

GLOBAL VOICES

Professional skills on the line – in India

Even a short stay as an international voluntary worker can make a positive difference, as family counsellor Dorthe Ussing experienced when she travelled to India in the summer of 2008 for the Danish Association for International Co-operation (MS)

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Photo: Dorthe Ussing m.fl.

In everyday life 47-year-old Dorthe Ussing is a family counsellor in the Municipality of Vejle, where she is, also, the union representative for her 29 social educator colleagues. In the summer of 2008, she took a break from her regular work to realise a long-cherished dream of being an international voluntary worker. This resulted in an exciting one-month's stay in northern India.

Dorthe Ussing had investigated the options available on the internet. Her choice fell on the Danish Association for International Co-operation (MS), where they were not just looking for young volunteer workers, and where it was, also, possible



The foreign volunteers are popular among both children and adults in India. Dorthe Ussing is the person in the very back to the left.



to travel abroad for just a single month. This was what Dorthe Ussing had time and money for.

Besides having to take leave from her job, flight and accommodation cost mounted up to DKK 22,000. But Dorthe has not regretted her investment, which brought her both professional and personal rewards.

Start-up help for school project

The first week she and the other participants took a trip around the environs of New Delhi organised by MSÍ local collaborator IDEX.

“It gave us a good understanding of the country and culture. We lived in an Indian home for three days. Here we learned the most elementary words and expressions, but above all we were given an insight into how a family from one of the middle castes lives and thinks,” Dorthe Ussing told us.

Subsequently the volunteers were accommodated in a camp and sent out on various tasks. Together with a nurse from Germany and an IT consultant from England, Dorthe chose to help getting a small village school up and running.

Normally physically and mentally disabled pupils go to special schools in the major cities, but as transportation is expensive, many disabled children don't get to go to school. Through the project, IDEX was attempting to integrate disabled pupils in an ordinary local school.

Primitive conditions

The school was primitive: a 12 square metre back-room in the house of an Indian family acted as the schoolroom for eight children aged between five and 18. Their playground was an outdoor terrace. The latrine was in the yard.

“The children sat on the floor with their tatty books. The teacher had no teaching experience and was trying to teach them to write the letter ‘a’, which they had been working on for a long time. There was no enjoyment but a lot of insecurity among the children. As soon as they were left to themselves, they started to fight or tried to steal each other's things. As Dorthe Ussing put it, it was more of a storeroom than a school.

The western volunteers soon turned things around for the better. The children were given

The school facilities were very basic, but Dorthe and the rest of the volunteers brought happiness and structure into the children's everyday school life.



pencils, games and toys, which Dorthe Ussing had brought with her from Denmark.

They also went outside to play instead of sitting in the dark and pokey schoolroom. Three to four days were spent almost entirely on play, after which the guest teachers started to introduce short periods of teaching.

The school started to glow with happiness and life, but the week ended in frustration. The regular teacher went off sick. The volunteers had obviously taken so much control that she felt she had been left out.

From saviour to team-mate

Because Dorthe Ussing was the only one of the volunteers with a social educator's training and experience, she was the one to take the lead and turn the ship around.

But what use would it all be if it only went well as long as they were there. What they had to do was to try to leave something behind which could be used in the future, without their help.

"I got in touch with the local IDEX leader to discuss how we could get this to work, how our work could be continued after we had left, what

Dorthe Ussing, also, participated in home visits, where she told the families about their rights to social services. Many of the families were not aware such social services existed.

resources we had available etc. He was extremely positive and arranged a meeting with a native teacher who had trained to teach disabled children," says Dorthe Ussing.

"At a meeting with the school's ordinary teacher we spoke to her about the importance of establishing a regular structure around everyday school life. We agreed on a regular timetable for morning assembly, teaching and lunch etc. Toilet breaks and hygiene training were also part of the timetable, as several of the children were not accustomed to using the latrines.

"We also set up an individual teaching plan for this mixed group of children. Some of them could not master academic tasks but could paint and draw. Others needed to learn English. I brought along a number of exercises and games from my time as a kindergarten teacher. Structured games were an important aspect of the teaching, as it helped the children to get to know each other socially," says Dorthe Ussing.

She was happy and proud to see that her professional input was effective. The children blossomed, and local ownership of the introduced ideas took hold.

“The social educator skills I had brought along with me helped us to stop things in time and examine where we had been going wrong. We had to recognise that we weren't there for our own but for the children's sakes, to give them something that would be useful to them. We weren't there to save the world, but to pass on our professional knowledge to others,” says Dorthe Ussing.

She is overjoyed that the developments she helped to get started have left a lasting mark on the school, as reports from other volunteers who have since visited the school have demonstrated. Their recommendations for a structured school life and other educational ideas were pursued and developed further.

Family counselling

Dorthe Ussing also had time for other tasks, especially home visits, together with a local IDEX employee. The purpose was to spread information about the rights of families with children - rights of which so many people were unaware.

As overseas volunteers enjoy a great deal of respect and are regarded as authorities, their participation in home visits is extremely beneficial.

“We visited a young mother with a little girl. The mother was expecting her second child. She was afraid that this would, also, be a girl. She shares this worry with many other poor families in India. When girls get married their families must pay a dowry, and this is a great financial burden for the girl's family. As a result many girls are sent away or even murdered. We were able to tell the young mother that the government had allocated funds to solve this problem. Among other things, there is a free school transport scheme, but those wanting to use it have to apply,” says Dorthe Ussing.

Day-care centres have been set up in many Indian villages, where families can go for help in case of sickness or pregnancy. The problem is that many villagers know nothing about these facilities.

“We visited a family where the mother had lost her second child because she couldn't get to the hospital to give birth. Now she was pregnant again. We were able to tell her about a hospital in the vicinity where she could give birth, free of charge, and about a day-care centre scheme with free meals, vitamins, and clean water. Access to clean water is a major problem, and we were able to tell the villagers about the importance of boiling water to avoid disease.

What she brought back home

Besides the help Dorthe Ussing's trip to India brought to other people, she learned a great deal herself which has affected her approach to her everyday work of dealing with the problems of Danish families.

“I am more open and positive towards them now - and I am not haunted by visions of abuse

and neglect everywhere. Perhaps this is because I saw many things which were much worse.

I now have a sharper eye for the possibilities and resources rather than the weaknesses,” she says, and goes on to say, “When I went to India, I was prepared to give a lot of love, and when I encountered problems I would simply ‘deal with them’. I quickly learned that it is better to take a small step back as an observer and initiate a few changes, which will be useful to the people you're seeking to help. I became more aware of my professional role.”

In India she was able to see how people could deal with incredible hardships because of their religious convictions. Indians believe that the soul lives on after death and that a new and better life awaits them in the future. Therefore they think one should take life as it comes and not give up.

“This has very much become my philosophy. I also believe one can withstand many hardships, and that one must live, learn and develop with both this life and the next in mind,” says Dorthe Ussing.

In India she started each day with yoga and meditation under the guidance of a skilled teacher. She also brought this daily meditation home with her.

“It calms the body and sharpens the intuition,” she says.

Go ahead and do it!

Dorthe Ussing definitely recommends others to try a job as an international volunteer.

“It is just the thing for anyone eager to combine learning about another culture with voluntary work where they can apply their professional skills and experience, and at the same time help other people. You are guaranteed a marvellous personal adventure and a deeper insight into yourself! But it is important to be quite clear in one's mind about why one is doing it, to remember that it's not a matter of saving the world, but of bringing about change based on the capabilities, personality and professional skills one can bring to the work,” she says.

Herself, she is eager to repeat the experience, but this time in Kenya together with her 14-year-old son.

“I hope this will be as early as the summer of 2009. But it depends on whether I am able to save enough money to pay for the stay,” says Dorthe Ussing.