

Empowering youth

Imagine yourself in a completely different country. Let it be a developing country like Bolivia, or Kenya or India. You are there leading a life like the local people (or almost like the local people), eating their food, using their buses, shopping at their grocery shops and doing their everyday things and you do this for a year. An attractive thought for some but scary for others. There are several reasons why some do it but others don't. Some face financial difficulties while others are overwhelmed by the fear of spending time in a completely unfamiliar country alone. Weltwärts is a great opportunity for people who have this dream and these fears. Beside offering you a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the German ministry for development aid pays for your flight as well as takes care of your accommodation. You travel with a group of people from Germany, so you will not be alone. But the Weltwärts experience also brings difficulties with it. You will begin to question your own values as soon as you start living in the country. From my own experience I know that all the Weltwärts volunteers I was with were always in a dilemma with themselves and their own work. They would ask themselves: am I doing something good for the people of this developing country? Is my contribution to the so-called development aid a positive one or does it just add to the problem of creating greater dependence instead of independence? It does not matter whether one is in Africa, Asia or South America, this question of creating dependence of developing countries on developed ones in the process of "trying to help" is a crucial one that makes many volunteers doubt themselves. This article is not going to be a recipe on how to deal with this problem. Instead I intend to make a suggestion on what I think the next Weltwärts volunteers could do to help the inhabitants of the developing country they work in, themselves and their aid agency or Weltwärts in general.

I myself spent six months in Uganda (east Africa). My working group was the youth, more specifically, street children. I did a dance and theatre project with three different schools, one a German secondary school, the other two were schools for street children. Instead of giving an account of the great experience I had with the young people I worked with, I would like to suggest a better project for any developing country when one is working with the youth. Perhaps a reader of this article will carry out the project and see good or at least some results. To begin with, here are some typical words that one associates with developing countries: poverty, corruption, poor or no democracy, diseases, poor economy, low GDP, low literacy rates e.t.c. What I experienced was happy, welcoming people, great respect for the elderly, curiosity and huge willingness to learn by the youth I was working with. This is not to deny that the problems mentioned above do not exist, but one needs to take into consideration the positive values of a culture when trying to make changes and pay attention that the good values are not lost on the way or even sacrificed for the sake of western values. After all nobody should have the right to decide for the people which good values are the better values. The project that I would suggest would deal with the problem of corruption. Corruption is a huge topic in many developing countries and the sources of corruption are many. Corruption is amongst others, a result of lacking or little accountability in my opinion. The first experience I had in Uganda with corruption was in the institution that I was originally supposed to work in for the whole six months. After arriving at a centre where the Ugandan government kept street children who had committed some crime or other out of the need to survive, I met the person who was leading and controlling the whole centre which was filled with more than 100 children. The man was very confident and his plans for the centre were very promising. The people who were working as volunteers for him and his centre were drawing up plans of what one could do for the children there to make their stay at the centre a productive and educative one. The man himself, Peter, was also supposed to be supporting the program financially. His source of income for this purpose was the rent that me and other volunteers were paying for staying in his house. A percentage of it was supposed to go to the

centre. Very soon I found out that Peter had never paid the money to the centre that he was supposed to, that the projects that had been planned for the future were never going to be realised and that the children were waiting for promises to be fulfilled which were never going to be fulfilled. Peter instead of supporting the centre with the money he was receiving from incoming volunteers, was saving up for a trip to Italy where he was planning to stay for the rest of his life. He was the highest leader in the centre, was representing child soldiers in court from northern Uganda who had been put here because they had killed and he was the one making the most important decisions. Before him there was another person in the centre who had a similar position, who had in the end gotten enough money from volunteers to move to Germany, leaving the children behind. The situation was repeating itself. This was corruption on the smaller scale. It is hard to fight if one does not have the connection or the authority. Corruption on the bigger scale however I think can be fought by a change in attitude. Talking to several Ugandans, I realised that they did not connect to politics. If I asked anyone whether they were going to vote in the next elections they always gave negative answers. It occurred to me that this was not something that most people do. Their trust was not in government but in their smaller communities. People tried to help their smaller communities more and cared less about the whole of Uganda. This is not to judge whether it's good or bad, but as long as people have little awareness for what's happening in their government, it is easier for the government to be corrupt. Of course one can argue here that even voting turnout and political awareness among youth is not great in the developed world either. On the other hand I think that due to the fact that in developing countries poverty is greater, education worse and corruption on a bigger scale, it is even more important here to create political awareness and greater accountability. According to a report by Transparency International in 2006, more than half of Uganda's annual budget is lost to corruption each year (www.U4.no). Creating political awareness is a step towards reduction or even eradication of corruption in developing world. If this is done then perhaps the millions of aid development money that flows into developing countries would begin to bring about visible results. Therefore if I would go with Weltwärts to a developing country again I would plan a project which would try to increase political awareness among the youth. One could organise lessons where the young people are taught about political issues that affect their everyday life and what role the youth could have in these political issues. One could make them aware of what powers they have as citizens of their country and how they could use these wisely when they want to change something in the political arena. One could make them aware of different pressure groups and methods such as the media. One could help them build their own opinion on what they want from their government and how they could make their government more accountable. One could also make them aware of development aid and help them decide for themselves whether they want it or what kind of development aid they would like. They could talk to their parents and people in their community about this topic. What they find out from their own opinion and from their parents or their community would be useful information not only for them and their country but also for development agencies and Weltwärts. One could bring this result about by making them read newspapers or through other more creative methods like organising debates or role plays where they would create an awareness of different interests. One could also contact people who work directly or indirectly for the government e.g. the public service thus creating dialogue with members of pressure groups as well as the media. Creating this dialogue with members of government as well as members of pressure groups like the media or NGOs like Transparency International Uganda would help make the youth aware of the youth's powers or ways of achieving accountability. It would perhaps also be the beginning of new solidarity and civic culture which is essential to maintain a democracy as Putnam and other political thinkers have argued. This type of education or creating political awareness would benefit the aid recipient, the aid provider and the country in general.

Political education in developing countries might be a difficult topic. The governments of the countries concerned might feel attacked by the agency . On the other hand one is not trying to get the people to start to revolt against their government but merely building a new generation that is able to think more about the interest of its country and its role in building the future of its country so that this country might be less dependent on the aid of foreign countries in the future. It is worth mentioning here that the Ugandan government has introduced measures to fight corruption . Perhaps it needs support in all aspects of the population which would justify the project I am suggesting even more. It is also important to mention that such a project would not be realistic in a country where there is extreme political oppression such as Zimbabwe or China, seeing as pressure groups are either non existent or risk their lives while doing what they do.

This suggestion is just an outline of a project . There are of course other things that one would need to take into consideration when planning such a project. The biggest difficulty lies in making this a sustainable project. A way of making such a project sustainable could be by working together with for instance students of political science at universities such as Makerere university who could find time to devote to this project beside their studies. During my stay at the youth centre in Kampala I became aware of the fact that there were several university students willing to devote their time to youth work if there were resources and enough commitment from people above. One could talk to headmasters in schools and create a timetable where political education becomes an integrated part of the timetable. When one then leaves the country the student would hopefully continue conducting the lessons on a regular basis. Where this is not possible, one could create a voluntary political debate club. This article cannot provide the answers to every problem seeing as everyone has his own imagination of what a good project is and every country brings its own advantages as well as disadvantages for realising such a project.

Every journey, even that of a thousand miles, begins with the first step as a wise person once said. One could come up with a thousand points to why this project or that project will not achieve results. We often tend to inaction when results are not visible for us but why should they be visible for us . A result that is immediately visible might not be visible a year later any more. A result that is not immediately visible might be visible for years to come. Political education might solve more problems than just corruption. Being a Kenyan by origin, I saw in 2007 how much politics can affect people, and how people can turn to wrong actions due to lack of knowledge on their politicians . Perhaps people would not have turned to Machetes as the solution to their problems had they had the necessary political education they need in order to pressure their politicians and make the right political choices. Despite the difficulties that the idea of political education for the youth might bring about, the results are worth the trouble. Who knows, perhaps among those children there is a future politician who might turn out to be a very responsible politician.