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Habitat Green in East Africa Goes to Rwanda (at Last)!

"No matter what happens, as long as you keep a positive mindset and a can-do attitude, the day will go on much smoother. Be the one to stand up to the challenge, be the one to correct mistakes if any are made. Never stop reminding yourself that we are here not just to do a job or fulfill a target, we are here to serve and to learn."

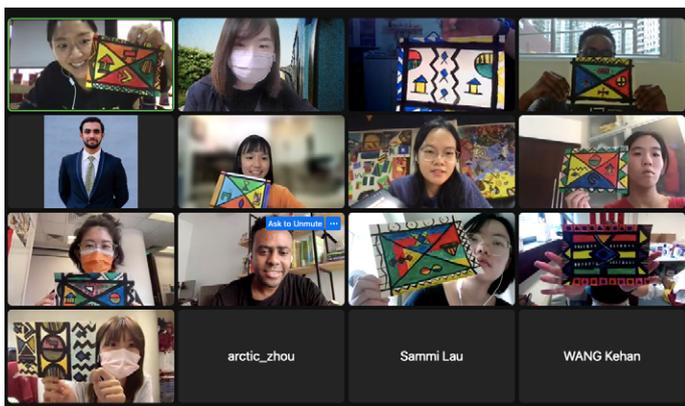
Said Dr Stephen Chan on a bumpy ride, he calmed a group of anxious PolyU students who were on the way to deploy individual solar systems with LED lighting and radio to rural households in the district of Rwamagana, Rwanda. The team embarked on their journey into this knowingly unknown as they enrolled in the Service-Learning subjects, COMP3S02 Socially Responsible Global Leadership in a Digital World and EE2S01 Low-cost Energy Infrastructures for Developing Regions in AY2021/22.



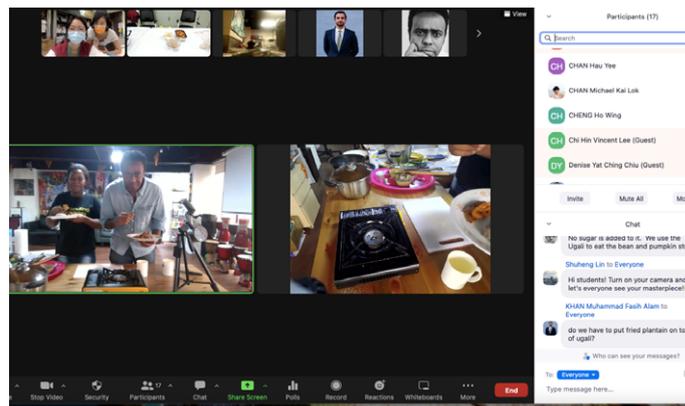
The service team passing through scattered houses on a hilly terrain to visit the service site

As a part of **Habitat Green in East Africa** – a SLLO programme that nurtures students' global leadership and cultural sensitivity in the context of cross-disciplinary green engineering – a total of 34 PolyU students taking the two subjects spent two semesters to learn about and design sustainable energy solutions for low-income families in rural Africa. The programme offered an array of activities for participants to learn and serve over the timespan of a year.

It started with students of various majors dedicating a semester to learning the key concepts of engineering and construction in lectures. Following that was a three-week laboratory session that got their hands skillful in prototyping, assembling, testing and packing the solar system for shipment to Rwanda. Supplementary to the theoretical and hands-on trainings, SLLO also organised a series of cultural activities to immerse participants into the everyday life of their service recipients. All the activities were carefully curated with an ultimate goal to better support students in building empathy for the service beneficiaries prior to their travel. These include an online live tour of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, a movie screening to learn about the history of genocide in the country, a cooking workshop to get a taste of African cuisine, and an art workshop to create their own Ndebele painting.



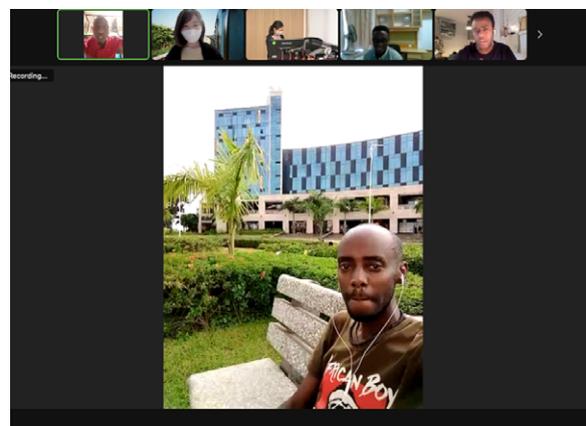
A group photo taken from the African Art Workshop



Staff of Africa Center Hong Kong conducting a synchronous online cooking class for PolyU students to offer a taste of Rwanda.

Despite the comprehensive preparation at PolyU, delivering the service in person on the foreign soil was no easy feat. In the ten-day service which covered our students training 27 local youths on installing the solar system as well as tailoring this system to different household's needs, the students not only had to overcome language barriers, but also the less-than-ideal working conditions like commuting on rocky roads and high temperature. While the process was both mental and physical, it was all worth it when the students and local youths successfully brought light to 200 households.

The team were grateful to see how every installation had ended with big smiles on the villagers' faces when they lit their house with electricity for the first time in life; when they knew their children could finally revise homework after nightfall; when they knew they could stay connected with the world beyond their village at a switch of a button on their rechargeable radio.



A volunteer in Rwanda giving an online city tour for PolyU students before their trip



PolyU students teaching youths in Rwanda how to assemble and debug the solar system



Dr. Stephen Chan briefing PolyU students and Rwanda youths on the first day of service



PolyU students doing the indoor wiring in one of the households.

It was a pity that not all PolyU participants were able to deliver the service onsite due to the pandemic. In fact, the service trip itself had also been a long time coming.

Scheduled to deliver the service in Rwanda back in 2020, the onsite service was forced to be put online when international travel was brought to a sudden halt by COVID-19. In spite of the unprecedented challenge, the concerted effort and creative passion of the instructors, the students, and community partners had realised the service in the form of a tele-engineering project. PolyU students had successfully trained youths in Rwanda to install their tailor-made energy system for 150 families in Summer 2021 remotely with the support of video conferencing tools.

Looking forward to 2023, with the resumption of international service-learning projects, we are excited for the next cohort of students to continue the work and commitment by all those before them, and foremost, to continue applying what they learn to illuminate the lives of those in need.

