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A River Blue Bringing Hope to North Uganda

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For a society to move forward, reconciliation and forgiveness are integral in building a future for any society that has faced conflict. Sometimes, justice is not about punishing the perpetrators, but in the ability to rehabilitate the society as a whole.

This is a lesson that the communities in Northern Uganda are learning well. After more than 20 years of conflict, the community is coming together to rebuild and restore their society. Invisible Children might want to catch Kony, but the people of Northern Uganda want to rebuild their lives. Community members have established grassroot projects using resources available to them in order to socially and economically empower the community.

One such project is “A River Blue” – ARB, which is one of the most innovative projects that aims to empower the internally-displaced persons camps in Northern Uganda through the arts.

A River Blue is entirely run by community members who came together in order to restore hope for their children and save their future. North Uganda has faced years of turmoil, and the communities have been caught in between politics that have left them devastated and emotionally wounded. While punishing perpetrators is important, it has become even more important to rehabilitate the young children who were caught in crossfire and forced to fight a war that was not their own. The children are the future of Uganda. While they have endured some of the worst hardships imaginable, they have the ability to survive, to overcome, and to succeed.

ARB began in 2006 when Barefoot Workshops launched *A River Blue Arts Festival* that included music, dance, drama, and art. The festival was hugely successful and it gave birth to the development of A River Blue Vocational Training and Rehabilitation Center in Alebtong in Northern Uganda. Recognizing the need for vocational training, and the power of the arts in the process of healing, ARB's center offers a hybrid curriculum that mixes counseling, tailoring, agro-forestry, agriculture, animal husbandry, painting, MDD (music, dance & drama), English and basic business. To foster continued development and growth for young people across North Uganda, the program sponsors about 30 youth who are either in secondary school, or in various vocational training programs. With the help of international donors, the ARB team has been able to provide economic empowerment for young girls, some of them young mothers who had no place to go. In some instances, it has been as simple as teaching the girls how to sew, and

providing them with a sewing machine. In other instances it has been the simple act of providing a safe space where these young people can speak about their past and express this through the arts. In either case, A River Blue has become instrumental in fostering community growth and giving young people an alternative to violence. Furthermore, the program has provided a model that many post-conflict regions in Africa can adopt and implement in building their communities.

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