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Volunteers

inspiration in action

At first sight: Community photography for development in action

By Linda Germanis

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Bangkok, Thailand: As a UNV volunteer Intern at UNESCO Bangkok I saw that my colleagues were perhaps missing the grassroots experience in the community they were working in. They were missing an emotional reminder of the values that they were rationally developing.

That's why I decided to try to develop a volunteer project that could involve members of my host UN organization.

One of UNESCO's goals is to create an understanding of an individuals' values and those of the society in which they live through education. The idea was to develop a project aiming to promote these values through informal education in a poor Bangkok community.

To guarantee the sustainability of the initiative, other volunteers from local organizations already involved in formal UNESCO activities were involved. They were from the local branch of an international NGO and a related Thai foundation (the International Movement ATD Fourth World Thailand and the Friends of ATD Foundation).

Then, thanks to a donation of cameras by Thai Samsung Electronics Co., it was possible to undertake informal education using the community photography methodology.

Through a participatory approach combining the experience in the education field of the volunteers from UNESCO, the facilities donated by Samsung, and the knowledge of the culture and people of the Saphan Phut Community of the volunteers from ATD, the 'At first sight' community photography for development project started.

The aim of the project is to work on the community identity concept targeting the youth of Saphan Phut but trying to apply a whole community approach. It works through initiatives such as collective photography sessions and symposium community lunches to share commentaries and pictures taken during the previous sessions. The whole community approach is supported



Bom, an 8-year-old boy, was given an opportunity to express himself and challenge his curiosity by using a professional camera for the first time in his life. (UNV/ATD Foundation)



Sirisak Chaiyasuk, an At First Sight volunteer from UNESCO, shares his camera and photography experience with the children of Saphan Phut Community. (UNV/ATD Foundation)



Linda Germanis: "It takes a whole village to raise a child," she notes, "and an international understanding to open a window onto the importance of the diversities that populate communities' life and culture."



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and justified by the conviction that “it takes a whole village to raise a child”.

The formal output of the project will be a photo booklet containing pictures and commentaries taken and given by the youth of Saphan Phut about their identity, values and challenges. A mid-term goal is represented by the opportunity given to the young photographers to participate as a team in different photo contests on social and development issues at a national, regional and international level.

“In the beginning,” said Ratchakorn Kulsawet, a Thai volunteer from the Friends of ATD Foundation, “we planned to start with a small group of teenagers, to train them in basic photography so that they could capture objects or scenes that represented their idea about the identity of themselves or their community – as well as their point of view for development to share with Thai citizens and international community in Bangkok.”

“As it turned out,” he continues, “at the first training session at the community centre, some children who heard about the activity came to observe and requested the opportunity to learn taking photos as well.”

The other aspect of the project is the promotion of education for international understanding. The education for international understanding goal is pursued through giving members of the Saphan Phut community opportunities to get in touch with similar community photography for development projects worldwide through an on-line social network (atfirstsight.ning.com)

In fact, the children in the grassroots community had seen equipment such as computers and digital cameras through the media and also in the hands of others. However, they hardly had any chance to use them themselves.

Through simple activities and small steps on the path of an individual and international understanding, all the partners of this project, from the kids of Saphan Phut to all the national and international volunteers involved, are impacting their own community and other communities beyond.