



Commentary: Fishing in the Desert: Empowering Sustainable Development through Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp

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# FISHING IN THE DESERT: EMPOWERING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION IN KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP

**DIEU MERCI LUUNDO**

**INTERVIEWED BY PAUL O'KEEFFE**

Vijana Twaweza Youth Club (VTC), which was created to serve youth living in Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya, is empowering these young refugees to make real and lasting change in their community. Winners of *Permaculture* magazine's 2020 Youth in Permaculture Prize and the 2021 World Food Programme NextGen East African Innovator Programme competition, the club members are guided by the permaculture philosophy of working with nature. VTC creates sustainable and empowering solutions to provide better nutrition to Kakuma residents and to help combat some of the effects climate change is having in the camp. Club founder Dieu Merci Luundo, who studied human rights, global health, and basic medical training with the University of Geneva in Kakuma, has put what he learned in class into practice to serve and educate residents of the camp. The youth club, whose first projects were a small fish pond to raise fish and a garden to grow vegetables, now includes 39 members who have built a bigger fish pond, planted more vegetable gardens, started a soap-making enterprise, and are delivering permaculture training to others in the camp.

Refugees living in camps like Kakuma rarely get the opportunity to exert much control over their lives and the environment around them. They are generally prohibited from leaving the camp and have limited access to the camp's institutional resources. This is especially difficult for the many young people in Kakuma. Higher education is one of the few avenues available to them to invest in their hopes, empower themselves, and forge a better future. With its ability to protect and provide durable solutions and foster resilience, VTC has harnessed the power of higher education to enable the young camp residents to engage with

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the wider world, to learn and exchange ideas, and to build a project that both provides and inspires.

This interview with VTC founder Dieu Merci Luundo shares the inspiring story behind the club in the hope that it will provide a model for change for refugees around the world. The interviewer, Dr. Paul O’Keeffe, is a longtime supporter of and adviser to the club.

**O’KEEFFE:** I first met you when you stormed the stage at the University of Geneva’s Kakuma graduation ceremony in 2018 and put on an impromptu play about police violence and protecting human rights. The hall was filled with students and faculty from the courses the University of Geneva ran in Kakuma.<sup>1</sup> Although the play was in French, which many people in the room did not understand, your message—that refugee rights are human rights and that we must all fight for them together—came through loud and clear. I think everyone in that room was inspired. Can you tell me how your experience in higher education inspired the creation of VTC?

**LUUNDO:** Higher education inspired me a lot in creating VTC. Higher education can bring students together to discuss problems and challenges. For example, our tutors at the University of Geneva taught us primarily by asking us different questions or presenting cases to us that we had to work as a team to answer. We had to listen to each other and respect each other’s opinions, which gave me the spirit of working together with people from different backgrounds. We use the same principles in VTC. For example, I raise an issue, then we discuss it, and together we find a good solution. This is one of the main inspirations I got from the University of Geneva.

In the global health course, a video about finding solutions for tropical diseases really inspired me. The lecturer was talking about how the World Health Organization was planning to eliminate rabies by 2030. She said the point is to think big and have a strategy, but start small. Show your evidence, then scale up. She said that we can be the generation to make a difference, that we need to work together across sectors to make a bigger impact. This message was the inspiration for VTC.

In addition to studying human rights, basic medical training, and global health with the University of Geneva, I have taken courses in aquaculture, entrepreneurship, and cricket keeping. My younger brother is in the club and has studied human rights and ethics as well. Others in the club have studied

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Geneva facilitated higher education courses in Kakuma refugee camp from 2017 to 2021 through a humanitarian program called InZone.

things like community health, computer science, plumbing, media production, and management. Together we have a strong collection of education backgrounds.

**O'KEEFFE:** For me, VTC is confirmation that higher education is more than just getting a qualification. It's about being part of a community that enables ideas to become a reality. Can you tell me how you came up with the idea for VTC?

**LUUNDO:** After getting that motivation from the global health course, I watched another video from the World Health Organization about linking global health priorities with biodiversity. This made me think that I cannot work alone, that I should work with other youth to help our community. If we could provide fish or vegetables to our households, it would be a first step. We do not have a lot of support, we do not have a lot of money, but the little skills from each member can help. We can start from this to make things big. Before I started the global health course, the fish were mine, the little farm was mine, but the course made me realize that I need to work with other people and showed me how.

One concept in global health is that many parties—physicians, entomologists, anthropologists, climatologists—can come together to work on one problem, such as the coronavirus or malaria. This inspired me to bring young people together to work on our problems together. The name *Vijana Twaweza* means “youth, we can”—we can come together and, even if we are not experts, we can use our knowledge. So, I got the general idea from higher education. In the courses we talked about how to respect each other, how to keep ourselves healthy, what nutrition is, how to take care of ourselves physically.

**O'KEEFFE:** Starting any project in Kakuma is not easy. The environmental conditions are difficult, the resources are limited, there is a lot of red tape, and people often are demotivated. Can you share how you went about setting up the fish pond?

**LUUNDO:** I suffered a lot as I started it myself; it was very difficult. One day I went to the stream and found some baby fish, so I collected them and put them in a container. After a few days, five of them died. After many questions, I found out that the container was not suitable for them. So, I transferred them to a basin, and decided to dig a small fish pond. To do this I bought some plastic covers to line the pond—it was hard to prevent my chickens from falling into the pond and drowning. Also, changing the water of the pond was very challenging; I had some health conditions in my shoulders from doing this.

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Later, a man from the Burundian community told me that the lapia fish, the ones I had collected, would not grow much more and that I should get some catfish instead. A Congolese guy told me that the fish could not lay eggs, as there was no sand at the bottom of the pond. He told me I should put some sand in the pond so that the fish can lay eggs. So, I followed this advice and learned from others around me.

By the next morning, almost all the fish had died. Just one male and female were alive, then the male died. I decided to get more fish, but then there was lots of rain and the fish were washed out of the pond, and the chickens ate them. It was a hard time. I took all the fish that had survived and put them in the pond, then they started to eat each other. There were lots of lessons I learned the hard way.

**O'KEEFFE:** Despite the difficulties, you persevered and set up the club and brought other people into the project. Who are the members of VTC and how is it organized?

**LUUNDO:** When we started we were 14 young people from all different backgrounds—Congolese, South Sudanese, Somalis—who came together as a refugee community initiative. We were motivated to work together to solve some of the problems in Kakuma, in particular the inadequate diet and the fight against climate change. We worked together to improve nutrition by increasing the diversity of animals and crops and to increase food availability. After six months, we welcomed 25 new members, then this year we received three more applications. Many young people want to join, as they can see the impact the project has in the community and how we work together with the spirit of cooperation.

When bringing so many people together, there can be many challenges with organization, logistics, communication, cultural barriers. We follow the permaculture principle of positivity, which means that the problem is the solution, or we try to see the problem in a positive way. For example, tribalism in Kakuma can get in the way of working together, so we decided that we needed to make sure that all the communities in the club have proper representation in everything we do. We are now 39 people in VTC. To enable transparency, we put in place an executive committee structure, which is composed of the chairman and vice chairman, the secretary and vice secretary, the treasurer and vice treasurer, and four advisors. We try to reach consensus on any new projects.

I'd like to mention that we have forged strong connections with partners in the camp and overseas. The Jesuit Refugee Service has given us a lot of support, with motivational training and other assistance. For many projects we work

with local community organizations, such as Vision Art Music for Youth, the Youth Education Development Association, and Food and Health Education. We also have weekly mentoring meetings with you and others from the University of Geneva, the Lampeter Permaculture Group in the United Kingdom, and the Permaculture Institute in Uganda. We also communicate regularly with our former tutors from the University of Geneva. VTC is very much organized around a collaborative global effort.

**O'KEEFFE:** I've been following VTC's evolution from the start and have seen you take it from an idea to something truly amazing. Can you tell me what a typical week looks like for the club and describe the key developments over the last year?

**LUUNDO:** Currently we are working on the two main projects—the market garden and the fish farm. We have a greenhouse where we grow different vegetables. We appointed a South Sudanese guy to be the “chief” of the market garden. He was with me in a course on fish farming and agriculture, and he is the one who plans everything for the garden. We also created a new pond that has about three thousand fish in it. This keeps us very busy.

In VTC, we all volunteer our time. The reality is that we all have a lot of things to do outside of the project, school and so on, so we mostly come after school or on weekends. When we have a little time, we just do what we can, such as irrigating the compost heap, taking care of the crops, and feeding the fish. We don't work in the market garden on Sundays, but Monday to Saturday we do what needs to be done.

For the fish farm we work every day. A friend from Burundi leads the fish farm; he selects and directs the people to work on the pond. The old pond takes a lot of work, so we recently built a new fish pond and put it in our family compound to keep it safe and to have less work monitoring it. We lined it with plastic and we irrigate it to keep the water clean, as the community depends on getting water from it. Also, having the pond in a public place was not so safe, as people could trample in it, spreading disease and bacteria to the fish from their shoes. There are a lot of risks and a lot of work involved in keeping the pond safe and secure, so having a better management system helps keep the fish safe and makes it easier to organize.

There is no really typical week at VTC, as there is always something new to do. For example, one week we might be taking a course on permaculture or preparing a presentation of our work for a competition, or we might be planning a satisfaction survey for our customers. We do this a lot, as we want to ask them what kind

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of products they want, what crops they think we should grow, how much they would be willing to buy, and so on. We plan and discuss all of these activities during our meetings every Saturday and plan the next week out.

**O'KEEFE:** VTC has gone from strength to strength in the last year. Can you tell me, what are the next steps for the club?

**LUUNDO:** VTC was among the three groups which won the permaculture prize organized by *Permaculture* magazine in 2020. We also won last year's World Food Programme NextGen East African Innovator Programme competition. This really motivates us for the future and helps us come up with new ideas. We are currently planning a permaculture ethics and principles training for women, orphans, and widows in the camp. We want to enable them to observe, interact with, and design sustainable solutions for their problems or needs by turning available materials or waste into something useful for them. For example, we plan to train them to turn the leaves of the neem tree, which grows in Kakuma, into natural pesticides; to transform the sacks we get from the ration center into raised beds for crop production; and to compost legumes and some green grasses into a source of nitrogen for growing crops.

In terms of growth for VTC, our next step is to open the first permaculture center in Kakuma refugee camp in order to reduce hunger and poverty by encouraging and supporting people to create their own durable solutions to their problems, and to provide more fresh fish and vegetables to the residents of Kakuma. We are also planning to improve our outreach strategy so that we may collaborate with some local organizations working in the camp.

**O'KEEFE:** How can others learn from VTC's experience?

**LUUNDO:** I think our determination makes others learn from us. For example, many young people are going to the lake to collect catfish, while others ask us for small fish so they can start similar projects.

If we have a good reputation, if we have integrity, I think many people will learn from us. By working together, it will make them come to us to learn. The people in the community are seeing what we are doing. If we succeed, we can tell them how to succeed. We can organize sessions to teach them about agriculture, and we can share the knowledge we get from our studies with the ones who cannot access the courses.

**O'KEEFFE:** Finally, the ethos of collaborative learning for sustainable development is hardwired into VTC's DNA. What else is necessary for young people in Kakuma to empower themselves?

**LUUNDO:** I think it is about improving post-high school studies. In Kakuma we don't have many places to learn. There are about eight high schools with people who want to learn, but few opportunities for higher education. This means a lot of competition to get into the courses that are available. For example, for a course I took at Arrupe Learning Centre, there were about 600 applicants for 8 places. I like this learning center because it asks questions on the application forms that require a lot of thinking. Taking post-high school courses is the first step to empower the community, which is what we are trying to do at VTC.

When I was in high school before I came here, I never thought I would learn about medicine, global health, human rights, agriculture. I thought I would just study economics and go work for the government. But here I have studied medicine, global health, and human rights, and these courses really helped me. I think if this project succeeds, the people will accept it, as they will see that it works and that they can follow our example. So, I think the support most needed here is for education after high school. If we get this, we will gain enough knowledge to help ourselves.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

To find out more about Vijana Twaweza Club please see:

1. <https://www.facebook.com/VijanaTwawezaClub/>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbZ-AVuKZF0>
3. <https://abundantearthfoundation.org/announcing-the-2020-youth-in-permaculture-prize-winners/>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGkt3Yv6mUE>