

Final Report

GLEN Mongolia 2013

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Title of the Internship: Boosting Sustainable Tourism

Country and Place: Mongolia, Murun

Period of the Internship: July-September 2014

Name of Hosting Organization: HATI

Summary

The internship took place in Northern Mongolia, capital of Huvsgul province, city of Murun. Huvsgul province is quite calm in terms of political stability, although people here struggle with very low incomes, unemployment and environmental problems such as pollution and harsh winters. Extremely cold climate in the winters causes deaths of thousands of livestock every year and due to the fact this is the major livelihood opportunity in the region, people are very vulnerable. Missing infrastructure as well as corruption and unequal distribution of wealth leads to absence of sustainable livelihood for local people and one of the possible sources, tourism, gives rise to environmental impact and culturally insensitive behaviour. HATI, organizations GLEN participants worked for, tries to deal with these problems. Its aim is to support sustainable livelihood opportunities, mainly in terms of environmentally and socially responsible tourism. Interns worked on several projects ranging from livelihood capacity building to health and environmental issues awareness rising. The results of the internship consist of established network of sustainable tourism involved organizations, new PR strategy and couple of projects in their pilot phase (self-help groups, public campaigns etc).

Tato stáž se konala ve městě Murun, centru huvsgulské provincie v severním Mongolsku. Tato provincie je poměrně klidná ve smyslu politické stability, avšak místní lidé strádají kvůli nízkým příjmům a nedostatku příležitostí k zaměstnání, environmentálním problémům, znečištění a tuhým zimám. Extrémně chladné klima způsobuje v zimě úhyn velkého množství dobytka, na jehož pastevectví spoléhá většina obyvatel jako na zdroj obživy. To vše způsobuje vysokou zranitelnost místních lidí. Chybějící infrastruktura, korupce a nerovná distribuce příjmů a bohatství vede k nízkým možnostem občanů získat udržitelné živobytí a jeden z potenciálních zdrojů příjmu, turismus, přináší spíše více škod než užitku. Negativní dopady na životní prostředí a necitlivost vůči místní kultuře jsou jen příklady, se kterými se snaží bojovat organizace HATI. Pro tuto organizaci také pracovali účastníci programu GLEN a snažili se podpořit cíle organizace v projektech zaměřených na udržitelné živobytí nejen v oblasti kulturně a environmentálně zodpovědného turismu. Stážisté pracovali na různorodých projektech od posilování kapacit až po zvyšování povědomí o zdravotních a ekologických tématech. Mezi výsledky stáže lze zařadit založená síť spolupracujících organizací v oblasti udržitelného turismu, nová strategie public relations a řada dalších projektů v pilotní fázi (svěpomocné skupiny, kampaně apod.).

Introduction

In this report, I would like to describe my working experience in Mongolia, which was performed during the summer 2013. My motivation to take part in this programme was primarily based in my desire to extend my field experience abroad and to be involved in global education activities afterwards. My background is in public economics and social

sciences and the topic and issues the hosting organization is dealing with convinced me to send the application to this particular organization and place. Livelihood opportunities in Mongolia are not very vast and for many people, income from tourism is the only chance how to sustain their family. Tourism has, however, plenty of negative impacts both on the environment as well as on the community. My motivation was to contribute to the hosting organization's effort to spread the knowledge and build the capacities in order to make incoming tourism more beneficial for the local community.

Mongolia – Politics, Environment and Culture

Although it is almost 25 years since Mongolia became completely independent after the Soviet era, political situation in Mongolia is not very stable at the moment. Officially, Mongolia is a semi-presidential representative democratic republic with a multi-party system. In fact, there are two major political parties, one of which rule the country based on the election results. Ex-communist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party is has had big influence on Mongolian politics since the revolution, however currently both president (Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj) and parliament is ruled by the Democratic Party. Recently, there has been observed rising attention and power of extremists groups (ultra-right wing) and very important issue in the politics is immigration prevention and nationalism due to increasing numbers of Chinese workers coming to the Mongolia.

In terms of environment, Mongolia is one of the richest countries in indigenous nature and untouched spots. Vast and extensive steppes as well as extraordinary mountains and thrilling deserts are just few examples of Mongolia's spectacles. Low population density and huge distances allowed several places to keep their original appearance. Unfortunately, Mongolia is rich of widespread natural resources, which caused interest of mining companies as well as other countries interventions. Due to instable political institutions and low transparency, lots of benefits coming from mining companies are concentrated in the hands of the leading elite. According to the Corruption Perception Index, issued by Transparency International, Mongolia is perceived as one of the most corrupted countries in the world by its own inhabitants. The destruction of the environment is clearly visible at certain places and although size of the country may seem almost infinite, some sites are becoming irretrievably

depleted. On the other hand, the country is polluted due to the effort of Mongolians as well. Missing or ineffective waste management system together with attitude of local people to garbage collection means that streets and even countryside is not sparsely covered by waste. The air quality in winter in bigger cities is also an issue for not only environmental organizations. Permanent smog is causing severe diseases among the population.

Mongolia is very proud country and Mongolians are very proud people. They are aware of the power they had in the past and this is still influencing the culture and people's attitudes. People I have met were open-minded and friendly, on the other hand most of them kept some kind of distance from the others. Plenty of locals, mainly children were eager to see and especially to talk to a foreigner, even though they had enough opportunities to meet visitors earlier. They wanted to show their hospitality, particularly in the countryside. Visiting ger (yurt) is an unique opportunity for anyone keen to get know the Mongolian culture and habits of local people. Lots of people love their festivals and family reunions. The major religion is Buddhism, there is not much ethnic and language diversity (most of the people are Mongolians and speak Mongolian).

Host Organization

The host organization is called Huvsgul Association of Tourist Information (HATI), which has been derived from their first project – tourist information centre, established as a second one in the country (after Ulaanbaatar). Nevertheless, its current activities and mainly objectives are much broader. HATI works in the community in order to support sustainable livelihood opportunities for the local people and upkeep culturally and environmentally responsible tourism at different levels. HATI is one of the leading NGOs in the city of Murun, Huvsgul province in the north of Mongolia. The organization has been established by Tseepil Gombojav, who has invested lots of her free time in the welfare of the organization. Sadly, she is the only stable person running the organization and since she has to work full time in her family business, we were the only staff in the office. Another person, HATI is cooperating with, is Sarangel Mukhbayar, local tourist guide. Rarely, HATI involves some external volunteers, who take part in certain events.

The organization is struggling with fundraising due to lack of employees and people who can approach potential donors in English language. On the other hand, equipment of the office

and the organization is sufficient and HATI is centrally located. Besides providing information to the visitors, HATI focus on capacity building programmes and especially projects evolved from the effort of foreign volunteers. The organizational culture is very open and we had freedom to establish any kind of project we were fond of. However, no support was provided for us, so we were basically running all projects without any resources and help.

Internship and its phases

Before the placement, we were supposed to establish a proper contact with the host organization and the contact person. Those contacts we had were not responding at all, neither to us nor to INEX. After couple of months, we managed to contact them and got the information they are very busy at the moment. At the bottom-line, we overcome the communication problems and focus on our own preparation.

Our preparation activities consisted of language skills improvement, organizational and administrative planning as well as cultural and professional training. In terms of language skills, we were working hard to improve our Russian and learn basic phrases in Mongolian. Most of the preparation was performed individually, using online materials etc. Concerning cultural preparation and getting into the knowledge of social system and the nature of organizational main field, we prepared ourselves via individual consultations and desk study. As mentioned above, we attempted to arrange the visa as soon as possible, however major delays were caused by the lack of communication from the hosting organization. Not even two months advance was enough to get visa in time, so we had to wait until the very last moment. The bureaucracy together with dilatory approach of host organization resulted in late travel arrangements as well, which means we had to buy much more expensive tickets to the final destination than it would have been possible before. At the end of the day, we managed to get any paper necessary for takeoff.

The internship itself began promisingly. The organizational meeting with Tseepil was held and we got the information about the organization and its activities and goals from the founder's point of view. She and Saraa helped us to find accommodation and we got the basic orientation in the town. At first, we delivered short needs assessment during a journey to different destination in the region and visit to vulnerable groups and members of the community. Afterwards, we set the goals of our stay with Tseepil and brought our own ideas, so for the rest of the internship we focused on various projects such as capacity building

among the tourist services providers, trainings, awareness rising in the environmental and health issues, support to self-help groups etc. Due to lack of support and resources we decided to cooperate with couple of other NGOs in the town, e.g. World Vision and Bookbridge, which resulted in the pilot phases of several programmes. The cooperation with contact people in HATI was problematic due to either lack of time or lack of interest in not-individually beneficent projects. However, we were able to cooperate effectively within the tandem and reached at least some of the objectives we set at the beginning. The most important advantage of our tandem was our background in different subjects and ability to share ideas and experience.

Challenges and Learning Effects

The key problems and challenges are already mentioned above: lack of communication, bureaucracy and language barrier.

Lack of communication from the host organization before and during the placement caused severe problems such as visa delays, expensive tickets and sometimes inefficient work efforts. When we realized it won't change because both contact people were too busy and not interested, we decided to cooperate mostly with other organizations in order to achieve goals of the organization and our projects evolved from needs assessment. Even though we tried to get know what HATI's needs are, we didn't get proper answer. Nevertheless, the cooperation with other organizations went well and we were able to empower some of local people to contribute to the community development within the sector.

Bureaucracy was rather bothering and annoying than problematic in a serious way. We had to arrange all work permits since two months before the internship till the very end of the stay on a daily basis, which also caused delays in work and preparations. Mongolian paperwork concerning visa and work permits is very lengthy and extensive due to the fear of flood of Chinese workers into Mongolia. We had to accept the legal environment, hence we arranged all papers and documents and paid for them, however, we were aware of our rights and refused to undergo the blood draw during one of the administrative controls.

Language barrier occurred mainly during the communication with people in remote areas or in vulnerable conditions. Our knowledge of Mongolian (which was widely the only spoken language, neither Russian nor English) was limited to basics and we cannot make proper needs assessment and community meetings without translators. Whenever possible, we asked

local people interested in our work to be our translators in order to deliver the capacity building etc.

Conclusion and Perspective

During our stay, we gained new skills, exchanged our experience and learn lots of new knowledge in different fields of aid work. The stay itself was beneficial on various levels, from personal development, cultural sensitivity intensification and new contacts as well as broadening horizons and enlarging experience in working in a different environment. We got used to diverse perceptions of time due to huge distances and were able to understand at least some of aspects of Mongolian culture and struggles. The influence on future plans is mainly inherited in continuation of global education activities as well as desire to keep in touch with the field work. Lots of issues to think about arisen from our stay too, we need to rethink positive and negative impacts of our efforts in Mongolia, benefits and hidden problems and constraints in particular projects and the overall efficiency of global education and development projects delivered by foreigners or with their help.