

SURVIVOR KATEBO: SERVICE LEARNING IN RURAL UGANDA

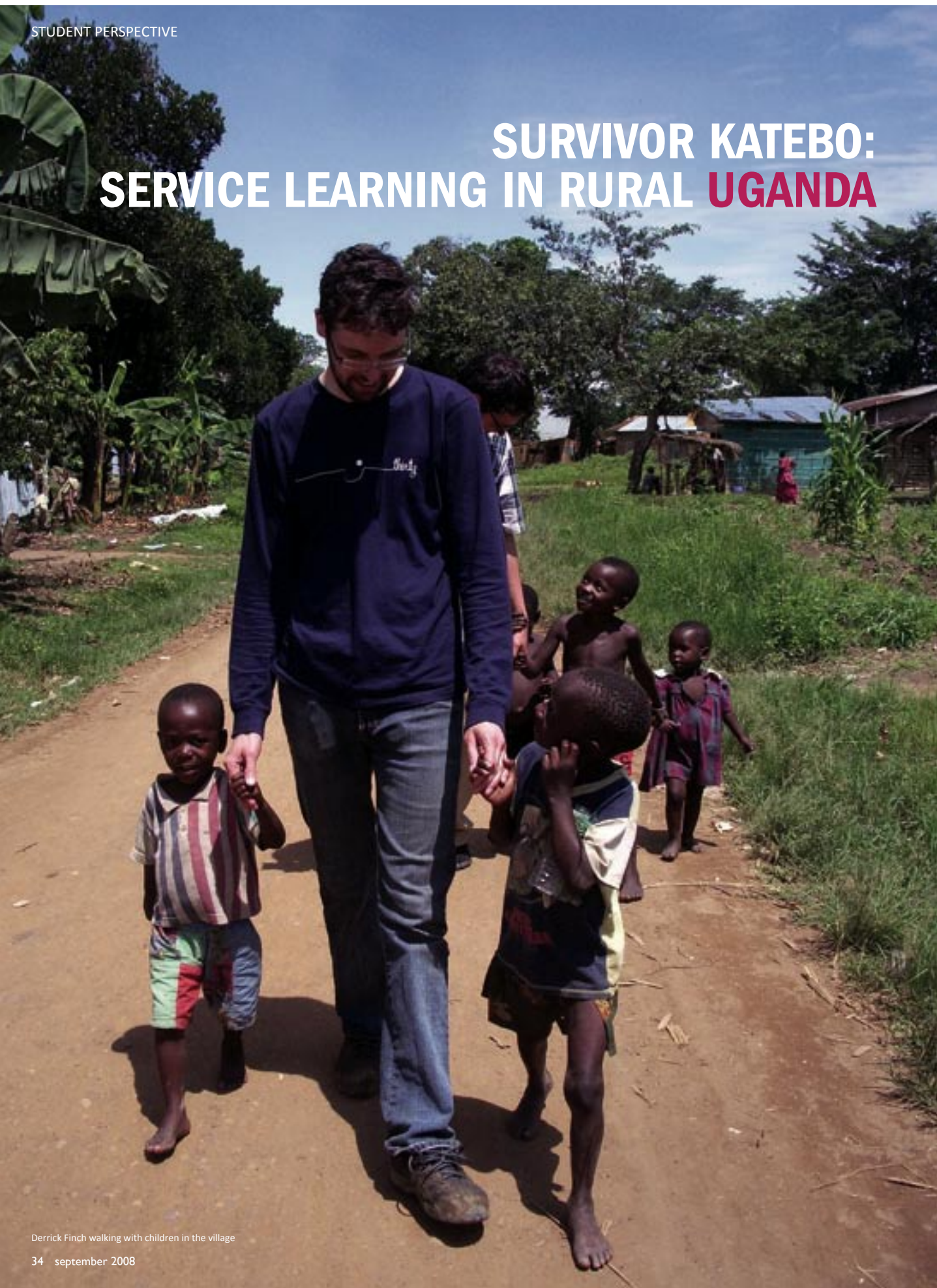
BY MARLA

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Derrick Finch walking with children in the village



the library in progress



Izak Bridgeman learning bricklaying

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HANDS-ON

One of the benefits of this service learning course was the opportunity to design outside of the traditional studio environment. Through this experience we were able to discover the constraints and possibilities of building with our own hands. You begin to realize that without a back-hoe, it takes over a week to haul enough dirt to fill in a shallow foundation. Even making concrete requires chipping your own gravel and pushing bags of cement on the back of a bicycle. Each wheelbarrow load, each swing of a hoe gives you a stronger understanding of the materials and connection to the process of making.

This direct and interactive understanding of making also influences the design process. In our case, we began to understand and accept our own limitations. The realization that ensued was that our reality had situated us back to the basics of simple, uncomplicated design. The greatest discovery was that that reality did not limit creativity or our ability to give something special to the community.

Giving up the infamous Architect's ego is imperative to both service learning and collaborative design, as they offer us a different set of circumstances whereby we have to accept that things do not always

go as planned. It is about balancing design rigour with the ability to let your ideas develop into something totally different from what you initially imagined. It is about pushing the envelope with smaller details rather than bold statements. It is about trying to improve what already exists rather than creating something completely new. It is that cultural understanding that if something has been done a certain way for a long time, there is probably a reason for it.

CONFRONTING POVERTY

Although most of our experience in Katebo was wonderful, it also had its share of frustrations. It was frustrating when things were not getting done, even though we were working as hard as we could or waking up to pouring rain for what felt like a week. It was frustrating waiting for materials to show up or vehicles to arrive. It was frustrating that the workers' did not get paid for four weeks and had no choice but to stop working. It was frustrating when your body felt weak or your head was out of the game and you could not contribute as much as you wanted to.

One of the most difficult things that we had to deal with was the poverty. Living in Katebo has brought me closer to

poverty than I have even been in my life and I think part of me found it difficult to confront the level of suffering. The truth is that this village has been ravaged by AIDS, that nearly an entire generation has been lost to this pandemic, leaving the next generation orphaned or in the care of elderly relatives. Access to basic medical services and doctors is minimal. Many of the children seem to live off of sugarcane, sometimes their only meal is a cup of porridge at school. They are hungry, their families have little money, and they do not have enough food to eat. Although clean and put together, most of the children come to school each day with the same ripped clothes and without shoes on their feet. The hardest part seems to be that their suffering cannot be blamed on a lack of effort. The people here work incredibly hard just to make it through the obstacles of daily life.

Faced with such imagery, it can be difficult to feel like we can make any sort of dent or difference. Some people even began to question whether what we are doing is even valuable. Personally, I had to constantly remind myself that any action, no matter how big or how small, can help improve people's lives. The library may just seem like a building right now, but that building is going to be used to educate,

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