

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE: AN APERTURE TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF DISCOVER

Students' Exchange Experiences from African Countries

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Thesis, Autumn 2015
Diaconia University of Applied Sciences
Degree Programme in Social Services
Bachelor of Social Services (UAS)
Focus in Community Development Work

ABSTRACT

Sapkota, Shree Newas. "International exchange: an aperture to community development and self discover": Students' exchange experiences from African countries. 65 pages. 1 appendix. Language: English. Autumn 2015. Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. Degree Programme in Social Services. Degree: Bachelor of Social Services.

International exchange is a platform where a student encounters various diversities in order to increase his/her understanding of other culture, religion, communities, society at different levels and languages. These encounters not only develop skills in his/her professional and personal life but also provide an opportunity to be involved in different community development work using various approaches. International exchange gives perspectives to students. Hence, this exchange is crucial for the students to work in various fields of social work.

This is a qualitative research. The aim of the research was to find strengths and weaknesses students discover about themselves during their international exchange in African countries. This research has further discussed about community development approaches they learn during the exchange and a brief comparison has been made with practices in Finland. The research group of this research were the students of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences who have had been participants of international exchange programme of the school.

Three methods of data collection were taken for the research; Interviews, email questionnaire and personal observation. A focus group discussion and one face-to-face interview was done. Email questionnaire was sent to 6 respondents. In order to analyze the collected data, content analysis was used as a method for the interpretation.

The results of the research indicated that international exchange is useful and beneficial for students to sharpen their personal and professional skills. The exchange can be an eye opening for the students to learn various community development approaches in diverse contexts. In addition, this research has listed some of the strengths students gained after the exchange and weaknesses they discovered about themselves during the period. This research has further made some critical perspectives of the international exchange.

Key words: international exchange, exchange students, community development work, community development approaches

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social work profession is an academic as well as practice based profession. To practice this profession, it requires knowledge of human behavior, their development, social, cultural, economical understandings of communities and interaction of all these factors (NASW 2014). It requires a good exposure to people, their way of life, societies, or in one word exposure to diversities. The encounters to these various diversities help to develop skills and capacity to work in this profession. Various tools, methods and means help developing these competencies of which, international exchange is one major mode.

International exchange is such a programme where a person (student) is exposed to a different environment to increase his/her understanding of other culture, religion, communities, society at different levels and languages. It integrates theoretical concepts of community based learning. Such exchanges generate platforms providing social work students opportunities to have ethnic consciousness, cultural awareness and a feeling of social commitment. It provides wider sense of environmental sensitivity; increase students' compassion level significantly, gives better understanding of oneself, community and others. It further gives ability to adapt with stress, enlarge capacity of critical thinking and improve academic achievement. It offers opportunities for self reflection about personal goals and other aspects of one's life, such as civic responsibility, social justice and one's understanding of poverty and discrimination (Squillace 2014). It is a medium to broaden our knowledge of various community work approaches in diverse societies. These approaches vary according to their locations, scenarios, socio-economic status, level of education and awareness in communities, political situations and other phenomenon. International exchange is a platform for these encounters and it is an opportunity to have their understandings.

International exchange is a platform, which widens boundary of our knowledge and understandings of society in diverse ways. It has multidimensional affects on us to give varied perspectives of the pictures what we have learned during

our studies. Being a part of exchange programme of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak) 2013, I was able to place myself in communities with diverse people and culture that enlarged my thoughts and experiences to give me understandings of diversities unlike my origin.

Being an international student from Asia, studying in Europe and having an experience of doing international placement in Africa has multi-dimensional influences on my wellbeing. From my own experiences, I came from a strict Hindu family having many limitations in mind. Travelling various places from Asia to Europe and Africa encountering societies, people, culture, religion, various geographies from high hills, mountains, pristine water to plain lands, degraded environment, extreme poverty to hi-tech world. These encounters and experiences have strongly widened my periphery of thinking and strengthen my tolerance towards differences. International exchange is one of the main reasons to be eye-opening factor personally for me, which has highly influenced me to write thesis on this topic. In addition, there has been no any such thesis written in this topic till this date in Degree Programme of Social Services of Diak.

2 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to see international exchange as an aperture to discover oneself realizing personal weaknesses and strengths. During international exchange, students encounter various situations. During those encounters they discover their potencies as well as limitations. This research discusses what kind of those weaknesses and strengths they confront during their exchange by using experiences from the students of Diak who have had been a part of this exchange programme in African countries. It has also marked some competencies a student acquires in his/her life after taking part in the programme.

This paper further aims to give understanding of community or social work approaches in diverse settings. Approach here means a way of dealing something. For instance, I am studying in Helsinki. The methods and tools practiced with certain target group in Helsinki may vary with the same target group somewhere else. Empowering poor people of a community in Africa may vary empowering poor people in Helsinki. Perspectives are different but how? What are affecting factors? What is the definition of poverty in a remote village of Africa and how it is in Helsinki? Community/Social work approaches differ in various settings; social work terms may have diverse meanings in a place where there is a different economic, social or geographical situation. To give understandings of these issues, approaches and perspectives, international exchange can be a window to see in diversities, it can be an opportunity to improve our skills and capacity to work, to widen our thoughts, to see a community from many directions.

This research aims to find answers to the following research questions.

- 1) What kind of strengths and weaknesses do students discover after the exchange?

- 2) What different kinds of community work approaches do students learn during their exchange programme compared to practices in Finland?

There exists a relation between these two research questions. The students who participate in international exchange involve in different kinds of community work. Students may participate in community school as a volunteer or some may engage in Non Governmental Organizations or International Non Governmental Organizations or other local organizations. They do various kinds of work using different community or social work approaches that have been described later in this thesis. During their participation in such community work, students are able to use their capacity to work effectively in their target group or area with the knowledge of theories they have learned at school. During this process a student is also able to know how capable he/she is to work in different settings. The students are able to discover their strengths as well as weaknesses from which they can learn and even work better in the future.

3 BACKGROUND

Diak was established on a trial basis in August 1996 and became permanent in 2000 with 8 different units in various parts of Finland. The key aspect of Diak is the development of ethically robust social education in the fields of social welfare, health, humanities and education. Diak is the largest University of Applied Sciences which is providing education in the field of social work in Finland so far. From the beginning of its establishment, international exchange has been in its focus and developing countries have been its major partners. One of the ideal principles of Diak is that all its students should study multicultural professionalism and has an opportunity to go abroad during their studies in Asia, Africa or Europe. Over the years, clarifying in students' selection process and organizing compulsory orientations have developed Diak's student exchange programme (Meretmaa 2012). In the social and health sectors, it is the only national-level UAS that has capacity to provide working life services and trainings from the metropolitan area to Oulu and from Pieksämäki to Pori (DIAK n.d.)

3.1 Study Course Module

Degree programme in Social Services is provided in both Finnish and English languages in Dicoania University of Applied Sciences. The degree in English language is targeted for international students where Finnish students also study. The English degree programme is called Degree Programme in Social Services (DSS). The students of DSS do their international placement in their third year in the course module called Community, Empowerment and Participation (CEP). It aims to make students familiar about barriers in participation and to work for change(s) in local and wider situations with the strategies to deal with them. The student is able to use theories and practice in planning, organizing and development of group and is able to use his/her expertise in strategies for empowerment and change. The student further is

able to apply processes of participatory research and user research in youth, community development and social service work. One of the major objectives of this course module is also that the student is able to develop the final version of thesis plan and collect data for the thesis (Diak Curriculum Guide 2010.) The students who receive this degree in Finnish language do their international placement in the course module called Monikulttuurisuus ja moninaisuus opintokokonaisuus (Multiculturalism) (Voima, personal communication 27.08.2015). The total duration of the placement is 3 months (Diak course catalogue 2014-15). The participants of the exchange also receive some financial support from the school.

Personally, I took part in Diak's exchange programme in 2013. I did my 3 months of placement in an organization based in Swaziland. In this research I have also used my experiences to support the data and findings. Here, in the table below, it shows the number of students participating in international training mobility from Diaconia University of Applied Sciences for more than 3 months. These numbers include students from Social Services, Health and Sports.

| Year | Number of students |
|------|--------------------|
| 2010 | 104 |
| 2011 | 129 |
| 2012 | 83 |
| 2013 | 101 |
| 2014 | 97 |

Source: OPETUS- ja KULTTUURIMINISTERIO

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 International Exchange

We are living in a globalized world today where exchange of culture, knowledge education has become wide. In the context of this increasingly global society, international exchange has been an important tool in learning methods for students. An international exchange is an enriching experience on many levels. It affects both personal and professional development, stimulates creative ideas, enhances relationships and strengthens multicultural understanding (Towson University 2015.) The education, government and business communities are united in the call for college graduates to be competent to function in a global economy. International exchange has taken an added importance in this twenty-first century as the main way to accomplish goals through its potential to develop a variety of intercultural competencies. Numerous studies relate studying abroad to a broad range of positive outcomes, including intercultural competence, global perspectives, personal growth and identity, professional development and career success (Twombly, Salisbury & Tumanut 2012.) Student exchange programmes, either international or domestic, provide college and university students with opportunities that they simply cannot get anywhere else. Whether students want to travel in order to earn credits, broaden their horizons or experience a new culture, there are plenty of benefits. The social change that take place in exchange students are remarkable which means that they are often more flexible in any 'foreign' situation, whether this means taking a new work, embarking on a new course of study or speaking publicly in front of their peers. Students exchange programmes can certainly have an impact on the lives of participating students, both in the short-term and for the rest of their lives. These programmes are an excellent opportunity for students to gain new interests, get an education and gain an appreciation for diversity all at the same time (Studentexchangeprograms.net 2015.)

The National Student Exchange (NSE) of The University of UTAH located in USA has mentioned fourteen benefits of international exchange in its website. Among those benefits, I have chosen eight important benefits and described here below. It was a challenge to find literatures in regard to this topic. Hence, I chose these benefits from NSE, which reflects important aspects of international exchange. I have described these benefits using other various references.

Become more independent

International exchange helps strengthening one's independency. At a place where one is born, he/she has a good networks and support. During this exchange period, those networks weaken and one is pushed to be more independent. Dee Roach, group manager and European marketing for the Navitas Education Group, says that a student should be able to cope in his/her own when he/she is studying abroad. One should be able to look after himself/herself and be able to do daily activities by own (QS 2014.) It widens one's confidence, independence and skills of solving problems. It is a platform to acquire new skills and in addition, it is also an opportunity to test one's existing skills. Furthermore, it examines organizational skills and one's ability to cope in a new environment with new challenges. It further increases capacity of communicating with different people and adapt in a new environment quickly (University of St Andrews 2015.)

Enrich educational experience

As a part of an educational degree, international exchange widens the periphery of one's educational learning. International learning and knowledge drives students towards understanding diverse cultural and community perspectives and it creates feelings of acceptance towards the diversity. With the help of practical immersion, there is an opportunity to learn language. Multi-dimensional approaches to learning is experienced and also adopted during the learning process. Hence, these kinds of exchanges broaden general knowledge and increase one's interest in global issues. (WEP 2015.) It is an opportunity for a

student to gain deeper understanding of theories he/she learns during his/her career in educational institutes.

Experience life from a different view

We have our own perspectives and views to see varieties of factors. These exchange programmes have capacity to change our beliefs and perspectives, which one may have previously taken for granted. Sarah Han of the Department of International Cooperation at the Korean Council for University Education says, 'Studying abroad provides an opportunity to expand one's field of view and helps one to understand and analyze problems and phenomena from a longer-term, worldwide perspective.' She further says that if one has a long-term experience in other culture, it helps to think objectively about oneself and home country. It creates feeling of appreciation towards diversity, makes one more tolerant towards differences (QS 2014.) International exchange gives one an exposure to new ideas and ways of life. It encourages one to see own culture from a different perspective. There is possibility to make one capable of challenging those ideas and perceptions, which one has been taking for granted (University of St Andrews 2015.)

Grow personally

International exchange not only increases professional skills of students but also adds benefits on personal level. Discovering themselves in a place that is unfamiliar to them, students are able to develop their level of self-awareness and self-esteem. Outside his/her comfort zones, a student learns the ability to confront social challenges and deal with problems. (Studentexchangeprograms.net 2015.) In day-to-day life, a student may face challenges that he/she has never experience before. Although foreign place with different language and culture seems frightening, the difficulties, which a student confronts during the exchange period, can teach him/her number of life lessons. Sometimes participating in an international exchange becomes an emotional issue, but the experience one gets in the exchange is unique and

beautiful. The sad components of exchange may result to homesickness, feelings of alienation, or various other factors. In addition, one may sometimes go through depression, but returning back to home country after the exchange, a student is able to gain new strength, confidence and self-understanding (Augart n.d.)

Discover a new part of the world

The world is diverse. Our upbringing in a particular community in certain culture gives us perspectives. We are constructed in certain ways in our societies. When we cross this comfort zone to discover new part of the world, it brings much amazement challenging our perspectives. Student's international exchange is a platform to explore that new part of the world. One has an opportunity to see the host country and in addition there is a possibility to travel to its neighbouring countries. A student who has never lived out of his/her homeland, it gives him/her knowledge of geographical diversity and socio-economic differences of the new place. Living with a host family during the exchange gives one an understanding of cultural diversity.

Acquire life skills

Acquiring life skills is significant benefit of an international exchange. Author and educational leader Ellen Galinsky has introduced seven life skills and their relevance in the 21st century. Focus and Self-control, perspective taking, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on challenges and self-directed, engaged learning are these skills she has discussed about. The world, which is full of distractions, it is essential to have a focus and self-control to reach our goals and objectives. We should have flexibility to be able to adapt in the changing life. It is important to understand perspectives of other person. Social, emotional landscape of other people's mind is necessary to comprehend. And to understand those people, communicating is vital. Critical thinking is a major life skills one should have in this globalized world as there is flow of information from various sources and we should have that capacity to

analyze, need to know what is valid and what is reliable. Taking on challenges is more than coping with stress. We may pass through different incidents, which we don't like and taking up challenges is beyond simply coping with factors. Information in the world is changing constantly and we should have the ability to take on challenges even we fail as we learn from failures. Self-directed, engaged learning is the ability to continue to learn from our experiences (Galinsky 2013.) For all these life skills Galinsky has discussed about, international exchange can be a platform. These skills not only increase our capacity to work in our personal life but also are essential in our working career.

Break out of comfort zone

The dictionary meaning of comfort zone is a situation or position in which a person feels secure, comfortable or in control (The Free Dictionary 2015). The place where we live or have been living and growing is comparatively a zone of comfort than a place, which is new to us. With motivations to experience new world or pushing ourselves into it, international exchange helps in breaking the zone where we have living our whole life. Breaking a comfort zone is always a challenge, but converting this challenge into success is one of the fine outcomes of this exchange. A completely new language, a new culture, new system, new people, a new environment are those elements which lie on our way to challenge to break the zone and this exchange offers an opportunity to make us capable to break the zone during the period. It makes us more confident to welcome such zones in the future.

Immerse self in new environment

Dee Roach claims that immersive international experience one gets during the time of studying abroad is fruitful. He says that one of the ways to know about another culture is by immersing in it and the only way to practice this is living in that culture (QS 2014.) It involves learning common practices of the community one is working and bringing those practices in one's day-to-day life. In this process, the level of understanding the society may not be as similar as a local

but it gives a closer look to the shape of social, cultural structure of the society. It further generates the feelings of one's belongingness to that particular community.

These international exchanges have varieties of impacts on one's development. It makes one more conscious and aware about various situations in regard to diversities in diverse communities. This is one of the most common changes, which can be noticed in returned exchange students. It adds maturity in one's life to confront challenges outside one's easy networks and comfort zones. When a student goes to a family as a host, it helps in his/her integration into that family. This may develop a stronger friendship that helps in promoting feeling of appreciation towards home and family. A successful accomplishment of the international exchange encourages a student to give independent opinions, make decisions and increases confidence to reach goals. Those students who participate in such kinds of exchanges find themselves more comfortable in foreign environments (WEP 2015.)

Internationalization of Finland

International exchange also plays an important role in internationalization of a country. When students from Finland participate in exchange programmes in various countries, they not only learn about a foreign culture, language, and social structures during the exchange but also share back their Finnish know-how. Promoting Finnish know-how abroad acts as mirror for internationalization of Finland. International exchange programmes help encouraging creative and constructive interaction both within organizations and with interest groups. This strengthens networks at national and international levels. These international mobility and cooperation, work to develop skills and creativity of individuals and communities and it promotes Finnish culture, skills and knowledge abroad. In the world today, there is tougher competition for skilled labour and talented individuals in education and research. Personal capabilities are determined by his/her success in different competitive situations. In addition, social collaboration is important to increase social capital, networking and sharing

skills and knowledge. Hence, offering new kinds of opportunities for interaction and cooperation increases social capital. In order to improve competitiveness of individuals and nation and their well being, cooperation and social collaboration need to be strengthened (CIMO 2011.) For this international exchange can play a significant role.

4.2 Concept of Community Development

There are various definitions of community development. Some define it as an outcome, which means that it brings improvement in community socially, physically and economically. Some other defines it as a process of making communities to be able to work collectively and increasing their ability to do so. To make it simple, community development is a process of teaching people how to work together to solve common problems (Phillips and H.Pittman 2015.) It is a way of making civil society stronger by emphasizing community actions and perspectives of community in the development of social, economical and environmental policy. It aims to empower local communities around specific themes or policy initiatives. Through community groups, organizations and networks, it strengthens capacity of community members as active citizens. It helps people to identify and develop their potential and organize themselves to respond to problems and needs they share (The Scottish Community Development Centre n.d.)

Nash, Munford and O'Donoghue 2005 describe key elements of community development, synthesizing definitions of other writers such as Craig (1987), Derric (1993) and Ife (1995). Community development involves working with groups alongside to identify discourses, structures, policies and practices that require transformation. It usually involves working with groups who have been marginalized and excluded from participation. In order to enhance the daily life of those groups, community workers help to gain control over their situations and to achieve positive changes. It has vision of changing factors to achieve sustainability and social justice at global and national levels (Ife 1995).

Community development workers embrace collective methods utilizing existing resources and find out other necessary resources to make sure that all members of community get fully involved as citizens (Derrick 1993). One of the key focuses of community development is working from people's own definitions of situations, ensuring that community development workers are not alone changers but partners for change. They work throughout the change process with groups embracing social justice and an understanding of top down approaches (Munford and Walsh-Tapiate 2000.) Some principles of community development that writers describe as its foundation has shortly discussed below. These principles are important base for community development approaches. To initiate any approach of community work in a particular setting, these principles are vital to be considered. These principles should be on practice during community work and have important roles in the implementation of community work approaches.

Having a vision for future and indigenous framework

It is always crucial for community worker to have a vision in order to work with a community. This vision can be as broad as to bring social justice to all or be much focused on a goal for which community workers want to achieve for themselves. Building a vision gives a direction to work for a positive change and keep it sustainable. It is important for community workers to always look for various methods to work, relevant to the contexts in which they are working. They should be aware of the indigenous context of their target area. Community workers need to work to foreground the needs of indigenous populations and local ethnic groups, while also working with new migrant populations as citizens in their communities (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.)

Interpreting local contexts

Interpreting local contexts is related to the indigenous frameworks discussed above which includes an understanding of communities within their local

contexts. It is important to understand how global issues and national events and policies are applicable in local communities.

Local contexts also include the foregrounding of local knowledge, which means that sometimes common sense wisdom from everyday life activities is necessary rather than formal learning. It refers 'what is' and 'how things are done', community concepts, beliefs, values, goals and perceptions and the processes are acquired, stored and transmitted. The challenge for community workers is to understand that local knowledge is crucial and without which they can often make wrong decisions about and interpretations of local issues (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.).

Locating oneself in community development in practice

It is an important principle of community work to be able to locate ourselves within one's own community. It is also strongly connected to understanding and interpreting local contexts. We should clearly understand our background and position in society as it determines how we see the world. In this way it is more effective to locate ourselves in our practice. It is important to critically think about our previous experiences and try to understand how these experiences influence in our perspectives and interpretations. It is necessary to have a thinking of our worlds from various perspectives for example, our family experience, education and cultural and religious experiences. It will lead to make sense of our world and think how negative circumstances could be transformed. The process of asking who we are in this world and what/who has influenced, is an excellent tool to make ourselves effective to work (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.)

Understanding power

Another key foundation of community development is understanding that power relations do exist and the role of community worker is to identify the nature of these relations, understanding who benefits from this existence and who gets

disadvantaged. Community workers do not just place a certain group of people in marginalized position, as if this is a common sense and expected state of affairs. It is important to work with community hand in hand to find out why certain situations exists (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.)

Achieving self-determination

Achieving self-determination is another important tool for community development. There are two key elements of self-determination: having one's voice heard and having opportunities for developing knowledge so that participation can be extended and strengthened. Participation should be active which means that community members can have a say about what is going on in the community. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of individuals and right to be treated with dignity, despite of subject position. Here, self-determination is well connected to the understanding of power relations. In this case, we understand how some groups are subject to power relations in such a way that their identities are devalued and they are not able to exercise self-determination (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.)

Working collectively and bringing positive social change

Working collectively to bring a positive social change is an important element of community development. In order to identify issues and to examine why community groups may be mariginalized from decision-making process and from resources, it is crucial to work alongside with them hand in hand and this is how it can challenge 'top-down' approaches. It is necessary to carry out collective analysis with the community to find ways to share knowledge ensuring that community worker does not take the role of an 'expert' but instead working with the community to understand issues and how knowledge can be shared in order to address those issues. At times, community worker will take a lead role but the goal of a community worker is to work alongside communities and enable communities to be self-determining and gain knowledge and skills that help them achieve self-determination. A key element of community work

practice is to ensure that any positive change is maintained and can be extended. Social change requires people to believe that they can achieve change. It is a challenge for community workers to make community believe that change is possible. But this can be done by identifying a vision with clear goals, giving a clear picture of issues to be addressed, having vision for change, helping groups to find their location within the issues and so on. To be involved in bringing a positive change can be demanding but it also profoundly rewarding (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue 2005.)

4.3 Community Development Approaches

There are different kinds of approaches for community development. The aim of the research is to understand some of the approaches used during the exchange programme in Africa. Hence, a short discussion has been made here below about some approaches used in the development of a community.

Empowerment

Empowerment is one of the major approaches in community development work. It is defined as capacity of an individual or group to make choices in order to transform them into desired actions and outcomes. It is commonly used to indicate both an outcome and process. As an outcome an individual or group is able to enjoy a state of empowerment whereas process is an action that moves the group or individual from a lower state of empowerment to higher state (Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland 2006.) Empowerment is a state when people of a community are able to feel that they can influence the decisions, which impact their lives. Providing the members meaningful opportunities can make this happen (McLean & Andersson 2009, P.13 cited in Neumark 2010.) Sadan, 1997 describes three different levels of empowerment that has been discussed here below.

Empowerment at individual level

Empowerment is an active process. The process bring an integration of self-acceptance and self-confidence, socio-political understanding, and an individual capacity to take an active part in decision making and in control over resources (Zimmerman, Rappaport 1988 cited in Sadan 1997.) Empowerment is also a process of internal and external change. The internal change is a person's confidence in his/her capacity to make decisions and to solve his/her own problems. The external change is the ability to act and implement practical knowledge and skills. Individual empowerment is a process development at personal level that involves development of skills and abilities (Parsons 1988 cited in Sadan 1997.)

Group Empowerment

A group is a good environment for consciousness-raising for mutual help in order to develop problem solving skills, social skills and also influencing interpersonal influence. It is a mutual empowerment. An example of self-help group reflects a meaning of this group empowerment (Reismann 1985, Kahn and Bender 1985 cited in Sadan 1997.) Participation in a self-help group is an ideal platform to encourage individual empowerment where such groups even can produce empowerment beyond individual. In the group, each member receives social and emotional support in which they can provide concrete help to each other. During the process they learn new skills including development of ability for future action (Dodd and Gutierrez 1990, Chesler and Chesney 1995 cited in Sadan 1997.)

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment can be defined as a process of making community members capable to increase control over their own lives. Communities are groups of people that share common interests, concerns or identities. (World Health Organization 2015.) Children, youth, women, men, people with

disabilities, elderly and other various groups from minorities are those communities and empowering them means empowering the whole community. To make a community empowered, there are various sectors involved. Local authorities, small community led groups, voluntary organizations and informal networks have their own role in helping individuals to make decisions that affect their lives.

Participation

Participation is another important approach in community development work. In a simpler term, participatory approach is that process where everyone who has a stake in the intervention is heard either by person or representation. Participation of each is welcome and respected. Any individual or group or one point of view should not dominate it. Each participant should be given importance for contribution and everyone's perspectives should be considered. Usually many low-income or minority individuals and groups do not have stronger voice in the society and that is the point where true participation should be acknowledged. Such participation carries feelings of ownership with it and has more credibility, which builds a strong base for the intervention in the community. It strengthens ties between community members and brings them together (Community tool box 2015.) For the development of a community, community participation is vital. It is a form of involvement of community members with similar needs and goals in decisions affecting their lives. It can be defined as:

“ the theory that the local community should be given an active role in programs and improvement directly affecting it” (Abrams 1971 cited in McGill 2015).

Community participation brings many lasting benefits to members of community. There are two types of community participation, which Moser describes in his book Community Participation in Urban Projects in the Third World. It has two types in the form of top-down programmes and bottom-up

initiatives (Moser 1983 cited in McGill 2015.) B.L.C. Johnson in his book, *Development in South Asia*, gives an example to explain these two types of approaches. He has taken an example of construction of dam and the improved agricultural production as a result. The dam construction is a top-down development process where all the decisions are made by the government or other agencies without seeking consent of the people. But there can be a bottom-up approach where people may decide to adopt modern agricultural technologies to improve overall production. Hence, in the first case it is imposed while in the second case it is self-chosen by the people. Johnson explains that there can be sometimes overlap between top-down and bottom-up approach (Johnson 1983 cited in McGill 2015.) When these two approaches overlap, it is a partnership approach, where governments and communities work together in planning and decision-making with long-lasting results (Reddy 2002 cited in McGill 2015.) Here is the Partnership model Reddy has given.

Partnership Model

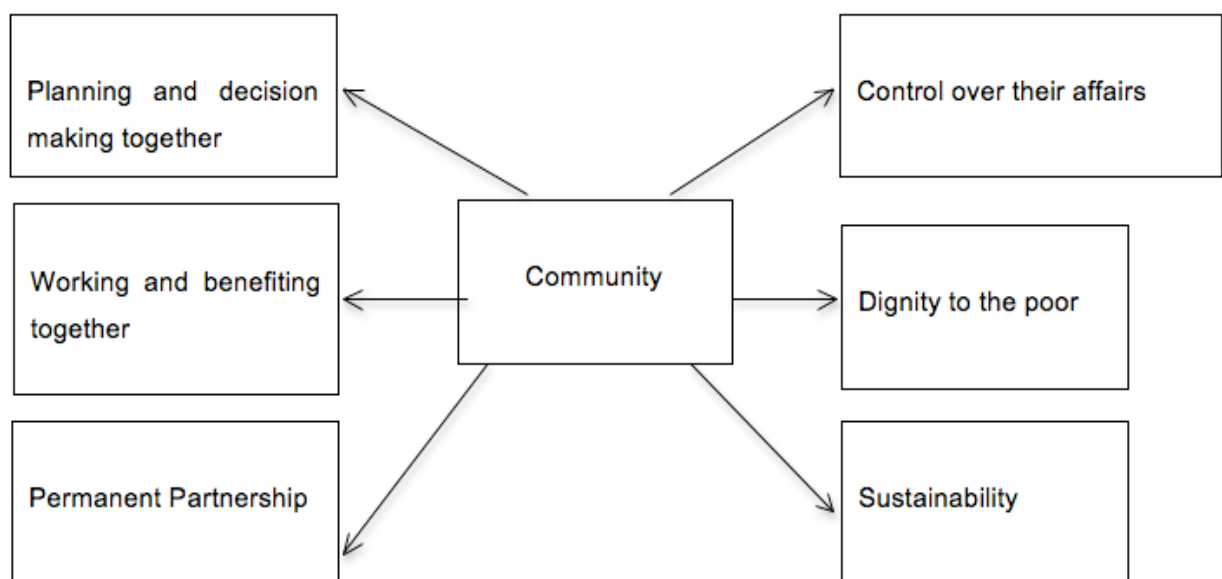


Figure: Partnership Model from G. Narayan Reddy 2002 cited in McGill 2015

From a planning phase to the decision making phase, this partnership model helps to keep community work sustainable. People's voice are heard which benefits the poor and minorities. The community has control over their affairs with a permanent partnership with their government.

5 METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a general approach of studying research topics. Hence, it is important to choose a method in such a way that it reflects strategy of overall research because the methodology we choose gives a direction and guidelines to our research process (Silverman 2005.)

The nature of this research is qualitative. It contains some elements of participatory approach, which I have explained below. There is no single, accepted way of doing qualitative research. It depends upon various factors including purposes and goals of the research, characters of research participants and research settings, the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (Ritchie & Lewis 2004.) In this book, writers have taken definition from the book of two other writers; Denzin and Lincoln called 'Handbook of Qualitative Research'. It has been defined as

"Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices ... turn the world into a series of representations including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study thing in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (2000:3.)

It is a qualitative method as this research carries characters of above definition. It was done in natural settings within the social worlds of people to understand various actions and experiences. Interpretations or senses of those actions and experiences of people have been made. This research does not aim for certain findings but it is an interpretations of experiences made by certain group of people (intern returnees).

This research is also participatory because, it carries some elements of participatory approach. During the process of focus group interview, I took suggestions from the group participants to make questions for the focus group interview and email questionnaire. They suggested me to make some changes in the questionnaire I had prepared by myself. When the changes were made, the focus group interview was followed on the base of the common questionnaire.

The research group of this research is the students who have participated in international exchange of Diak in African countries. Those participants included students who are mainly from Finnish background. In addition, a student was from Asia and one from Africa. Most of the data were collected by sending online questionnaire to research participants. I also made a one to one interview with a student from non-Finnish background with motives to make the data more diverse. As I was a participant in exchange programme of Diak, 2013, I have also used my experiences in this research. This thesis process started from the same time when I did my international placement in 2013. In 2014, some other students did their international exchange, who are some of the interviewees of this research. The focus group discussion was done in 2015.

5.1 Data Collection Methods

Three primary sources were used as methods of data collection for this research, Observation, Interview and Questionnaire. For the interview, a focus group discussion was done and in addition a face-to-face interview was taken.

As I participated in Diak exchange programme, observation was one of the key tools used to collect the data. It is a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place between 'Participative' and 'Non-Participative' observation. I was using 'Participative Observation' as a method. It is an observation when a researcher participates in the activities of the group in the same way like other members

with or without letting other members know that they are being observed (Kumar 2014.) I took part in the activities of the project run by the organization where I was doing my internship. In the activities, youths participated to learn skills to grow cauliflower in the field where I was also involved in plantation of seedlings. Therefore, in the process, I was using observation as a method to collect the data. I wrote weekly learning diaries during the placement and also made a report after completing the three months long placement. Hence, I have used the report and learning diaries as a source of information.

For this research, data were also collected by using focus group interview. It was organized on 12th January 2015 in Diak's premises as suggested by my thesis supervisor. Interviewees who participated in the process were all placement returnees. There were 3 participants in the group. I prepared interview questions and bring them to the group for suggestions. This group made some recommendations for these questions to make this research participatory as I have mentioned above. After some suggestions were made on the questions, focus group interview was followed. The same questions were asked to the group. The set of questions also included some queries about their personal experiences (see Appendix 1) but all the members expressed their ideas at personal level too at their own choice. The data was audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The total length of the interview was 16 minutes and 59 seconds.

Research interview is based on the conversation of daily life and is a professional conversation where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. An interview is literally an *inter view*, a sharing of views between two persons on a specific theme of common interest. Various forms of interviews like Journalistic, therapeutic or research interviews have their own purposes though sometimes, these forms of interviews can come close in qualitative research. The reason to choose this interview research for my thesis is to generate knowledge. Journalistic interviews are more into recording and reporting social events whereas therapeutic interviews improves debilitating situations in people's lives (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009.)

As I did a focus group interview for this research, it is characterized by a non-directive style of interviewing, which encourages interviewees to bring variety of viewpoints on a specific topic focused for the group. The main idea of this interview is not to consensus or solutions but to bring forth different viewpoints on the topic (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009.) Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and David Nachmias give four characteristics of Focused interview (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1997.)

- a) It takes places with respondents known to have been involved in a particular experience.
- b) It refers to situations that have been analyzed prior to the interview.
- c) It proceeds on the basis of an interview guide specifying topics related to the research hypotheses.
- d) It is focused on the subjects' experiences regarding the situations under study.

The focus group interview that was taken in the research carries all these characters. As a group moderator, I introduced the topic for discussion and facilitate the interchange. I tried to create an atmosphere for the expression of personal and conflicting viewpoint on the topics in focus.

After completion of this whole process, the same set of questions, which were prepared by the group, were sent through emails to other respondents as questionnaire. Questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was basically the main data collection method used in this research and it was sent through email. Kumar (2014) defines questionnaire as a written list of questions, the answers to which are recorded by respondents. Therefore, in the process, respondents read the questions, understand what is expected and then write down the answers (Kumar 2014.) There are few reasons why I chose this method for data collection. Chava Nachmias and David Nachmias explain that Mail

Questionnaire provide access to wide geographic contact at minimal cost. As my interviewees were from different parts of Finland, it was difficult to reach all of them at common time and traveling would be more expensive including more investment of time. Another important benefit of this method is reduction of biasing error. The writers explain that respondents are not influenced by interviewer characteristics or techniques as the interviewees do it alone. But there were also some challenges encountered during this process. The writers describe some disadvantage of mail questionnaire in the following ways.

- 1) Questionnaires require simple, easily understood questions and instructions.
- 2) Questionnaires do not offer researchers the opportunity to probe for additional information or to clarify answers.
- 3) Researches cannot control who fills out the questionnaire.
- 4) Response rates are low.

I sent online questionnaire to six participants due to the easy accessibility of Internet. Eight different open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Open-ended questions were used for seeking opinions, attitudes and perceptions. In a questionnaire, open-ended questions provide respondents with the opportunity to express themselves freely, to give variety of information where respondents are not obliged to select specific answers from the list. (Kumar 2014.) Though the questionnaire was sent to 6 participants during the process of this data collection method, I came across some of the challenges mentioned above. The disadvantages of mail questionnaire, which has been listed above, were experienced during the process of email questionnaires. The response rate was pretty low. Only three of them who received the questionnaire replied and remaining provided no responses. Due to busy schedules of the respondents, responding date was postponed couple of times; hence, I had to continue my thesis with only three

replies when no other responses were received. Respondents took a long time to complete the questionnaire though I was notifying them once in a while. The first reply of the questionnaire I received was exactly after one month in 24th March 2015. Other replies took some more weeks and some took another month. I tried providing clear instructions so that I could get quality data with the questionnaires that Nachmias's describe to be one of the disadvantages. In addition, there was no opportunity to ask further questions or give explanations about the questions in this process.

A face-to-face interview was made using the same questionnaire, which I used for email questionnaire. The interview was more semi-structured to have in-depth discussion. The one-to-one interview is a social interaction. In this interaction, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee has a supreme importance to make it a success. Therefore it is necessary to build a trust between both parties. This interview is commonly conducted face to face. An important aspect of this interview is that interviewer should be an active listener. Active listening is communicated through both verbal and non-verbal medium; good eye contact, good posture and appropriate facial expressions. One of the benefits of this kind of interview is that it gives opportunity to researcher to interpret non-verbal cues through observation of body language, facial expression and eye contact. It permits researcher to explore hidden meanings and understandings. One of the challenges of this kind of interview is that it may be more expensive than mail questionnaire (Academia 2015.) The face-to-face interview was carried on a peaceful cafe in Helsinki centre to make the process more convenient and the place was easily accessible by both parties. The peaceful café was chosen to have a concentration and an active listening. It also eased the interviewee to give responses. While conducting this interview for this research, travel costs and cost in the cafe made it more economical as some soft drink was offered to the respondent. It was audio recorded and the total length of interview was 17 minutes and 41 seconds.

The data collected from focus group interview and face-to-face interview were recorded and then transcribed. It is also an important part of a data collection method that avoids loss of information. It further eases to analyze the data.

5.2 Research Ethics

In a research process, a researcher should be aware of ethical considerations. During data collection process when consent of respondents is required, Kumar (2014) says that research participants should be aware about the reasons of taking the data, how the data be used and the purpose of the data. He argues that those participants should be made aware about how they are expected to participate in the process. He highlights the importance of maintaining confidentiality of respondents. Identity of each participant of the research should remain anonymous (Kumar 2014.)

Hence, during this research process ethical considerations were taken into account. To begin the research, permission from Diak was crucial. Therefore, research permission was taken from Diak. Consents were taken during data collection method in focus group and face-to-face interview. In addition, permission was taken from participants who answered the questionnaire prepared for the research.

Anonymity is another important aspect of research ethics. Hence, in this research, identity of individual respondents has been considered by keeping their names anonymous. For instance, statements made by the participants that have been used in findings of this research do not carry any names. They are anonymous.

5.3 Data Analysis Method

Data that are related to concepts, opinions, values and behaviours of people in social context are qualitative data. They are not easily reduced to numbers.

Audio, video recordings, transcripts of individual interviews and focus groups, field notes from observation etc. contain qualitative data (Nigatu 2009.) As a type of qualitative data, unstructured text was used. Observation through self-experience, Interview, focus group discussion, online questionnaire were the methods used to get this qualitative data. There are different kinds of methods in order to analysis the data in qualitative research. In this research I have used content analysis as a method.

"Qualitative content analysis is a method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame" (Schreier 2012 cited in Järvinen, Le Baron, Lehto 2013, 41.)

In content analysis, a researcher analyses the collected data and tries to identify common themes and contents, which help to answer the research question/s. It is reductionist, which means that it reduces the collected data into common categories within the target group though there is possibility that the information gathered do not belong to the entire group. In this method of analysis, key themes and common characteristics are separated from the data (Schreier 2012 cited in Järvinen, Le Baron, and Lehto 2013.) Here, in this research I have analyzed individual's experiences and classified them into general and wider perspectives, which is called inductive analysis, approach. In this approach, a researcher begins by collecting data that is relevant to the topic of interest and when enough data have been collected, a bird's eye view is done to analyse the data. At this stage, a researcher looks for patterns in the data in order to develop a theory. Patterns here mean the ideas that give similar meaning. For instance, if two respondents share similar experiences, they have similar patterns. Hence, this approach involves beginning with a set of empirical observations, searching patterns in those observations, and then theorizing about those patterns (Blackstone 2012.)

Qualitative analysis is appropriate to analyse the data collected by researcher himself/herself, for instance interviews. In addition, it is suitable to analyse rich

data that demands interpretation. The researcher gives meanings to the gathered information focusing on certain aspects of data that makes it convenient to process large quantities of data. For instance, in order to describe what interviewees have stated after conducting an interview, qualitative content analysis is used. It is typical to concentrate on selected aspects of data (Schreier 2012 cited in Järvinen, Le Baron, and Lehto 2013.) As my research demanded interpretation of rich data, which I took from interviews and questionnaire, I used this method. The qualitative content analysis has eight steps, which always follows the same order.

- i) "Deciding on a research question
- ii) Selecting material
- iii) Building a coding frame
- iv) Dividing the material into units of coding
- v) Trying out the coding frame
- vi) Evaluating and modifying the coding frame
- vii) Main analysis
- viii) Interpreting and presenting the findings" (Schreier 2012 cited in Järvinen, Le Baron, Lehto 2013, 43.)

These eight steps were followed in my research process. As there are two different research questions in this research, I built coding frames separately for both the questions to represent the concepts of those questions. According to Boyatzis (1998) and Rustemeyer (1992), a researcher has to be flexible in building these coding frames and modify it according to the need of the material. This makes data valid and reliable (cited in Järvinen, Le Baron, and Lehto 2013.) I was flexible to modify the coding frames when needed.

According to interview questions, the collected data was divided into units. For instance, answers of one interview question were kept into one group and so groups of data were formed. After completing this categorization, major analysis was done.

With three answered questionnaires and using transcribed data from face to face interview and focus group interview, I started gathering the data together grouping them according to the interview questions as I have mentioned above. It is important to read the data number of times to get to understand them better. So, after reading the responses couple of times, I made coding frames to reflect those answers. Here, I was concentrated on patterns of the data on how they reflect those frames. The data representing same patterns were kept in one frame. Similarly, other frames were constructed. These coding frames represent almost all experiences of the respondents. Five different coding frames were made for the first research questions and four for second research question. The participants were more interested to give responses for the first research question. But for the second research question that is about community development approaches, less information was collected. This may be the reason that there are not enough studies about community development approaches in Finnish degree programme in Social Services of Diak. This is why less coding frames were built for second research question. These coding frames were made in such a way that they reflect most of the responses.

When this research project is completed all the data from interviews and questionnaire are destroyed. Audio recordings and transcribed interviews will also be deleted from computer. It ensures confidentiality of the participants.

6 RESULTS

In this research there are two research questions. Hence, results have been reflected in two different levels according to those questions. I have also tried to connect some of the theories discussed above in chapter 4 with some findings of this research.

6.1 International Exchange: Life Changing Opportunity

The data collected for this research reflects that international exchange can be a life changing opportunity for those who participate in such exchange programmes. For the development of the exchange students from personal level to professional level, to sharpen skills, to create a platform in order to involve social work students in having interaction with various factors and aspects of society, international exchange is an opportunity. Therefore, this opportunity teaches them life skills to change their perception, to change their lives as Galinsky argues in chapter 4.1.6. During the exchange period, students have been able to gain the capacity to think critically and take challenges. It has given perspectives to those students about various social, cultural issues as Galinsky describes. Hence, these skills bring changes in one's thinking to change their lives. According to the responses, results have been discussed here below. I have categorized them under the frames that were constructed during data analysis method.

6.1.1 Opens mind

International exchange proved to be a medium of opening mind to informants. These exchanges give situation where a person has to encounter diversities willingly or unwillingly. This exchange opportunity was fruitful to open the mind of exchange participants in regard to confrontation to differences. The participants of the international exchange who are respondents of this research are from various backgrounds like Europe, Asia and Africa. To go and work in

African countries for many of them was a different experience where they had interaction with diverse people. This opportunity provided them more confidence to have a comfortable interaction with different people. They believe that they have become more open to people from different background after the exchange. A student has a similar experience as she has stated,

"I am more open to people who are different than me."

Foreign land, foreign culture and surviving in those settings are usually a topic of discussion before international exchange. Some participants may also carry fear with them to confront a different culture and it may sometimes worry them about their stay in the setting. They may not have enough confidence. Moreover, when the stay is for a longer period of time, the participants may have many questions in their mind on how to survive in those settings.

"Before the exchange I was afraid of the upcoming and how I'm going to survive abroad in foreign culture."

But after participating in an international exchange, they are more confident and tolerant to diversities. They are able to build capacity to interact with those diversities and they get more positive to have similar experiences in future. In addition, they are even motivated to make a career abroad or live their life in any such settings. After the exchange, a student was impressed by her experience abroad and made the following response.

"I might go back to work and to live there."

The above statements also resemble with the arguments made by Sarah Han 2014, which I have described above in chapter 4.1.3. She argues that exchange programmes have that capacity to change our beliefs and perspectives that we would have previously taken for granted. A student before the exchange may have different views, opinions, beliefs and perspectives about the place where he/she is suppose to do his/her placement but the statements made by the

respondents proves that this exchange has the capacity to change their perceptions.

6.1.2 Strengthens courage and self-confidence

Encountering diversities is not easy which interviewees agreed. To go beyond comfort zone and experience the situation, courage is essential which develops self-confidence. And that courage and confidence are useful skills one need in his/her professional career. To add this, in the different fields of social work, it is important to have those skills to be able to confront the challenges one face during his/her working career in a diverse environment. Hence, after the exchange a student is able to gain more courage to face challenges, which is supported by the following statement of a respondent.

"I've more courage and I can more easily face the challenges in my work."

As respondents have agreed that facing diversity is a challenge but they also acknowledged that when one faces it, it develops better self-assurance at both personal and professional level. And in addition, if it is one's first experience of encountering those diversities, he/she gains a trust and belief in himself/herself after the exchange. Attaining this self-trust and self-belief is one of the achievements exchange offered to participants.

"It gave me confidence because I survived in such a different environment compared to Finland and it was my first time I was travelling like that."

While crossing those comfort zones and taking oneself to a foreign zone can create a situation that one is not able to understand the language, culture, social life and other lifestyles of community. But when a person pushes himself/herself in such setting he/she has no other option than to cope to get an understanding. For instance, when interns from Finland went to Swaziland

where people speak Swazi language in the community, they had to adapt in the situation. This developed the capacity in them to adapt in overseas that are unfamiliar to them.

I experienced situations where I was not able to understand the language and I still needed to cope.

The skills to cope and adapt in such foreign settings are significant for social work students. In social work profession, one has to deal with different kinds of problems when working with people sharing similar culture or a multicultural or international environment. In such cases, it is demanding to work without these skills.

6.1.3 Opportunity to see the world

International exchange brings opportunities to see the world. Going abroad is not always an easy decision to make for students due to various reasons. Lack of money and time, confidence etc. are some influential factors. In addition, when it is about travelling to global south, there are more factors to be considered. For example, it may be expensive to travel and moreover, one may have to take some vaccinations depending on the destination country. Despite all these factors, it may be dreams of students to go abroad as stated by one the respondents of this research.

"I've always dreamed about going to a foreign country and wondered how it would be to work abroad."

Curiosities of a foreign land are common which was also seen in responses of the research. Students not only have opportunity to see that particular country where they go for their exchange but also have chance to travel around. For example many of those students who did their placement in Swaziland also travelled to Mozambique and South Africa. And these travels could be an

additional opportunity to experience more new and different world; this is what one respondent said.

'During my exchange I saw only small part of the world outside of Finland but was able to see something totally new and different.'

Countries carry their own unique characters in regard to culture, social way of life, geography and so on. Hence, this exchange can be a platform to see newness, differences and different parts of the world.

6.1.4 Experience life from a different view

People have their own perspectives of life. And those perspectives are constructed on the basis of the way they grow and they are grown. These perspectives are influenced by one's social, cultural, religious upbringing. Encounter to diversities may create those platforms that make one think different. It helps giving perspectives that is what one of the respondent said.

"It gives you perspectives"

International exchange could be that platform which has an important role to change the way one think, to give various perspectives or to think from different angles. It has that capacity that can develop one's potential to keep himself/herself in the shoes of others. A respondent gave similar answer in regard to immigrants, as she said that she was a foreigner during her placement in the host country.

"...In Finland like if you end up working here, then its good to know how it is in the shoes of immigrants and like the ones who are new.."

One of the Finnish students of Diak who took part in her international exchange in Taiwan made a similar comment when she returned back from her placement. She says that she can now understand how difficulties international

students face during their practice placement in Finnish institutions without Finnish language. Hence, participating in international exchange help developing empathy. It helps to realize and give deeper understanding.

6.1.5 Positive affects on personal and professional level

This placement has added both personal and professional competencies in the life of those students who participated in the international exchange. At personal level, the exchange created feelings of appreciation towards life. A respondent said that after the exchange, one starts appreciating even smaller achievements in life and work.

"You are able to appreciate more small things in your personal life and in job."

This statement carries a deeper meaning. If a student has spent all of his/her life in a place, a community with similar culture, he/she may have seen one perspective of life. For instance if a Finnish student goes to a foreign country and sees lives and culture in those settings, he/she may do comparison between both settings. If he/she sees himself/herself in a better condition at both personal and working life, then one may start appreciating. For example, in a particular community of Swaziland where I did my placement, there was scarcity of food and in addition, some community members did not have a proper accommodation or clothes. So, in my personal understanding when the same Finnish student sees the situation and make a comparison, he/she may be more satisfied for what he/she in his/her life or at his/her workplace.

When one is involved in some activities, one has the opportunity not only to use his/her strengths but also it helps discovering weaknesses to improve. In order to deal with those weaknesses, it is important to work in different situations and to work in those situations it is not always necessary to be competent. This is what some of the students realized during the placement.

I realized that you don't need to be perfect and most important thing is to try."

During learning process, the exchange students also gained skills to work as a future sosionomi. The statement below by a respondent stands an example where it has been argued that it is important to understand meanings of social problems in various settings.

"Problems that we have in Finland can feel really small compared to the problems that people have in Swaziland: poverty, AIDS etc. But as a socionorm I'll have to remember that the problems that we have in Finland are true to Finnish people."

It is crucial to understand being a professional sosionomi that, definition of poverty, exclusion or so other social phenomenon carry different meanings in different settings. The above statement from respondent made it clear that the students who participated in the exchange programme have gained an understanding of problems in diverse settings. It is a crucial skill one should have to be a professional worker in social work field.

Finland is known for its fine welfare system in the world. A student in a Finnish environment may have queries in regard to this system from other countries. It is also beneficial to have knowledge of this welfare system from somewhere else. One of the respondents has made a similar statement during the research.

"I also wanted to do my placement in some country that has really different social welfare system compared to Finland."

During the interview and questionnaire process, the participants did not speak more about their weaknesses directly. Either they did not notice weakness in them, or they did not have any such or they did not like to share for this research, but as they have spoken enough about their strengths they have gained during the placement, it can be argued that those strengths gained were

their weakness before the exchange. For example some of the respondents stated that they have gained more courage after the placement. This means that they were not courage enough before to encounter the diversities, which was one of their weaknesses. One of the common weaknesses that interviewees experienced during their placement was homesickness.

"My weakness is that I get home sick easily."

During 3 months of long placement in the global south, many of them experienced homesickness. When one travels out of comfort zone, away from family and friend's circle, one may get homesick as he/she spends time away from home country for months. In addition, if one is travelling away for the first time, there is more possibility of getting this sickness. As some of them were travelling for the first time, their responses reflected similar weakness.

6.2 Community Development Approaches

From the interviews that were taken during this research and from my own experiences and observation, various approaches of community development were practiced during the exchange, which has been discussed below. Some principles of community development that have been mentioned above in chapter 4.3 are important bases for community development approaches. Here, I have related some of those principles with my own experiences and from responses made by the exchange participants. The students participated in various places of Africa for the internship from Diak. In such situation, it is and was important to understand the target area, the indigenous context and the ways to deal with their problems. To deal with those problems, local knowledge is vital and it is important to understand the local context. It is essential to know how activities are done, what are concepts, beliefs, values and perception of people. Without local knowledge wrong decisions may be taken sometimes. For instance, during food distribution programme in a community in Swaziland where I was an intern, food distribution was organized without knowledge of

local context. Bigger quantity of food was distributed that could last longer only in refrigerators. But in the locality, people could hardly afford it. Also it is important to understand power relationship between community workers and community people. From experiences from exchange students, target group of people in a community were more empowered to decide the solutions for themselves. This was done in such a way that community workers were more working as a facilitator to empower community members by themselves. Also during the exchange working collectively helped bringing a positive social change. For example, when agricultural skills during exchange period in Swaziland were given to youths with help of trainers, community workers and other community members. It created motivations among people to grow food for them where there was scarcity of food. Hence, these principles were and are essential to use various kinds of community work methods in a diverse environment. Here, some of the approaches that were used during the exchange programmes of the participants have been discussed.

6.2.1 Empowerment Through Agriculture and Animal husbandry

Empowerment is one of the key tools for the development of a community. During the exchange, participants had opportunity to work with community members in their own community and with them. So, most of the participants experienced that, empowerment through agriculture or animal husbandry was one of the major approaches used for the development of the community they were working for. One of the participants made a response how community members were empowered during her exchange in Kenya.

“They already had the chickens but to make it into business and the participants, they never thought of it like they could actually do it professionally....so that was like empowerment.”

From this statement, though animal husbandry was common there, people did not have good skills on how to make business out of those animals. Teaching them good skills to make money out of the business is how they were

empowered. In addition, during my placement in Swaziland, community members were trained on how to have an effective involvement in agriculture. Though the land was fertile, people did not have better skills to grow vegetables. They did not have good knowledge on how to make the use of their backyard to grow vegetables. So, the organization where I was doing my placement gave them the training to involve themselves in agriculture with the cooperation from the government. The trainer was governmental official, seeds were distributed free of cost by the organization and practical training was given in the field in the presence of many community members to empower them. This is the empowerment model that has been discussed in the literature review above. Empowerment through partnership model by Reddy has been used to empower the community members where there was involvement of the government, which led to sustainability of the project and presence of disadvantaged group.

6.2.2 Empowerment through Women Participation

In the developing nations, participation of women in various developmental activities is not as stronger as in the developed nation. Empowering women with their active participation in the community work was another major approaches used. With reference from my own placement report from Swaziland, women participation was one of the major approaches used for empowerment. Women were one of the most vulnerable groups in the community where I was working. Hence, with motives to empower the women, they were made involved by the organization to identify their problem by themselves. Few women were chosen with the help of local project officer of the organization. They were trained by the organization to go to their community and find out the problems with the help of other community members. When problem was identified, solutions were discussed through meetings and seminar and action was taken. The organization was mainly working as a mediator and managing the resources but in the real field they were the same women who were working to empower themselves. For instance, in a community of Swaziland, people who were victims of Human Immuno Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Defficiency

Syndrom (AIDS) had medicines against the disease. But with the help of those women, it was found that some people do not consume the medicines due to the lack of food at their homes. Hence, to tackle the problem, agricultural skills like growing tomatoes, cauliflowers were offered to the community members. In the whole process, women of the community had an active participation.

6.2.3 Use of Local Knowledge

Local knowledge is an important asset for any community work to be a success. In order to gain that local knowledge, it is important to understand local context as discussed in chapter 4.2. It is necessary to have common sense wisdom in day-to-day life of the local context where one is working. How activities are done in the local area and what are common beliefs and values of the community are important aspects to consider. It was a challenge for the students to have that understanding of local knowledge. Nash, Munford and O'Donoghue (2005) as mentioned in chapter 4.2 argues that without local knowledge, there is possibility in making wrong decision. In chapter 6.2, I have mentioned how a wrong decision was taken during exchange period in a community of Swaziland due to lack of local context. Hence, this was another important approach used for community development work during the exchange period. As per my experience from Swaziland, there were frequent visits to communities making interactions with people several times in order to collect the local knowledge. In addition, opportunities to Diak's exchange students in Swaziland were given to visit the organizations they were working for. The organizations working with orphanage, HIV and AIDS, community schools were those settings where students visited and this led them to understand local life. These kinds of activities widened students' and my understanding of local knowledge to work in the projects we were involved. In order to use local knowledge, participation of local people is also crucial. As discussed in chapter 6.2.2, participation of local people was considered.

6.2.4 Approaches at Community Schools

Approaches to teach students are different in different part of the world. The ways of making students disciplined vary. In Finland, physical punishment to students is not permitted whereas in many other nations it may be common. A respondent stated similar case.

“In my exchange in orphanage for example physical discipline was more common and approved than in Finland.”

Schools, children’s home or any other such institutions experience wider influence by government policies in Finland and intervention is done when necessary while it may be a different case in some other countries.

“Orphanages were more independent and not supported by government financially or giving common acting procedures. “

From the above response from one of the participant, approaches to work may be different in another setting compared to practices in Finland. To add this, one of the respondents experienced that even community schools intervene to improve the economic status of a family. When a family is poor, children under that family may not have proper access to education in countries where government does not have a proper support to children education. During the international exchange, a participant experienced similar case.

“.....they not only give education to children but also think about the family who are the financial support of the children...by building a small micro finance....”

According to the experience of the respondent, the community schools also help families having poor economic background to improve their economic standard for instance by building a small micro finance which is not practiced in Finland. This is the point where a student sees diversity in approaches

and is able to have comparison between two different settings. Hence, this is how international exchange can be that aperture through which a student can experience various approaches of community development.

Finland is a welfare state. The social welfare provides rights to all its citizens to receive social benefits according to general allocated criteria (Suonio n.d.) It has many strengths regarding listening to children and young people and taking their views seriously, in particular in formal representational structure (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2013.) These policies are not limited to books or laws but are common in practices that we can see in everyday life unlike what was seen during the exchange period according to informants. Youth empowerment through sports or hip-hop dance or singing may be common in Finland unlike global south. Physical punishment for children at school is illegal in Finland whereas it may be common practices in schools in the south. All the informants including myself experienced diverse community development approaches in both settings, in Finland and African countries. It is important to understand here is experiencing various approaches of social work in a rich social welfare state like Finland and a poor least developing nation vary. Living/studying at a particular place may not give that diverse perspectives or our level of understanding may be at surface level. For instance, as discussed above, physical punishment in Finland is not permitted, not seen, not in everyday life. The ways of making children disciplined are different. But in the global south (Swaziland) it is common to see those physical punishments in everyday life and there are types of those punishments children suffer (according to interviewee), which may be a shocking experience. From all the responses from interviewees, it is clear that methods of community work practices for instance, empowerment is similar in both the settings but the ways of dealing those methods (approaches) vary. It is due to various reasons like social, economic, geographical, political scenario of target area. To have that understanding or to get an opportunity to practice these methods of community work using various approaches is what this exchange offers to students.

7 ENCOUNTERS, SELF DISCOVERIES AND DEVELOPMENTS

In my understanding, during international exchange, we come across various encounters, which have meanings that germinate perspectives in our thinking. These perspectives may share common understanding we have had or they may be quite diverse which we may have never thought about. We confront our strengths, realize our weaknesses and it motivates us directly or indirectly to develop ourselves.

Reconstruction of Meaning

In the process of moving from one culture to another social environment, there may be a process of reconstruction of meaning. These meanings vary from discovering self-strengths and weaknesses to understandings to new social reality. This new social reality is termed as the 'third space', a third and new culture that are formed by the meeting and mingling of two different cultures. The concept of third space is an interesting one as it is a means of explaining the process at work when individuals from a particular context move to a new culture and linguistic context and, through interaction with others, a third culture or space develops (Montgomery 2010.)

Though the third space is a complex concept, it is useful as it moves away from the idea of culture having immovable features. Third space is a construct that describes personal and cultural development of a person. In addition, it explains that culture is changeable which is frequently renegotiated and meanings of culture are created through interactions (Finkbeiner 2005 cited in Montgomery 2010.) When a student immersing in a culture moves to another culture, there he/she gets an opportunity to explore new social realities, language and culture. With interactions with the society and mingling with it, he/she is able to learn a new culture. At this point the two cultures get mixed to create a third space as mentioned above. During the process, meanings learned from one culture may change and at this point those meanings reconstruct to give new definitions.

Identity Issue

When a student comes to a new educational context, he/she is continually forced to restate and renegotiate their identity. Although he/she is encouraged to identify and define themselves according to his/her nationalities, there is a strong sense in which his/her experience of moving to a new socio-cultural environment empowers them to achieve a development in their perspectives of themselves and others. Iredale (1994) reports the power of the experience of living abroad and its value in constructing the future of an intercultural person. He states:

Even to move to another culture is to be touched by major influences, as those of us who have lived in other countries and cultures know. The enormous changes of perception that new cultural and educational experiences can work are an important influence in the formation of people's working lives as well as on their personal development. (Iredale 1994:7)

These perceptions change in the form of 'reflexivity'. It is a process through which learners consider themselves and their own culture in the beginning and then see the cultural and social identities of others in a new and diverse way (Montgomery 2010.)

An Opportunity to Travel

International exchange offers an opportunity to travel. Traveling is discovering, discovering new places, new people, to think about questions like Why are they like this? Why aren't we? Traveling is endless possibilities, its endless opportunities (Willox, 2013). It's a medium to open our eyes, learn who we are, to develop skills we didn't know we had, to learn new language, to create meaningful relationships. It gives us adventure, perspectives, education, knowledge and so on (AirTreks 2014).

An American author and humanist, Mark Twain (1969) writes "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness". Travelling opens mind, increase

tolerance by encountering various differences. It widens the perspectives of thinking; it helps to discover personal weaknesses and strengths. All these meanings carry the definition of wellbeing. Dalai Lama, a Buddhist monk says, “once a year, go some place you’ve never been before”. What does this mean? It aims to self-realization to support wellbeing of an individual, which creates direct or indirect impressions on a family and a community.

8 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

International exchange plays a major role in expanding skills of social work students, which are essential for them in their social work profession. The exchange enlarges capacity to think wider and strengthens courage and confidence to confront diversity. Moreover, it gives perspectives. It is also an opportunity to travel to a foreign land and see other part of the world. In addition, international exchange creates an environment where a student can experience various kinds of community work in diverse settings and using different approaches to solve problems in those settings. This opportunity provides students local knowledge and ways of dealing social issues in various circumstances. All these aspects of the exchange have principal role to add personal and professional skills in the lives of exchange students as a student or in their future career. Hence, as per the research questions, this research has concluded that a student is able to gain various kinds of strengths after the exchange. In addition, it helped them to realize some of their weaknesses and learn various community development approaches during their placement.

During the phase of data collection methods, interviewees also made some suggestions in regard to international placement from Diak. I have listed some of the comments made by Diak students who participated in international exchange. As per the suggestions, it is necessary to have comparative studies of community work in various countries. For example, when a student learns about orphanage in Finnish context, it is necessary to give a picture of orphanages in the context of some other countries. It is important to have this study for social work students who participate in international placement in various such settings. An exchange participant made following response.

"I think that DIAK's goals are unrealistic. They are for Finnish orphanage, not for African context."

When students reach to their destination country for their international exchange, they face various challenges from their first day. The challenges include not only coping in a new environment but also in supervision by supervisors of the students in the particular country. A student faced similar challenge during her exchange as she said,

"When I arrived they told me what to do. That's it - otherwise I got zero supervision."

It is significant to get an effective and regular supervision not only to help students in coping in a new place but also to meet goals and objectives of the exchange. It is necessary to have understanding of the goals of the course module in which students do their international placement. It may happen that supervisors in those countries may not have understandings of those objectives or they may not have received clear guidelines from the school from where students participate in exchanges. A student stated,

"They got all the written material about our training period but my experience was that they didn't either know or care about our activities there."

Hence, it is necessary to give clear guidelines from the school to supervisors in host countries and coordination between both parties time to time during the exchange period is vital. It is also important for the students to collect enough information about their destination country and organizations where they will work for, before they make the exchange. During the whole exchange period, it is crucial to have necessary communication between students, school and the organization.

Critical Perspectives

Most of the research suggests positive outcomes for international exchange. Policymakers and educators have higher expectations on this issue. One

common view about studying abroad is that when students travel to a different place from their home country and get immersed into it, they learn many interesting and useful factors on their own. Many students get excited and say that their life has been changed and that being abroad has been 'the best experience' they have ever had. Some studies questions that studying abroad does not necessarily help students to learn skills and develop perspectives as traditionally believed. (Garden et al. 2008, Trooboff, Vande Berg & Rayman 2008; Van Hoof 1999, cited in Berg, Paige & Lou 2012.) Here, studying abroad has been metaphorically portrayed as a swimming pool. Educational institutions send their students to learn in the host culture, to learn academically, linguistically or interculturally by immersing them in the new culture through practices as direct enrolment courses, language pledge or home stays. The metaphor goes on to suggest that many students fail to adapt in this 'sink-or-swim' environment; it portrays to avoid further unpleasant and threatening exposure to the new and unfamiliar settings (Lou & Bosley 2009; Vande Berg, 2007a 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2009, cited in Berg, Paige & Lou 2012.) Sometimes the students who return from such programmes themselves report that they did not learn or accomplish what they had thought or had been told that they would, offering a counterpoint to reports by other students about being transformed through study abroad (Zemach-Birsin 2008 cited in Berg, Paige & Lou 2012.) Liza Donnelly's lampooning of education abroad in New Yorker cartoon says that it is an open secret for many students as they usually treat their time abroad not as a learning experience but something different. The cartoon represents a college student telling her roommate, 'For my junior year abroad, I'm going to learn how to party in a foreign country' (2010, P.64, cited in Berg, Paige & Lou 2012.) During interview process for this research, one of the responses stated was,

"It was not a relaxing time at the beach."

It adds to make a criticism of international exchange that there may be students who do not take the exchange as an opportunity to learn both academic and life

skills but to enjoy the time which may not have a better impact for their future working life.

In order to meet the educational challenges of the twenty-first century, study abroad or international exchange must move from a focus on 'perpetually increased participation of purposefully designed educational impact'. This can be done by widely designing abroad study program with clear objectives. There should not be assumption that all abroad study experiences improve intercultural competencies. It is necessary to develop an appropriate study module of learning, reconceptualize abroad study as a part of an integrated educational experience (Twombly, Salisbury & Tumanut 2012.)

9 CONCLUSION

Social work profession deals with different aspects of societies and these societies carry their own features. They have their own unique characters in regard to culture, religion, social behaviour and geographical settings. Thus, societies are diversified and to understand these diversities, it is an important aspect of social work profession. As a social work student, it is necessary to have that knowledge about differences in societies. In order to enhance one's ability to receive the knowledge, it is not enough to have understanding of different social theories but also necessary to encounter those diversities. For the students of social work, international exchange offers the platform to gain the opportunity in order to have that encounter. This is what this research has concluded. During the exchange program, a student not only learns about diversities but also after participating in the exchange he/she is able to polish his/her skills both at personal level and professional level to work as a professional in the future. This research further concludes that a student learns various different community development approaches compared to the practices they have in their country.

To write about limitations of this research, I think that in my first research question, instead of using weaknesses of students, it would have been better to use developmental needs of the students. The reason to have this change is that when weaknesses were asked to respondents, not many of them gave responses to that question. Changing this word could bring more responses.

Implications of this thesis for future is that the results of research can be useful for Diak to get opinions of students who took part in international placement in regard to general issues of international exchange programme. Suggestions made by the students would be useful in order to design course module of the study. This research can be also a source of information for placement supervisors of the countries where Diak sends its students. This research

further is useful for those students who will take part in international exchange from the school in order to use it as a source of information.

9.1 Professional Development

During my academic career in Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, I have written various placement reports and assignments. This was my first academic research where I gain a deeper understanding of research process. The process from creating an idea paper to finalizing this thesis tested my patience that made me more determined and focused. It has increased my ability and confidence in planning and conducting further researches I may do in my future.

In the process of this research, I was learning by doing. Though I learned about the process of writing thesis at school, my understanding of research has widened to give a clearer picture of thesis in overall when completing this research. From the beginning of idea paper to completing the thesis, there are various processes. I believe that I have gained deeper understanding of each process, which will be beneficial for my future researches. During the research process, it increased my skills of solving problems in specific time frame. Though there were some challenges faced in regard to time management during data collection process, I was able to meet deadlines of this research.

Adaptation to changing situation was one of the important skills gained. In the beginning, I was in the process of writing thesis in a different topic. But due to some technical problems, I had to start a new thesis process from the beginning. This situation guided me to remain concentrated and keep the motivation to adapt in an uncomfortable scenario.

During the process, I learned to be more flexible either to make interviews or to adapt in changes. Some challenges of losing motivations or lacking focus at times were encountered but these challenges were overcome by being more

organized and meeting thesis supervisor to receive clearer instructions and directions.

Working individual need a commitment and a good concentration on research. During the various research processes like data collection, analysis, describing methodology needed a good focus. This improved my skills to be more firmed and responsible. In addition, reading various articles, books and literatures related to my research increased skills to get specific materials for my thesis.

The overall thesis process was a remarkable learning experience. I take this learning experience as a valuable asset in my further academic career. In addition, it will enrich personal and professional skills in my working career in future. Hence, I believe that writing this thesis has been a success.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire/Interview questions

- 1) Why did you choose to go for international placement?
- 2) What is the importance of international exchange as a future socionom or social worker?
- 3) How international exchange influences a student in his/her personal and professional life?
- 4) How were your learning experiences? How do you see yourself after the exchange?
- 5) What kind of personal strengths and weakness did you discover during your placement?
- 6) What kinds of community development approaches were used during the exchange? What differences did you discover on those approaches compared to practices here in Finland? (Approaches here means the way of dealing with a situation or problem)
- 7) How do you suggest international exchange to other students of Diak? Why?
- 8) Do you have any other view or ideas to share?