplies. Without paved roads, the route is very difficult to maneuver. The route also goes through dangerous territory, preventing drivers from traveling at night. Unfortunately, these things cannot be remedied and have dissuaded other organizations from working in rural settings in the past.

Now that the center is in place, however, we can rest assured knowing that many young people are receiving invaluable assistance as they work to establish a normal life in spite of the ongoing conflict. Twenty young people are expected to utilize the vocational training center as part of the upcoming school year. The vocational center will work in tandem with the other Justice Rising schools already operating in the area. A new group will be cycled through the program every year, allowing for more young people to gain experience and job-skills training over time. Providing Justice Rising the means to incorporate job skills training with their current psychosocial rehabilitation initiatives also allows them to impact more children impaired by the trauma of conflict and diversify their services.

Justice Rising is currently hiring teachers to lead the vocational courses. They will start with masonry and carpentry. In addition, Justice Rising is also working with another organization by the name of Innocent Voices, which raises funds to support organizations helping children in crisis, to furnish the center with \$5,000 worth of training equipment. Come late September, when classes begin again, the center should be fully operational. Providing both an education and practical job skills will ensure that young people are discouraged from joining the armed forces and are instead seeking out viable alternatives to support themselves. Young people under the organization's care will be able to learn about a trade in an apprentice-like atmosphere, providing them with sustainable jobs in the future. Without such marketable skills, children transitioning into adulthood are desperate and can often feel obligated to join or enlist in the military in order to survive.

The recruitment of child soldiers is not an easy problem to address. It is the result of a number of interrelated issues. Partnering with Justice Rising International to provide vocational training is a practical step towards remedying the problem. In so doing, my project will support the promotion of peace by limiting the number of child soldiers through effective intervention. Disincentivizing at-risk youth from turning to the military for stability while empowering them to pursue alternative paths for their futures is truly transformational. I look forward to the day when children are no longer forced to carry guns. Instead, I anticipate the day when every child in the DRC is afforded access to a proper education. This is what peace looks like to me.

After two months of watching this project unfold, so much of my perspective of the world has changed. There are simply things that you cannot learn from a textbook and I'm honored to have walked alongside these resilient young people and play a part, however small, in reclaiming their future. The conflict is not over. Despite the existence of formal peace agreements, much of eastern Congo is still experiencing unrest. It was a surreal experience to realize that conflict is simply an everyday part of life for the Congolese. While I settle back into life in New York, the young people of Kalembe are still being awakened by the sound of gunshots. They are still forced to grapple with the possibility of forced recruitment. They are still confronted with incredible poverty as they work to build a future for themselves. And yet they continue to move forward, continue to build, continue to hope.

Having encountered such diligence and perseverance, I am invigorated to take full advantage of all the opportunities that are available to me. For the sake of those that I worked with, I will study hard and learn all that I can to make an impact. I have reconsidered some of my short-term goals and am now considering the benefits of studying business and bringing that lens into the humanitarian sector. I've always wanted to start a non-profit working with orphaned and vulnerable youth and that hasn't really changed. But spending those two months in the DRC has motivated me to bring more to the field, to develop other hard skills that can benefit those that I work with in the future. Business may be one such avenue to develop those additional skills.

In closing, I would say that this project was important to me because of its focus on peace as a generational inheritance. There is only so much we can do in the here and now to remedy the effects of violent conflict. However, by starting anew with the next generation, teaching them what peace means and how they can build a meaningful future, we can ensure that peace is fully realized by those that we leave behind. A peace legacy.

