

Wendy Wagemans from Belgium shares her experiences as a volunteer in Bangladesh

Hello,

I had the chance to come to Mymensingh for one year to work as a volunteer for an organization called 'L'Arche'. We work with people with learning disabilities.

Slowly I learned to know a little bit about Bangladesh. Mostly I learned how little I know! But even though there are a lot of things that I don't understand, I got to appreciate very much this 'particular' context in which I had arrived. I started to love the people, their interests, their way of looking at life...

One of my tasks was to give formations to the assistants, in order to help them develop the programs in which they work. When I look back on it, I realize that it is me who has been formed much more than the other way around.

What is so 'particular' about Bangladesh? I will share with you some of my ideas, but don't take them as such. Try to discover for yourself if you find any truth in them ...

- What's important in life for people in Bangladesh is the *relational level*, which is different to countries where 'work' is the key to give meaning to one's life. The first question people will ask you in a Western country will be 'What do you do?'. In Bangladesh people will ask you 'How many brothers and sisters do you have?'
- The education system of Bangladesh is based on *reproduction* in contrast to countries where reflecting and creative thinking are valorized.
- '*No right to make mistakes*' is very present in the mentality of people in Bangladesh. This is related with the absence of a social security system. In order to survive, it is better not to take any risks.
- There exist a different notion of *time* and what it means to use one's time 'meaningful' or 'useful'. There seems to be no such thing as 'my time'. All time is given. This is very different in Western countries where 'I should not waste my time' is what makes many people very busy.
- People in Bangladesh seem to accept the way things are. It is difficult to talk about *difficulties* in a direct way. That makes it hard to start a process of change, growth, learning new things. Hard, but not impossible!

Related to this specific context, working in Bangladesh has been a challenging but interesting experience. I had to learn little by little how to adapt my formations and especially my expectations. These are the 'golden rules' I have discovered. They are very much related to my personal experiences and my personality. But maybe they can inspire you or help you to find out for yourself your 'golden rules'.

1. Listen and be creative

Don't talk too much. Give the chance to the people you work with to share about their own life and their experiences and listen carefully. Use a creative approach (role play, games, pictures, drama, drawing, music, ...). I found that it worked much better than asking direct questions.

2. Welcome the unexpected

Often things turn out completely different than expected, but others things are given at the same time. Make sure not to pass by without noticing them. If you have a specific 'task', a good preparation is important, but being able to let go of your own plans is even more important.

3. Don't give up

If you ask questions, often people will tell you that everything is ok as it is, or they will repeat the answer of their neighbor. It can also happen that they contradict themselves. Accept these answers, but don't give up. Often in a second time or indirectly the same people will tell you about their dreams, their difficulties, what can be improved. I have noticed that it is possible to start a process of growth, but this takes time. It is much easier to add new ideas or practices, if it doesn't mean that the old things have to be changed.

4. Be ready to change yourself

Keep a good balance between giving and receiving. Even if you are the one who gives the formation, you are at the same time the one who is being formed. If you expect others to receive new ideas and to change, there is no better way than to show yourself this openness.

5. Take it easy

Don't try to do too many things in a short time. Respect the rhythm of the group and each participant.

6. Don't expect any 'result'

Tell yourself that you are there to sow some grains. Maybe one day they will bear fruit, maybe not.

7. Have fun!