

# ***GLEN Internship 2012***

## ***Final report***



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Home organisation: INEX-SDA, Czech Republic

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Host organisation: SCDI – Supporting Community Developing Initiatives

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*Me and Caroline while driving in Hanoi traffic*

## **Once upon a time...**

*... in a kingdom full of rice fields, tofu, and motorbikes so called Socialistic Republic of Vietnam in a huge, huge and crowded city Hanoi there was a tandem compound of two lovely girls Tereza and Caroline, trying to work in an fellowship that helps people who lives in there. Those people (concubines, homosexuals, drug users, HIV positive people and transsexuals) were oppressed, exploited and punished by many of other serfs and the kingdom itself.*

*The story starts in August 2012 and finishes in November the self-same. The magical fellowship was SCDI – Supporting Community Developing Initiatives. And in the time the tandem came to the kingdom their biggest task was to fight the king to stop punishing innocent subjects.*

*The tandem came with a dream that they will be useful and will do their best to fight the human evil and misfortune, to contribute to change. Unfortunately this dream had never come true...*

*After some time the tandem was fighting for their own survival. Without being desired or having meaning they started drawn in cultural differences, the huge, huge monster of Hanoi, and their consuming, bitter feelings.*

*But as all the fairy tales also this story has a happy ending. The tandem found a fount of wisdom and thanks to all the strong emotions and feelings they got to know themselves as never in their entire lives.*

## ***How does it begin?***

In time before the internship I already finished my studies (of Social and Culture Anthropology) and worked in an NGO that works with socially excluded youths for a year and I was quite unsatisfied with the organisational level. Once I was searching something on web of my home organisation and I saw this opportunity. I did a short research and I decided I would love to try it. I chose the internship because of its topic that I am interested in, to work with sex workers and drug users. During my studies I worked with drug users as a volunteer and I wanted to extend my experience. My decision already proved to be good when I attended an open competition in Prague. The competition lasted three days and there were many interesting activities but more importantly really nice and enriching people. I left and I was full of energy and new ideas. I was chosen and I was really happy. I did not hesitate and I quitted my job. There were two amazing preparation seminars followed and I was looking forward to do an internship with my great tandem Caroline.

## ***The Kingdom of Vietnam and Hanoi itself...***

Vietnam is crowded, fast growing, still strong communist but also capitalistic country. I don't know how for local people (they are avoiding this topics) but for me this was a bit schizophrenic. You can see the economic growth everywhere, all the western branches, really rich Vietnamese, driving in the most expensive cars. There are diamond and golden Apple stores, rich bars for locals, where small beer costs six times more than in Czech. High class is studying abroad and traveling all the time. But in north they still block Facebook, Human rights watch websites, all the opposite parties and movements pages. And every month there are several people sentenced for talking or blogging about democracy or journalists talking about corruption.

There is also quite big difference between north and south according to historical development and incidents. Northerners are more closed, conservative, obviously more in a communist way of life, and as a lot of travellers told us much reserved to foreigners. There is also a big difference between country and city. The people in remote countryside are much nicer and hospitable. Unfortunately we stayed in Hanoi. On the other hand I totally

understand the locals in big cities and their cold feelings considering tourists. My second culture shock was when I saw how tourists behaved. I saw so much of disrespect and offending of local culture that I was ashamed several times for being “white tourist”. This is a big topic for future work in this region of SE Asia...responsible and sustainable tourism. I think this could be also a good internship for next time. To make the tourist especially native speaking English aware of impact of their behaviour.

Another topic is environment situation that is really sad. There are almost 100 million people, living mostly in big cities (there is enormous trend of urbanisation). And the economic growth goes in a hand with devastation of environment. Even in such places like Halong bay that is a culture heritage of UNESCO is covered by garbage and oil stains. There are millions of motorbikes, overpopulation, economic growth and not exactly a warm attitude towards wild nature that all makes quite dangerous risk for its environment.

Hanoi was quite a big topic for me because you can see the change everywhere (while we were there prices of oil tripled, public transport doubled, and accommodation was 30% more, every week there is new shop/club opened in your street, etc...). There is vivid, living capitalism but unfortunately just the worst part (I didn't see so called capitalism with “human face”). The society was so strong experience to me I would compare it to some of the Orwell's books (the intensive, desperate feeling I had). Everyone wants to be as rich as possible and as fast as it can be. Even the human relationships and also the respect to elders went apart. At the beginning we were quite shocked how do locals treat us so we made different exercise and did participatory observation and realised that it is not just us but they are the patterns of the society. I did not see people being mostly nice to each other or solidarity. No warm faces no smiles...on the other hand the average young person works 360 days a year, 14 hours a day...(I wouldn't smile to be on their place either). This mixture of exploitation, post war trauma, communist/government oppression, huge city with its rules and hard survival (we saw many old homeless women) creates a society that to be in is quite scary and also depressive.

## ***The Magical fellowship – SCDI!!!***

Centre for Supporting Community Development Initiatives is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. There is headquarter in Hanoi but they work also in other cities all around Vietnam. Unfortunately I can describe their activities just briefly because during all the three months there was no one who would have just a single hour for us to talk about their projects and activities. The very first day we asked they gave us materials in Vietnamese. And after some time we asked for at least written materials, they have to have it in English, because all their project are sponsored by western foundations... they did not send us even these, although all the managers have it in their computers or on their emails so it would take top five minutes to send it.

Anyway, the NGO has about 30 employees and is divided into 4 different sections according to the different projects. Each of the parts has its own project manager that is responsible for it. We “participated” in community based project. Their work is characteristic by community approach. It is not social work we are used to in Europe. Basically there is a minimum of social workers almost all of the employees studied economic or project management there were also two psychologists. They come to locality and there is an existing community. They get to a contact with its existing leader and work continuously just with this person not with the clients itself. In our term we could say that the social worker is the local leader. Then they educate the leader who transmits his or her knowledge to the rest of the community. They work with drug users, sex workers, transsexuals, gays and HIV positive communities. They educate them in other fields; raise their awareness concerning safe sex, save using of drugs etc. As far as I know they do a good job indeed. They also have quite impressive results and you can see the impact of their work. Also the concept of community work is quite effective. But it was other point that was hard for us. We could see how good they are and how much we could learn but there was no chance to learn anything because of their attitude. There even were several workshops in English provided by their foundations but they just did not tell us about it. We asked them after we missed the first if they could at least write en email to inform us but there was no change it workshops upcoming. They also provide some support to local hospital where people with AIDS are dying but I don’t know much about it and about the rest of their activities either.

## *Our tasks...*

Since beginning communication was quite hard. We send our CVs and Motivation letters, we wrote them what we could do quite in detail, asked for our tasks to prepare in advance but there was no answer. Then we came and “a contact person” (that was the only 40 minutes she had for us during the whole internship) asked what do we want to do there that she has no idea... During the interview we realised no one ever read our emails because she had not a single idea who we are and what could we do. The outcome of the interview was that we can teach English everyone connected to this NGO and we will see afterwards what else. To teach English in the NGO where the managers spoke better English than we do (some of them had perfect Oxford English due to their studies in England) was quite ridiculous. But the thing was that the employees did not need English for their job it was just some bonus to them (but they belong to upper class) and in the sex workers community the idea was to provide better money to have more foreign customers (I strongly disagreed with doing this). There was almost no motivation from the students, at the NGO they cancelled every third lesson there were all the time some more important things or there were students all the time changing because there were meetings every day, and in the communities it was the same. When we asked to provide some other workshops in the communities the NGO refused. The only nice thing was to teach in MSM Group they were really nice to us and we finally felt welcome and useful. But to get there was one hour there in rush hour and the same back. So when I came there I was totally exhausted.

At first I was not quite sure that everything is so wrong (comparing to Caroline) I still believed that we could do more on communication level. So we tried and tried we talked to managers to employees and we told them our feelings and about the lack of meaning in all of our tasks.

All the time we told about it (during the talks) they seemed concerned and they found some new tasks for us. For example one of them was to do research about prostitution policy all around the world (they told us they really need it and it is extremely useful for them). Well we were happy to have some meaningful task and we started with it. We spend week working on the first part and send it to managers and director for revising and comments that we could continue afterwards but there was no response at all (we asked about 5 times for the comments). Well we stopped the research and again told that this situation is really useless and if they don't have any work for us we can work somewhere else. And again they said that

our workshops would be very useful to them. Well we prepared several workshops we really spend a long time preparing them and again the reality was a total failure.

Till now I still don't understand where the problem was or clash. It was not because of something we did (we asked that several times our only friend in there, after some time we realised that other colleagues started gossip her for too much talking to us ). Everyone knew we were absolutely unhappy and unsatisfied and they just did not care.



Here you can see the enthusiasm during Caroline's workshop.

### ***Our monsters, how to fight a dragon?***

After some time several questions we tried to find answers to occurred.

For example:

*How can you solve problems in a culture where people don't talk about problems? To point on some problems is quite rude (at least in a way how we used to do it).*

*How to deal with the hatred of people?*

*Why are they ignoring and even excluding us at work?*

*Where is the point we don't want to continue there?*

*What is ignorance, what is our fault and what is a culture difference?*

*Why am I so deeply unhappy?*

*What do we need to change the situation?*

*Is it just us (white, tourists, women) or their behaviour patterns simply differs from ours?*

Those were the questions we spend most time talking about. For me as an anthropologist it was quite shocking. I did not expect at all that this would be such a big issue. But it makes a huge difference whether you travel a country or live in there. Especially when do you work there among locals and have to deal with troubles and problems. Maybe we crossed some kind of cultural border by saying we are unhappy and the tasks don't have any meaning and then the communication was not possible and they started avoiding us...I really don't know till now. No one from locals gave us an answer we could understand. Because that is other feature of their culture they don't like talking about uncomfortable things...But at the same time a lot of the people in this NGO studied or lived abroad in "western" countries some of them for a while and they experienced and saw our behaviour patterns in order to this the only answer for our troubles was not just cultural differences. And there was lack of interest from beginning then it was evolving to total exclusion and sometimes ostracism.

But the biggest topic for me was driving in Hanoi traffic. That was a living nightmare. I had to drive every day from one to two hours sometimes in a rush hour. But there was no other way...we worked on four different places and the only way was to use a motorbike and I was the only driver. I just could not handle it but I had to do it and I was totally stressed out.

### ***Happy ending...?***

Well the happy ending for me is simply the fact that I survived it. We had two motorbike accidents I was really sick for almost all the time and also very unhappy there. Even now when I am writing this report my feelings are quite vivid and in the same time they are quite negative. The most positive thing during the whole internship was my tandem partner Caroline. Because of her and our talks I learnt a lot of things about myself. In all the stressful, negative situations I think we showed each other some kind of a mirror. And as we analysed all the situations and feeling we experienced, I learnt to talk about my feelings is a way how

to deal with hard situations. There was no other way sometimes I felt if I won't talk about it the feelings would "eat me".

I have never lived out so many strong emotions in such a short time. Sometimes I was so desperate, sad, angry, furious, stressed out. It was really hard but I learnt a lot about myself. I also changed in a good way I would say. Because of the high level of negative feeling I am trying to keep the positive ones much more than before. I solved some of my personal issues as well.

I also learnt an important lesson for my work. The time in Hanoi was quite hard for several reasons: cultural differences, impossibility of adaptation on daily routine life in Hanoi, exclusion and ignorance in our work , lack of language and almost no English speaking locals etc... This is how refugees and foreigners have to feel in my country at the beginning. I think I would be more capable and helpful in my future work with them because of deeper understanding of their living situation.

I am glad I did this internship but I would never ever want to experience it again.

\* All the photos were made by me or Caroline with an agreement of the people.

