

LEGO kits to help the women of India

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Finding a toilet in India can be Mission: Impossible. Overpopulation and the lack of sanitary facilities lead to contamination of the soil and groundwater. Making matters worse, women are frequently assaulted when they have no other choice but to relieve themselves in the open. These observations spurred Marc-Edouard Schultheiss and Alexandre Bouchet, two students in the School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering (ENAC), to head to India for a three-month humanitarian project supported by Engineers of the World, a student association at EPFL.

Once there, they focused on teaching villagers – especially [women](#) – how to build a shower and toilet connected to a pit. But the two students quickly ran into illiteracy problems and the [language barrier](#): it simply wasn't possible to provide instructional videos in 18 different dialects. "And since the women never went to school," said Marc-Edouard, "understanding a diagram and using numbers – even for measuring things out with a meter stick – was a challenge for them."

To resolve this dilemma and enable the women to pass along their skills far into the future, they came up with a surprising idea: that of using LEGO blocks to create a model. The kit comes complete with bamboo sticks and strings with colored markers to use as a measuring instrument. "We also prepared an animated drawing to remind them of the key steps in the building process," said Alexandre.

This fun and innovative project has been undergoing testing since the summer by other volunteers on the ground. But it has already caused a

buzz among humanitarian organizations, and Marc-Edouard and Alexandre were invited to present their idea in early July at a conference organized by the United Nations Academic Impact in New York. "We were able to go to New York thanks to the support of our School, and Silvia Hostettler of EPFL's Cooperation and Development Center (CODEV) described our work in front of 500 people," said the two students. They hope their contribution will help improve the living conditions of women in India in the years to come.

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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