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The Global Journey: a quest for reality

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Regular 'Global Journeys' provide opportunities for groups of Swedish teachers and educational professionals to spend an intense period of time in a developing country. This equips them to promote sustainable development issues in their teaching. The visits are part of a structured process of learning, planned a year in advance and evaluated 4 months later. They include space to discuss how to translate the experience into professional practice on return.

About Global Journeys

The Global School is a collaboration between two Swedish government authorities, Sida and the International Programme Office for Education and Training. The aim of the Global School is to provide educational staff of all departments with relevant further training on vital global issues. This should enable them to promote issues related to sustainable development in their teaching. More than 100 global education seminars are organised every year, all over the country.

Another central part is the Global Journey. Annually, six Global Journeys are carried out in different countries. Each journey lasts around 18 days and has between 20 and 25

participants. People are recruited twice a year for three destinations at a time.

Usually, teams consist of at least three persons from the same educational unit, one headmaster and two teachers. However, cooperation between schools from the same locality is also promoted. So is the participation of local government councillors and administrators, chief educational officers, and representatives from the local education authority/board. Therefore, the team composition may sometimes be more heterogeneous, including headmaster, teachers from several educational levels, municipal decision makers, and councillors from different municipalities. A Global Journey generally involves five or six diverse teams.

Teams are recruited almost a year ahead of the journey. They are provided with some basic course books/recommendations along with two to three compulsory, preparatory 2-day seminars. The orientation includes lectures, group discussions, and practical information. Lectures, for example, focus on development perspectives, opportunities offered by meeting different cultures, and subjects related to the country/region of visit. In the first meeting, participants form interest groups of three to five members. These interest groups plan and then perform their study tasks in the field. These studies are not of an academic nature – they are only

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working tools for a deeper understanding of the local culture and people’s life standards. Studies on attitudes and local values are particularly encouraged.

The Global Journeys are led by people with considerable experience of internationalisation in schools. They also have a great deal of knowledge and experience in the field of development cooperation. Similarly, in each country, local partners/organisations and interpreters/resource persons ensure the quality and professionalism of the programme.

The field studies vary somewhat depending on the destination. However, some points are similar for all Global Journeys:

- a study in the field is performed in interest groups, with the support of interpreters/resource persons;
- participants have the chance to live with families, providing them with an opportunity to experience people’s everyday life; and
- regular, joint seminars provide an opportunity for follow-up and the scope for discussions and exchange of experience.

Global Journeys in Bangladesh

Once a year, a Global Journey is organised in Bangladesh. Participants are encouraged to stay with a rural family for 10 days. Field workers of our partner organisation, Proshika, select suitable member families. Hosts are usually mid-poor families, not the poorest. However, relatively wealthy local families are disqualified. New host families are selected for every new Global Journey.

Before the arrival of the Global Journey teams, organisers visit the families and discuss sensitive issues with them (e.g. whether they prefer female or male guests). They try their best to match the interest groups with each and every family based on the circumstances.

An interest group of five members, three women and two men, will live with two different families within walking distance of each other. One household is for the three female participants and another household for the two men. Due to the local culture and space limitations, sexes are never mixed.

There have to be decent toilet and bath facilities. Organisers sometimes provide a new bamboo mat to enable participants to take a bucket bath in privacy. Another common point of discussion with the family members is where they will sleep once the foreign guests and their interpreter/resource person are offered the biggest bed. Two participants usually share a big bed. If extra bedding or mosquito netting is needed, it is provided by the local Proshika office. Proshika is paid and organises good food for everyone – this is the only payment for the hosts.

Rules for participants are few and simple:

- no alcohol in the community;
- no prospect of adoption of children; and
- no disbursement of money.

Orientation: days 1 and 2

Upon arrival, participants are hosted at the Proshika training camp in Koitta, some 50km west of Dhaka. Facilities are simple but good. Getting used to simplicity and room sharing is one of the aims. Given the long trip, in the first day only a few preliminary activities are scheduled as part of the field orientation, including:

- introductions to interpreters/resource persons;
- an orientation to the local surroundings;
- discussion/planning of interest groups with interpreters; and
- learning basic Bangla.

The second day is mainly devoted to seminars on development and poverty issues. Participants as well as interpreters are briefed on the aim of the field study.

Staying in the village

On the morning of the third day, participants leave for their villages with some basic information about ‘their’ families. They are spread out in surrounding villages, never more than half an hour away by car. If the location is nearby, they will travel by auto-rickshaw, otherwise by minibuss. Interpreters/resource persons (one for every two or three participants) accompany teams throughout the whole exposure and are equipped with mobile phones in case communication is needed.

Participants are then left ‘on their own’ for about 2 days. On the evening of the second day or the morning of the third day, organisers visit them. It is important that participants get the time to settle and become confident with their new environment. When organisers come, they are guests. By the third day, participants are usually referring to ‘my’ or ‘our’ family and village. The long stay, nights included, and the continuous presence of the facilitators/resource persons are

the aspects most appreciated by participants. They are keen to talk about their experiences. Practical matters are sorted out. Teams unfold their study plans, always respecting the local culture and habits.

Participatory sharing of information is vital – it is just as interesting for the host villagers to hear about the foreign guests' family situation, concerns, problems, attitudes, and values (and crops!) as the opposite. We suggest that participants slow down, walk around looking and listening, follow the rhythm of the local life style, sit down and gossip over a cup of chai, ask when they do not understand, and ask again. If they want to, they can take part in household and farming duties, e.g. learning how to prepare Bangla cuisine dishes.

It is also important to make time for reflection. Participants are encouraged to note down their impressions, thoughts, and findings in a diary, and to write about those whose stories catch their hearts and minds. The exposure is tough, hence the strong need for reflection in which interpreters/resource persons/facilitators have to take part, too.

Exchanging experiences

After 6 to 7 days, there is a reunion to exchange experiences. Exposure and sharing often give ideas on how to proceed and what must not be forgotten before leaving families. The reunion also provides an opportunity for school groups to sit together and discuss issues (e.g. colleagues talk about how to translate this experience in professional terms once back home/planning for the future). Another minor reunion is organised after the final departure from families.

The rest of the programme has a mainly study-trip character: a day in Dhaka to see the garment sector and how urban people live, and a trip to Thanapara Swallows, Rajshahi to see the Ganges river and beautiful rural landscapes, but also an area where there is contamination of drinking water with arsenic.

Follow-up seminar

Around 4 months later, organisers call for a 2-day follow-up seminar. Evaluations and further sharing take place, from which it usually emerges that staying with families is the main strength of the Global Journey to Bangladesh. Participants are

moved, touched, and affected. They don't feel pity; they miss friends they will probably never meet again. They learn a lot through questions, gossip, and discussions with villagers in Bangladesh. Not least, they learn about themselves and their own culture. Alien and exotic poor people of rural villages in far-off Bangladesh have become close and understandable. This emotional part is very important, although some might dismiss it as 'software nonsense'. Without emotional involvement, how can thinking and intellectual shifts happen? Without shifts in the thinking of the individual, how can there be shifts in her/his professional performance?

Final thoughts

In terms of challenges, the availability of good interpreters/resource persons is definitely one. Language is not the only critical issue; the right attitude and respectful behaviour are also vital in such rural environments. Often, because they are well educated and born in cities, interpreters carry with them 'bags' full of contempt towards the villagers. This will have a strong impact on the visitors' experience, given that almost everything is filtered through interpreters. Interpreters play a key role in developing mutual understanding between visitors and locals, and their mindset, interests, motivation, and behaviour are of utmost importance. Poor interpreters limit the success of the visit and therefore the overall purpose of the Global Journey.

Another constraint is time. The journey only lasts 18 days, including international and local travels. Initially, I was very sceptical about it. I wondered what visitors could learn in a few days in a village when I had spent more than 10 years working in and learning about rural areas of Bangladesh. I was afraid it could simply become a more sophisticated form of development tourism. However, although there are these limits, I am quite impressed with outcomes.

Visitors do learn and gain a lot from these experiences, which they retain for a long time. The friendly social environment and rural lifestyle facilitate the learning process, encouraging guests to open up their minds. They cannot escape from reflecting on and questioning their own lives and lifestyles. They cannot escape being impressed by their hosts' energy, lives, and thinking.

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