



## IISE ON THE ROAD

Since our last edition, our participants have completed their eight-week internships. They spread across India; from Shillong to Kanyakumari, from large cities like Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Bangalore to rural areas in Tamil Nadu, to work in various NGOs and corporates. They applied their acquired skills in different areas such as projects for underprivileged children, tribal communities, women empowerment, and rehabilitation centers.

Not only the profile of the internships, but also the

experiences varied. Some were rewarding, others challenging. But one thing was common: Through good and bad, all participants gained confidence, assertiveness, and inspiration for their own projects. They returned to campus with renewed energy and an increased level of motivation.

One of our participants who organised a blood donation campaign as part of her internship was thrilled with the experience. Her initial apprehensions and concerns proved to be

totally unnecessary: The “National Blood Donation Day” in Trivandrum turned out to be a complete success.

With this new confidence, participants are now free from fear and ready to unfold their wings to fulfill their dreams.

*Nora Hartenstein*

*IISE Lead Catalyst*

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## ***SHOWING INITIATIVE***

*Isabel Torres*

*(Catalyst from Spain)*

### **Act Three**

Three is the number of projects launched by our first generation of IISE participants, in the context of the third act of our journey: "Getting real." They presented their proposals to the general public and media on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> of July, at the UST Global facility in Technopark, Trivandrum. After calling attention to the needs of the visually impaired, our participants announced their plans to bring positive change.

Their mission is to empower blind and partially sighted persons to lead independent and confident lives: a most needed undertaking, particularly in India where low self-esteem has been identified as a major challenge of the visually impaired community. Each project team tackles the problem from a different angle: 1. education; 2. communication; and 3. technology.

1. Are blind and partially sighted children learning the necessary skills to become successful members of society? The presented field study reveals that these children are lacking in all basic skills. "A girl in fourth grade could not read or write Braille," comments Yoshimi Horiuchi, our blind participant from Japan. The problem does not only lie in inadequate teaching methods, but also in the deep-rooted belief that a blind person cannot achieve much. Visually impaired children are often openly denigrated by teachers and parents, which deeply hinders their self-esteem. "These children would not even dare to ask a question," explains Yoshimi.

The IISE participants are projecting a preparatory school for visually impaired children, here in Trivandrum. In this school, children will learn Braille, sciences, mobility and living skills in a fun way. They will develop their confidence and creativity through sports, theatre, music and plastic arts. The team, who is already in touch with an architect, is raring to design a cosy and sensory stimulating environment for these children.

2. Information is power. Together we are stronger. These are not mere clichéd phrases, but indisputable truths. At IISE, the "blindsite team" (spelled s-i-t-e and not to be mistaken with the documentary "blindsight") has clearly understood this. Because the Internet is today's most powerful tool of communication and networking, they strive to create an accessible website that will foster a global community and deliver comprehensive information to the visually impaired, in the areas of education, health, technology and finances.



*Isabel Torres*

Karin Broske, from Norway, shares her experience as a blind Internet user: "In order to see what is on the screen, I need the help of a screen reader. The problem I face is that many websites are not fully

accessible: they display information which cannot be read by this software.” Therefore, a priority for their project is to ensure full accessibility of the website through any screen reading and magnification software.

Accessibility is not only a technical issue. Robert Sabwami, a visually impaired ICT trainer from Kenya, explains that computer illiteracy and Internet unavailability are yet other two big challenges, especially in developing countries. “Take India for example” says Robert, “40% of the population is computer literate, but when it comes to visually impaired persons, the figure goes down to 0,01% only.” Through their website the team plans to promote ICT courses, as well as to lobby for the creation of free Internet points equipped with adaptive technology.

3. Talking of technology, the third presentation had everyone sitting on the edge of their chairs. Through a role-play, the team gave a powerful demonstration of the everyday challenges visually impaired persons face and how assistive technology can help overcome them. Creativity is endless: a smart cane that signals overhead obstacles, a machine that can recognize money, a device that identifies the right bus, etc.

The team wants to open a centre in Trivandrum that will revolutionize the world of adaptive technology: the International Centre for REsearch of Adaptive Technology (I-CREATE). It will be a “think and action tank,” where engineers and visually impaired persons from all over the world will come together to brainstorm. Their mission is to improve existing products, to innovate, and to make adaptive devices affordable to any

blind person worldwide. In alliance with developers, manufacturers and users, I-CREATE will test the prototypes before production and market release.

The event ended with a standing ovation from the audience. “I really enjoyed the presentation. It was definitely an eye-opening experience,” comments Mr. Arun Narayanan, UST Global's Chief Operating Officer.

UST Global is one of IISE's most valued partners. “IISE is an organization enabling social change through the education and empowerment of social entrepreneurs around the globe. This cause is in complete alignment with UST Global's mission of 'Transforming Lives'. We are excited to be working with IISE to develop leaders who will lead the change towards a better society” explains Mr. Krishna Prasad, Global Head-Delivery.

Sabriye Tenberken and Paul Kronenberg, co-founders of Braille Without Borders and the IISE: “We concentrate on the abilities of people, not on their disability. Therefore we are confident that these projects will become reality and will change the lives of many visually impaired persons worldwide.”

The seed has been planted and the foundation laid for future generations of IISE participants to take the relay and make dreams real.

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*Robert Sabwami*  
*(Participant from Kenya)*

## **The IISE Blindsite Project**

Come to think of it! Why is the majority of the visually impaired people (VIP), especially in developing countries, dismissed as incapable and incompetent? Most of them are associated with poverty and above all, they are looked upon as average performers.

These, among other reasons, are what prompted the blindsite project team to paint their dream of empowering the visually impaired people with information and all services they could possibly need through the medium of a website. For seven weeks, the team intensively worked on a needs study to set the stage ready for the project.

The team comprised of eight members: Martin, Robert, Lucy, Mohamed, Karin, Eric, Jayne and Pynhoi, and two catalysts, Isabel and Nora. Together, they pooled their ideas and skills to initiate the process for an online project that will improve the lives of many visually impaired people. The team endeavoured to foster a global online community and an international hub of information for the visually impaired.

To set the ball rolling, the team had to do a needs study in order to understand the magnitude of the predicament that surrounded the VIP community in terms of knowledge acquisition. This would help them understand the best way to tackle the issues at hand.

The team prepared two questionnaires targeted at both individuals and organizations dealing with the VIPs. This study was based on field work and online surveys.

At the same time, the group had to get concrete knowledge of existing websites and what they offer. The survey revealed that most sites only focus on one dimension in what they offer, hence the need for having a multi-dimensional approach where everything could be found in a one stop site.

In their research of what information or services to offer, the team had to pay attention to the interests of the said group. They later settled for four key areas which included: finance, education, technology and health related issues.

In terms of finance, the project aims to expose credit facilities to encourage the VIPs into social and business entrepreneurship. Since most of them are believed to be unemployed and may not have the possibility of accessing bank loans, the micro-credit concept would be a stepping stone as a link to investments. The objective is to enhance confidence, motivation and entrepreneurial skills among the VIPs.

In the education section, information about integrated schools, learning materials for the blind, vocational training centres and scholarships for the visually impaired people will be provided.

The technology section will offer cutting edge news on the latest software and assistive devices.

As to health, The project aims to provide information on treatment of eye diseases, prevention of blindness, optical devices, etc. Discussion forums of health related topics will also be hosted.

More often than not, limitations in terms of accessibility of websites hamper the research and Internet browsing of

information for the VIPs. In other words, insufficiency of information characterizes their surfing. Therefore, the team had to ensure that their website met all the requirements when it came to the accessibility of its web pages to provide optimum results to its target group. This of course should be the backbone of any website that endeavours to serve the VIPs.



*Robert Sabwami*

Among other challenges, the team had to give critical thought to other issues such as language barrier, computer illiteracy among the VIPs, Internet inaccessibility in most developing countries and, last but not least, budget. The good news is that all the mentioned challenges were assessed and action plans were detailed to overcome them.

To spice up their project, the team will slot in the features of mentorship programs, chat rooms, contests, discussion forums, and blogs. This will provide a stage of interaction for both users of the site and service providers. On the same platform, users may contribute by posting articles and other pertinent materials that are deemed necessary for the target group's consumption.

Overall, the long awaited all inclusive website is in the pipeline. Besides getting information and services, beneficiaries and the wider users of the site will be exposed to a range of more informative websites which will be linked in this initiative.

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*Kyila*  
*(Participant from Tibet)*  
**Preparatory School**

Act Three of the IISE's five step package was hands-on. The participants were given the mission to start up the next three BWB projects.

Three teams were assigned and each was given a different scope.

The three projects were:

1. Research on the needs of a preparatory school for blind and partially sighted children;
2. Research on the need of a center for innovative technology mainly aimed at visually impaired people in developing countries;
3. Research on the needs of a web portal for the blind that contains a database, an information pool and a micro-finance program designed for people with visual impairment.

The participants were allowed to pick a team according to their interests. My choice was the preparatory school because it is somewhat related to my own vision of starting a kindergarten for the blind children in Tibet. There were five of us working on the preparatory school, plus two catalysts. Our first meeting was geared to discuss the responsibilities to

be allotted to each of us.

Our need study was undertaken in Trivandrum city (Kerala) and in the Kanyakumari District (Tamil Nadu), the two states in South India. We started by brainstorming all the questions we would like answered from different target groups. We then visited a few integrated schools and organizations such as the Kerala federation for the blind (KFB). Our main challenge was the language barrier, even though we had an interpreter with us.

After a two week study, it was very clear that there was a need for a preparatory school for the visually impaired children in Kerala. During our interviews with visually impaired students, sighted teachers and students, resource teachers and parents, we found out that the visually impaired students are facing quite a lot of challenges. Some of these are:

- Some of the visually impaired students do not have enough preparation in maths, reading, writing, and braille;
- The visually impaired students cannot read or write as fast as the sighted students and some of the teachers dictate too fast for them to catch up.

These are only two of many such unremedied lapses in the general preparatory school system.

Visiting the schools and the organizations was very interesting. The team really enjoyed traveling around to interview students, teachers, and others. Nonetheless, our task was made quite difficult by the language barrier.

It was sometimes necessary to have

private space for the interviews to be held. As it is understandable, some of the students were unwilling to answer certain questions in the presence of their teachers.



*Kyila*

After this thorough needs study, we wrote a project proposal and a financial budget for the creation of a preparatory school where VIP students will learn all the skills they require to integrate successfully in mainstream schools.

The participants of IISE will hand over their act three proposals to the next batch, so that they may move on with the implementation of these projects.

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*Khom Sharma*  
(Participant from Nepal)

## **Devise Wants To Develop Devices**

Thanks to the to rapid development of science and technology, the world now seems reduced to the size of a modest village. Anything is possible now, even that which we could not begin to fathom a couple of years ago.

For instance, today there are many

assistive technologies available to better the life of the visually impaired. Unfortunately, most such devices are very expensive. So ostentatious in fact, that virtually nobody from developing countries can afford them. A very incongruent fact when we come to think that the majority of blind and visually impaired people live in developing countries, and are smitten by serious problems of poverty and unemployment.

So we, a group of seven participants from the International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (IISE), have merged our strengths to create the DEVISE group. DEVISE stands for “DEvelopment of Visually Impaired Systems”.

Recently, we discussed and came up with the Concept of Icreate. ICREATE simply means “International Research Center for Assistive Technology.” This will be the first center of its kind in the world. There, scientist, developers, designers, manufacturers and consumers will come together and think, design, develop and test accessible and affordable devices for the blind and visually impaired.

The question may be raised: how will we produce affordable technology?

Firstly, the project would not be profit oriented. Secondly, we want to use spare parts and locally available raw materials. We want basic assistive technology to be available at either no cost or low cost.

In the third act of IISE course we were assigned to think up one relevant and possible project for Braille Without Borders to implement in India. Our group decided to work on this issue.

We conducted research, interviews with

stakeholders and visited some manufacturers. Ultimately, we came up with the following ideal: ICREATE will be located in the northern part of Trivandrum. The center will invite international inventors, factory owners, and producers of aids for the disabled, programmers and beneficiaries needing a certain device. All these interest groups will come together to create innovative technology that is both affordable for blind and partially sighted people in developing countries and of high quality.

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## ***GAINING EXPERIENCE***

*Pynhoi Tang*  
(Participant from India)

### **Preparation For Act Four**

When I imagined my internship, I always thought about what kind of NGO I would be working in, what the place and the people would be like, how I would catch the train to Ahmedabad and how I would know when to get off the train.

When the time came to be prepared by our catalysts for the projects we would be working on during our two-month internship, everything was in full swing and everyone was excited about taking full responsibility as a future entrepreneur.

For our preparation classes, volunteers, catalysts, and participants met in the little IISE hut called Nabulai. Here we shared our ideas. We discussed what we expected to experience and how we could make the most of it. We discussed how beautiful the world is, how one can travel from place to place, and how great it is to know and see the different lifestyles and

cultures of each particular place. We discussed the ways in which our various host NGOs throughout India would run their institutions according to their local customs and regulations.



*Pynhoi Tang*

The main goal of the internships is to learn from the NGOs and, in turn, to share our skills and knowledge with them. For this reason, before joining our NGOs, the catalysts gave us a chance to communicate with our mentor at the NGO in order to discuss the particular project we would be working on. This helped us to brainstorm and prepare in advance for our projects.

Some of the things we prepared for relative to the various NGOs were: how to use an Indian toilet, how to eat with the right hand, and, one month before leaving for our internship, we practiced eating only vegetables, since we would be in a place where the diet was strictly vegetarian. We learned how to take care of our belongings on the train. We contacted our individual NGOs and asked practical questions: would we need a blanket, what kind of clothing should we bring, would we need to bring medicines, what was the culturally appropriate way to greet and address people when we

arrived? Should we show respect by calling people Madam or Sir or should we call them by their names? We learned how we should deal with different situations of life in this unfamiliar culture. We asked about the local weather, the accommodations, how we could best economize in such expensive places as Mumbai and Ahmedabad, and how we could move around the area freely and confidently as prospective entrepreneurs, despite the fact that we are blind.

I was looking forward to leaving the campus for our internship. The day I left was memorable for me. All my friends had gone already, so when the time came for me to leave, none of the remaining participants came out to say goodbye. I just expected that one or two would come from the dorm and say bye. Khom and James were with me because we were all leaving together. But in the last five minutes before we left, I saw many heads coming toward us to say goodbye. They were our catalysts, cook, guards, helper, and the great administrative staff; these are the people who always give us courage and confidence to move forward.

Thanks. A thousand thanks to you all. I wish it to be the same way for future IISE participants. My IISE preparation for my internship was very effective and I feel that I was well placed here. Everything is fine and I am happy.

On the way to Ahmedabad, we were three: James, Khom and myself. We traveled by sleeper, which is called value express. We had a good time on the train for two nights and one day. We ordered food from the train restaurant, like chicken, paratha, fried rice, and chicken biriyani. In our compartment we had one family with us. They were helpful and

friendly. We talked about our internships, what we would be doing at BPA, and were very eager to reach there quickly.

As the train rolled from Kerala to Amehdabad, people came in and out of the train all day and night. One night, a woman came to our compartment and clapped her hands in front of James and Khom, asking for money. Suddenly she stopped and looked at them because there was no response from them at all, although she clapped many times. These two guys were concentrating fully on their own conversation and didn't realize she wanted their attention. After a few minutes, she turned to some other men and asked them for money. They gave her some, and she went away.

Every few minutes, peddlers were coming in and calling out the names of all the goods they had for sale. I couldn't sleep well because of it. During the day I enjoyed the green nature and the pleasant breeze. But when the train stopped, I could smell different kinds of smells. Sometime it smelled like shit, which I don't like. I could see the plastic bags and bottles and trash lying on the ground beside the train. I wished that something would be done in the future about all this litter in my country.

Throughout our trip the land was planted with green trees. At 5.00 in the morning when the train was entering the Maharashtra/Goa States, I saw the landscape; the mountains were high and the trees were green and a gentle air was blowing, which immediately reminded me of my lovely home state, Shillong. When I arrived in Amehdabad, I felt that I was very far from the lovely campus of IISE and far from the IISE family. When I visited one of the villages in

Amehdabad it was, to me, like a zoo. You could see peacocks, monkeys, different cows, crows, parrots, donkeys, buffalos, and hear different kinds of bird sounds. The first time I went to the hill top with a friend from Germany, Alica, the monkeys were sitting under the trees and we were walking between them. It was fun for me that I could see them so near, and we regretted that we didn't carry our cameras with us. We went another time with a camera, but this time five dogs followed us and all the monkeys were scattering and running from one tree to the next because the dogs were chasing them. The monkeys carried their babies and ran up the trees. There were birds who cried and made noises every evening and morning outside my window.

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*Holiniaina Rakotoarisoa*  
(Participant from Madagascar)

### **My Internship In Samarthanam**

I was very, very impressed by Samarthanam. The organisation performs at an immense scale yet everything is extremely meticulously managed. Samarthanam believes in the concept of integrated education and development for the disabled students. The students attend regular schools (Samarthanam engages special teachers to augment the students' training through specialised methods); they are trained in regular vocations (which has produced a list of highly qualified alumni, including a visually-impaired Chartered Accountant); and are taught to be independent (mobility is greatly emphasised as a part of their training).



*Yoshimi and Holiniaina*

Another amazing aspect of Samarthanam's package is the use of technology for the benefit of the students. Apart from JAWS (computer reading software) and audio recordings of text books, volunteers who are out of town use Skype to talk to the students and get the jobs done. This may seem a trivial matter, but when you think of it, the fact that Samarthanam is mustering the latest technology to work around simple availability issues shows its commitment and smartness of approach. In addition, the organisation runs a mid-day meal programme that caters to 35,000 students in and around Bangalore! I was blown away by the figure - that is NOT an easy task to undertake.

I can go on and on about Samarthanam, but to truly appreciate its effect on the visually impaired you must experience it first hand. You must go there.

I will tell you that I learned a lot from this organisation. I gained a lot of experience and knowledge during my two month internship period. Working with this organisation honed the skills I acquired from the International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (IISE). Its practical aspect demonstrated a way for me to implement my own dream project. My interaction and exchange with the staff in Samarthanam made me understand the structure, the

leadership, the departments, the projects, the fund raising strategies and the different activities that feed in the NGO.

My friend and I were assigned to work in the Tech Vision, one of the departments in Samarthanam. That branch offers four different training courses: adaptive computer; English, spoken and written; personal enrichment and communication; and digital library. To reach out its target group throughout India, the Tech Vision department wants to provide online training opportunities by uploading these existing services. Our main task was to look for funding for that project. We decided to write a project proposal and look for potential donors to support our ideal. We went through different steps to achieve our objectives. We interviewed the Tech Vision staff and the director of Samarthanam and some students to understand the importance of this online project. Thenceforward, we wrote the project proposal and the financial plan. During this process, we interacted with the key people in Samarthanam so that they may offer suggestions and comments on our work.

We faced many challenges in accomplishing our task (such as the language barrier, misunderstandings, misconceptions, time constraints, etc). Nonetheless, we tried to overcome these obstacles by relying upon our communication skills and our past experiences. In the end, we triumphantly wrapped up the assignment. The solidarity and collaboration inherent within our team and our relationship with Samarthanam allowed everyone to plentifully reap the fruits of positive labour: "coming together is a beginning, keeping together is a progress, and working together is a success".

For you who read this article, remember

that your motivation, your commitment and your determination to improve social mindsets are your most powerful tools in effectuating your visions. If you can change the mechanisms of society, you can change the world.

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*Julius Braimah*

*(Participant from Ghana)*

## **The Plight Of Visually Impaired Persons In Kanyakumari**

My two months internship program at Cadre/India in Kanyakumari was a very useful exercise. It provided me with an opportunity to put into practice all the skills and knowledge I acquired at the IISE.

Among the significant aspects of my stay in Kanyakumari stands a number of meetings with Mr. Mohan Kumar, who shared with us his working experience on how to physically implement a project. He briefed us on the challenges and thrills of such a venture, and on the steps of its realization.

There, I came in contact with the beauty of Indian culture, especially through the medium of the celebration of the Onam festival with all the Cadre staff members. Nevertheless, the most important part of my internship was the opportunity it gave me to study and observe the living conditions of visually impaired persons in the region.

These two months instilled me with an intense sense of compassion for the plight of the visually impaired persons living in the Kanyakumari district. We interviewed 50 blind and partially sighted

people for our need study. During our field trip, I observed that most of the visually impaired persons in Kanyakumari district lacked self-confidence. A lot of them cannot make ends meet and are uneducated. They also lack the motivation to form an association to address their plight and to fight for a common goal.

During our field visit, I met a blind man, Kumar. He was shattering stones. He sells the pieces to support his family. Also, I met two blind persons aged 48 and 52. These two siblings have stayed in the house and done nothing for the past 40 years of their life. They have no education, no job, and are not married. Their only enjoyment in life is to wolf down their three meals a day. Furthermore, I came across another blind man who had multiple disabilities. He was blind, mentally challenged and epileptic. His situation was so sad that his mother was always crying, looking for a solution for her poor blind son. The man died one week after our visit.

On the third week of our field trip, I interviewed a woman who had given birth to two blind children aged 12 and 15. These children could not attend school because their father had divorced their mother and married another woman. His reasoning had been that he could not bear these two blind children his immediate family. Then I asked the mother: "is there any governmental institution in the Kanyakumari district which could force this man to be financially responsible for these two children"? She answered no.

We identified three visually impaired persons to be interviewed for the position of public relation officer for Cadre/India. Only one of them showed up for the

interview. After the interview, our director asked this man to acquire some basic English skills from us before he can start his job. The gentleman never showed up for the English classes.

A few of the visually impaired persons interviewed were engaged in small scale business: selling ice cream, cow milk, hot tea, and raising animals like sheep, goat and cows... There were others who owned small shops and sold some few provisions.

Most of the VIPs in India, especially in the Kanyakumari district, need social and financial empowerment. They need training to help them to know their rights and responsibilities. They need support so that they may apply for scholarship or sponsorship to continue their education or set up their own small-scale businesses.

They should form self-help group to identify common problems faced and address these issues in their communities. Visually impaired persons should take part in all public functions such as temple/church meetings, marriage ceremonies and cultural programs of their communities. Their participation will help the community become aware of them and understand them better.

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*Jessica Schroeder*  
(Participant from Germany)

### **Our Internship In CTRD**

Hey everyone,

It has been a week since my return to the IISE campus. The environment here is drastically different from the surrounding

of my internship's location. Johnson, a 30-year-old Liberian, and I went together to the wide tea plantations and beautiful mountains of Tamil Nadu. We had the chance to spend our two-month internship in the Centre for Tribal and Rural Development (CTRD-Trust) in the north of Tamil Nadu. CTRD is an organization that was founded in 1988 by a former tea-plantation labourer. The main focus of the organization is to improve the economical and living conditions of the tribal communities, the Sanskrit Adivasis.

The Adivasis are one of the most disadvantaged and underprivileged groups in India. In the range of societal perception they are the lowest cast. They are marginalized and discriminated against in all sections of social life. Children of Adivasis who dare to attend school are oppressed by teachers and classmates. Teachers don't integrate them into the lessons; they don't pay attention to their needs and questions, etc. Indian students bully them because of their different dresses and appearances. Adults hardly find any jobs other than occasional seasonal labour on tea and paddy plantations. Landowners exploit their working capacity and pay minimum salaries that are not sufficient to defray their basic living expenses.

Mr. Ranganathan, the founder of CTRD, witnessed the deplorable living conditions of the Adivasis and decided to support them in improving their quality of life. At first, it was quite difficult for him to reach out to his target group. The Adivasis were very suspicious of and reserved towards him because of the plurality of bad experiences they had faced. They thought that the founder of CTRD wanted to take advantage of their situation in order to use the donations he may receive for his own

purposes. It took quite a while until he was able to establish a good relation to the Adivasi population. He had long discussions, helped them when they had diseases, listened to their needs and sorrows. Due to these interventions he was able to improve his status and was recognized as a trustworthy man.



*Jessica Schroeder*

Today the CTRD-trust has a range of projects that covers all the essential needs of a human life. CTRD is very well known in the Nilgiri region and has a great and solid position among the other local NGOs. CTRD's mission is to give tribal and rural communities the right tools and knowledge to help themselves. The focus is on comprehensive and inclusive health, education and livelihood training to promote sustainable economic wellbeing, equality and basic human rights for all, regardless of gender, age and ability. Practically, CTRD implements its mission through offering vaccination-camps against polio, rabies, etc. and equipping the Adivasis with agricultural knowledge and tools in order to make them self-reliant and protect them from exploitation by landowners and companies. CTRD has also established self-help groups and introduced a micro-finance system to enable individuals to start their own businesses. They are preparing children

in evening-schools so that they are able to follow the lessons and to get higher marks. The list of projects is long and broad and it would take pages to describe them all.

The description of CTRD and its different projects was so exciting and tempting for me that I decided to undertake my internship there. Fortunately the executive director of CTRD was willing and sufficiently open-minded to welcome us. This forward thinking approach is not so common in India, where the attitude towards disabled persons is still rather negative. Many organizations do not see any benefit in employing or training a disabled person. They believe that disabilities represent an additional burden for them. That a disabled person can bring new and progressive ideas into an organization and can develop a new sense of humanity is for many NGOs, companies and industries difficult to imagine. To counter these negative perceptions, and to take advantage of the many benefits of employing a person with disabilities, Mr. Ranganathan was truly happy to receive us.

Since he works with the disadvantaged tribal and rural populations of the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu, Mr. Ranganathan encounters first hand the ways in which disabled people suffer. He realizes that many disabled people have no job, no school education, and receive insufficient care from their families; that often they are kept in houses like animals and that families are afraid to present themselves with their disabled children in public. They are scared of the embarrassing questions, the staring eyes, the rigid, frigid ignorance and the harsh insults of some members of the community. Parents often don't know how to deal with their disabled children.

Due to this lack of knowledge many disabled persons receive hardly any training in basic living skills. They are not able to wash themselves, eat independently, walk around and orientate themselves, socialize with community members, etc. Since the tribal programs are well established, the CTRD wants to extend his target group to the disabled persons of the Nilgiri region. CTRD wants to improve the living and working conditions of disabled people in the Nilgiris. They want to bring disabled people into mainstream society so that they can really participate, benefit from resources and be accepted as equal and valuable members of the community.

Johnson's and my task was to help CTRD in developing ambitious and sustainable projects to improve the living conditions of disabled people and create awareness and tolerance for their needs and rights.

We created a questionnaire targeting various areas of life: employment, school, participation in the community, daily activities and daily caring, access to assistive devices, etc. Our aim was to get a clearer understanding of the urgent needs of disabled people. With the help of the CTRD social workers we conducted two meetings with more than 120 disabled people and their family members. In these meetings we discussed the different topics of our questionnaire and raised awareness for the capability of disabled people and encouraged them to speak up and fight for their rights and needs. It was very obvious that many disabled people are not used to answer questions about themselves and that they are often quite hesitant to talk about their personal views. Often parents spoke for their disabled grown up children or disabled people and their families asked CTRD for money. But

of course we had also disabled participants who were really keen to speak and who brought every lack and every inequality to the table. We had great and enriching discussions, which helped us a lot to develop a helpful project to satisfy their urgent needs. Furthermore, the staff team conducted interviews with 200 disabled persons. With the help of the results from these interviews we were able to develop a clear and thorough project concept. It consists of basic skill training for all kinds of disabled people, of forming self-help groups among disabled people, and of starting a vocational skill training center. The center would serve as base from which to send the Nilgiri disabled into the job market with a fighting chance.

We did not only develop the concept. One of our very enjoyable tasks was to sensitize the staff of CTRD to the needs of visually impaired people. We offered white cane training. It was quite cute to see the staff members ambling blindfolded, clutching their canes. One of the male staff was really talented and walked fast and nimbly with the cane. We also conducted lessons in coordinating a self-help group and as a supporting aid we wrote a self-help group training curriculum for the first 20 lessons.

CTRD was like a big family for me. Right from the beginning I felt really welcome and received by open arms and minds. All the workers were very open towards new ideas and they always tried their best to involve us in their work. I was really impressed by how engaged all of them were to include us in their conversations. The language barrier was quite significant as many of the staff can only speak a little English. But despite that, they really strove to speak to us. It worked well.

When we visited the family of a blind and mentally retarded child, and we conducted an interview with them, even though the staff could only speak a little English we were able to ask questions and get very valuable answers. The staff always listened patiently, and in turn we simplified our terminology to some extent. Often the simple things are the clearer ones.

Mr. Ranganathan is a very kind-hearted and sincere man. He is really committed to his job and spends all of his day dedicated to the different projects. He is always full of energy and new visions and dreams. His attitude and charisma inspired me to put all my knowledge and creativity into my work to bring some benefit to CTRD. Although Mr. Ranganathan is very busy most of the time, he always had an open ear and mind for my questions, ideas and needs. He is a great leader and role model, a combination far less frequent than one may expect.

The beautiful surroundings made it hard for me to leave CTRD. Tea plantations, silver arc trees and pepper bushes surround CTRD. On the edges of the road different herbs and grasses grow. My favorite plant was the lemon-grass. Its blades smelled so fresh and exotic that I could never get enough of it. I had never touched tea bushes in my life. I love to drink tea. Now, I finally have touched the green and different shaped tea leaves. CTRD workers collect the leaves and make big piles to transport them to local tea factories. I liked to put my face in these piles, it feels smooth and it smells green. It reminds me of the forest.

The food in CTRD enriched my taste collection. Everything that the cook

prepares is very healthy as he uses so many different kinds of vegetables and spices. This was really an adventure for my taste buds.

The combination of all these things made me feel really homely and safe. The atmosphere was friendly and warm and the people were very motivating. I encountered many interesting and amazing people who really enriched my mind. I really miss CTRD a lot and I highly recommend it as an internship placement for the next IISE generation.

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*Yoshimi Horiuchi*  
(Participant from Japan)

### **The Adventure Of Two Blind Mice In Shillong, Meghalaya**

Kyila (my roommate from Tibet) and I did our internship in Shillong in the state of Meghalaya, which is located in the northeast of India. It is almost on the opposite side of the country from Kerala. We traveled by train for four days to get there! Of all the IISE participants, the two of us traveled the furthest to reach our destination. The train trip was sometimes quite boring, and sometimes a bit adventurous (there was a drunken man in our compartment). All in all, I felt privileged to witness another representative of the diverse cultures of this vast country.

In short, I felt as if I had come to a different country. The climate was very mild because of the high altitude, and we felt cold for the first time in six months. No wonder Shillong is nicknamed "Scotland of the East." The culture there was quite fascinating. The main population consists of three tribes: Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo. They have relatively fair skin and round

faces. In fact, their complexion and physiognomy remind me of my Japanese kindred. They speak their own languages, although they go through education mainly in English and Hindi. Food was not like that of Kerala at all. No spices like turmeric and cardamom. A lot of rice. Some vegetables, fish and meat. A lot of beans.

During the internship, we were hosted by an NGO called the Bethany Society. It is an organization that was established by a Spanish nun almost 30 years ago to support the most vulnerable members of the society, including people with disabilities, people below poverty line, etc. We stayed at their hostel, which is attached to an inclusive school, where blind and sighted students learn together. The hostel also housed children with different disabilities: blind, deaf, and physically or intellectually handicapped. It was amazing to see them living together under the same roof: a girl with intellectual disability taking the hand of a blind girl to show her where a glass of water is, blind and deaf children talking through sign language and finger alphabets hand in hand... cross-disability collaboration is often controversial, but through my two-month stay in Bethany Society, I have come to believe in its positive impact.

Within the organization, we had various tasks. Kyila was in charge of fund raising, and I mainly worked to improve the library in the inclusive school. Needless to say, the work in Bethany was quite different from our IISE assignments. At the IISE, we were taught how to write proposals and financial plans, strategies to face the media, etc. In Shillong we learned that we could put theory into practice, and that we had the power to achieve more than

bureaucratic paperwork. I learned how to be flexible. For example, I did not have a specific working partner in my library project. So in addition to asking teachers and staff, I went to ask the students themselves what they needed and how they wanted the library to be. Thanks to those students who shared their passion for storybooks, I did not lose my overall objective.

Kyila and I organized an event together, the "Cafe in the Dark", which turned out to be one of the most memorable days of our internship. " We made one of the rooms on campus completely dark, and served tea and snacks inside to sighted guests. The blind and partially sighted students worked from dawn till dusk, serving and playing live music. After each 20-minute session was over, the deaf children rushed in and cleaned up all the mess and carried fresh tea for the next session. The staff in the girls' and boys' hostel was constantly boiling water for hot milk tea. Kyila and I were there for the whole day without eating lunch, but I didn't feel tired at all! It was tremendously exciting and one of the most beautiful sights of strong teamwork I have ever seen. The guests were mostly very satisfied and inspired by this totally new experience, and filled out our guest book with such encouraging words as "I have never enjoyed the beauty of the dark so much before!"



*Kyila and Yoshimi*

The event's purpose was to raise fund for the Braille books in the library and to support funding for the blind college students in Meghalaya. We certainly made benefits. Nevertheless, I believe the most powerful impact of the event was to originate a shift in the perception of people with disabilities in Shillong. Another great part of this was that the children gained a lot of confidence through the experience. Normally, they are the ones who are to be taken care of. Most of them come from very poor families and have at least five siblings. Many of them do not own even a rupee. Everything is provided in the hostel: food, clothes, soap, etc. In the cafe, however, they were the ones to provide. They were serving people and guiding them step-by-step in the pressing darkness. Can you imagine how proud we were for all of them? After the cafe, all of us had a dance party in that room. We all danced together for hours: deaf and blind, girls and boys.

Actually, I could not contribute much in my library project. We still do not have the "Romeo and Juliet" that so many girls would love to read, nor do we have simple devices with which the students can listen to audio books. I have learned that library work takes enormous time, energy, and passion, much more than I had imagined before. But when I was dancing with deaf boys and shouting "Good, good!" with sign language, when I saw blind boys and girls working for hours to guide the guests like professional waiters and waitresses, and when I heard that many students were now carrying white canes to go to church, I could feel that they had gained much confidence as blind or deaf individuals. It felt good inside to know that we could leave at least something for them in exchange of the countless

moments that we received from them.

Khubulei Shibun baroh (thank you very much, everyone)!

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*Martin Niry*  
(Participant from Madagascar)

## **Branding**

I did my internship with my colleague Gompo from Tibet, in a company called RM ESI (RM Education Solution India) in Technopark, Trivandrum. That company provides educational software for schools, colleges and universities in the UK.

The title of our project was "*Proposing internal and external branding with the aim of attracting and retaining the best talent for the company*". The extent of what I knew about branding before my internship was limited to the names of Nike, Nokia and Samsung... During the internship I discovered branding goes much further than that.

There are two kinds of branding: internal and external. The first focuses on existing employees and what makes them eager to work for the company, and on how to motivate them to stay with the company and perform at their best. Based on our survey of employees at RM ESI, we found that workplace atmosphere, job security, career development, and attractive salaries were their most important motivating factors.

External branding involves attracting talent to work for the company. We suggested that broadcasting the strengths of the company through public events may be the best method to attract talent to the company.



*Martin Niry*

To maintain good atmosphere, RM ESI generates entertainment within the company. For instance, every Friday at 5:00 pm, the company hosts TGIF meetings (Thanks God It is Friday). They organize games and everyone has fun. As one employee said, working at RM ESI is to “have fun at work.”

During my internship at RM ESI, I interacted with many people and realized how important the employees are to the company. Without them, nothing happens. Apart from what I learned about branding, I also learned about the organization of the corporate structure. The knowledge I gained during my two months at RM ESI will be very useful for my future entrepreneurial projects. HR management is the most important factor in a successful organization.

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*Karin Broske*  
*(Participant from Norway)*

### **Cultural Diversity**

To learn about other cultures is very interesting. One may do so through

various sources: movies, books... Nevertheless, I think that the best way to learn about other cultures is to meet and talk with people. During my internship in Terumo Penpol Limited I was lucky to meet persons from many different cultural backgrounds. The experience was fun, fascinating, and it broadened my perspectives. Now, I want to share some of my own experiences with you.

### **Smoked salmon, Hytte and the Norwegian National anthem**

Terumo Penpol is an Indian and Japanese company. One day I was invited to meet its chairman. I was thrilled by the time I reached his office. Inside, my Japanese host gave me a warm welcome. One which almost immediately gave way to a lively conversation about our own countries. He already knew quite a lot about Norway.

He had even tasted one of my country's signature dishes: smoked salmon. Not many other than my country folk know what smoked salmon tastes like.

Suddenly, the chairman asked me: “do you have a Hytte?” Hytte is the Norwegian word for a cottage. I told him that my family had just bought a Hytte in the mountains. He proceeded to state: “I have heard that all Norwegians have Hytte in the mountains and that you go there in the weekends”. I told him that my parents go there every weekend and I explained how the Hytte looked like. We talked for two hours, until I had to leave. I started to get up from my chair when the Norwegian national anthem struck my auditory self. The chairman told me that he really liked the anthem and that he wanted to play it to me as a sign of friendship. I was deeply touched. Here I was in India talking to a person from

Japan and listening to the Norwegian national anthem. I think that whenever I hear that anthem in the future I will always remember that meeting and the welcoming attitude of the Japanese chairman of Terumo Penpol.

### **Indian hospitality**

During my internship I resided with an Indian family as a “paying guest”. From the first moment, when I stepped into my host’s house, I was struck with the sense of welcome that permeated the place. In my musings about my Indian future, I had anticipated a lot of problems and was apprehensive about my ability to manage. I was glad that things turned out alright.

Every evening after work all of us sat in the dining room, sipping tea and talking. We told each other about our day and asked questions about our respective countries. My new family taught me some Malayalam and we all got a good laugh when I tried to pronounce those few words I managed to commit to memory. Soon I did not consciously think about the fact that I was a Norwegian in an Indian nest. Many of our ideas and view points were quite similar. People have similar cores no matter their homeland.

### **Onam**

In Kerala, the locals celebrate Onam every year. Onam is a big festival during which people decorate their houses with flowers and eat festive food. People spend many days to prepare the flower decorations so that they are ready for the festival. When these fineries are complete, they deserve to be deemed professional artwork.

During Onam, people eat a special meal called “sadjā.” The meal consists of a lot

of small dishes all decorated nicely on a big banana leaf. I had a sadja with some friends. We sat on the floor on blankets and ate the food with our hands. The whole experience was wonderful. In my opinion, the food tasted better when I ate it with my hands than if I had eaten it with knife and fork. I think I will introduce family and friends back home to the idea of eating on the floor with our hands.

### **Learning by doing**

I could not have acquired these wonderful cultural experiences through reading a book or watching a movie. Some things can only be learned through their practice. I had a teacher once who told me that the best way of learning new things was to do them. I think that statement especially holds true when it comes to learning about different cultures.

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## ***FACES***

*Robert Sabwami*  
(Participant from Kenya)

### **Audience Awareness**

Come to think of it, standing on stage in front of an audience to give an impromptu speech on a topic that you have not prepared is not an easily digestible prospect. The common feelings for most of us are those of stage fright, anxiety, and nervousness about our overall composure.

Public speech and presentation is an integral aspect in making a good social entrepreneur. The International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs embraces this concept by ensuring that everyone

speaks out with courage and even boldness, and most importantly, delivers a well thought through presentation. Body language, stage awareness and voice projection are key elements to be considered whenever one stands up to speak.

It was a normal day when I was chosen to give a speech on the subject of love and relationships. This was a surprise to me for I had not prepared for the presentation. So without a doubt, I had to be spontaneous.

Little did I know the reason for that days exercise. The idea was to familiarize ourselves to different types of audience, ranging from active listeners to a bluntly disruptive audience. Without hesitating, I took the stage after a warm round of applause.

Just before starting my speech, I noticed some movements here and there from the audience. Some of them had not settled down even after I had given my introduction and the subject of my presentation. Anyway, I had to continue with my speech. To my amazement, one of our directors received a call, which she answered right in the midst of the presentation. I found that disturbing. I knew she would have been very angry for anyone else to have their phones turned on during class sessions. Nonetheless, she carried on with her obnoxious conversation. What got into my nerves the most was the dragging of chairs, not to mention the whispering noises from the audience at large. It was unbelievable how some people moved from their seats, walking around and chatting with each other.

By then, I was extremely confused at this

unusual unrest. I had to bring the audience back. I demanded: "OK! Are you with me?" They unanimously answered: "Yes!"

I trudged on with my speech and tried with all my might to project my voice effectively. It was really difficult for me to deliver my points. The more I talked, the more commotion came from the audience. I decided to go on, raising my voice to ensure that I was audible enough. I cared little about the disruptions for I knew that my time was running out and I had to make my point. I concentrated on the structure of my subject and moved forward with the few that were with me.

Finally, my time was up and I had to wrap up the presentation. Ironically, the whole of the audience appreciated my presentation as though they had been paying unfailing attention throughout. I really felt flattered for I knew that the majority of them had not actually listened to what I had talked about, and yet they clapped and cheered me off the stage.

It was time then to listen to more presentations from other participants who also had their fair share of frustrations. Sahr Yillia tried all he could to deliver his points but the flattering cheer and overwhelming jubilation confused him even more. The climax of the exercise came when Mohamed Salia met a very serious audience who refused to show amusement or any response to his presentation highlighting the funny moments of his life.

Overall, the exercise allowed us to fully appreciate the variety of audiences out there. Furthermore, it gave us insight on how to, as visually impaired people,

evaluate the number of listeners based on auditory perception.

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*James P. Johnson*  
(Participant from Liberia)

## **My Dream**

“My dream. Fantastic dream. Oh, time changes and runs fast. Oh! What a beautiful dream! When and where will I fulfill this dream? When age is passing by and everything seems impossible?” The discordant sound of guns yowled always its dreadful symphony. Hope was nowhere to be found. Then I asked myself. “Well! When and where will I discover my dreamland?” And suddenly, hope pounced onto me again and said, “You shall discover your dreamland. It's just a matter of time.” Like lightning, that fair and faithful moment struck my life. That morning of January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009, when family members and well-wishers escorted me to the path that led to my dreamland.

I got to the Robert International Airport early. “Where is your passport?” asked an immigration officer. “Here it is!” I exclaimed. My passport and other traveling documents were meticulously examined. Then came my time to depart. As we hurriedly moved towards the stairs of the plane, tears of joy rolled down my chin. “Could it really be true that I am now going to a place where I will discover my dreamland?” “Yes, time has a way of remodeling the world abruptly, unexpectedly, radically.” The stairs folded in, the door closed and the plane began to slowly taxi and taxi. Suddenly, it took off away to my dreamland, to India, “God's Country”. To the IISE.



*James P. Johnson*

The International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs, in Kerala, southern India: a place where all may interact and mingle freely, sharing love, respect, and learning about each others' cultures.

I am proud to have become a part of this unique family. A family that has empowered me with tools I had never dared to fathom using before. See, I'm now typing on a computer. In addition to these boons, the IISE is training me with skills that will allow me to set up my own project. One that will bring positive change in the lives of visually impaired people in Liberia, my country.

Visually impaired and sighted people from around the globe come to the IISE to discover and realize their dreams. It is a place of creative thinking and learning, environmentally and blind friendly. The cheerful sounds of nature loom gently. Oh! What a wonderful place to be! It has exposed me to the beauty of the rest of the world.

The academic bloc:

Is where I learn and hone my skills. The building contains several classrooms where thinkers converge to put the products of their creative thinking together. Chomolangma, Aconcagua, Mont blanc... The names of some rooms. And let us not forget the computer lab, the

sound studio and the library.

The kitchen and dining hall:

Our source of energy comes from the kitchen. A big dining hall where General Assembly meetings are held from Monday to Friday every week.

The administrative bloc:

Where the wonders of charitable bureaucracy are born and die.

The dormitory bloc:

This building shelters all 20 participants, future project directors. Two in every room, stacked neatly. Each one is entitled to a bed, a cupboard, a wall fan and a trash bucket. The rooms are all annexed by bathrooms with hot and cold water systems.

The laundry room is where participants and catalysts' clothes are washed.

From the main gate to the "Nabulai" hut and the great lake where we learned to swim, coconut trees are seen everywhere. Oh! what a beautiful and memorable place! A place that I will never, ever forget.

My internship:

Act Four was the time of internships. After a seven months intensive training at the institute, the participants were ready to move out and probe India.

We unfailingly anticipated this wonderful day. The atmosphere brimmed and bustled with purpose. All of us were busy buying needed items to take along. Emails insidiously overloaded laptops, from catalysts to participants. From participants to catalysts. And so it went... Everyone started to leave, two and two, in pairs. All headed to various destinations

of internship everywhere in India.

On the afternoon of August 3<sup>rd</sup>. I left campus with two other participants. We almost missed the train because, against all Indian odds, it arrived earlier than we had expected. Nevertheless, we made it and we took off to Gujarat Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, for our internship. For two months I worked at the Blind People's Association (BPA) in Gujarat. There I interacted, learned and shared my own skills with friendly and caring people.

What a great experience for me! At the end of the internship, I returned to the IISE to complete my eleven months of training so as to fulfill my dream that shall change the lives of blind people in Liberia.

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*Martin Nirry*

*(Participant from Madagascar)*

## **Serving People**

From my point of view, to serve means to help people - not only people with disabilities, but everyone who may be in need of help. Serving and helping others is a task which we should all undertake with love and passion. Acting for the greater good should not be perceived a duty or a chore.

I want to tell you that we, the 20 participants at the International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (IISE) in India, through each of our projects, would like to empower the visually impaired of the world. To fulfill this vision we need to always be committed to serve individuals and the wider society determination and care.

I am writing about serving people,

because I want to share my feelings based on my experience of being involved with blind people for ten years.

Sometimes it feels as if I actually forget myself and my needs because I am happy to be with blind people and enjoy their company. Before I got involved in this field, I did not have any knowledge of blindness or blind people. I do not have any blind family members and I did not live with blind people. When I enrolled for a course to be trained as a teacher of blind children, my friends and family told me “you need passion and humbleness if you want to work with blind people”.

At that time I was mostly looking for a job and a career. When I learned about the course I thought that it was promising. I would receive training for two years and then get a job immediately thereafter. In hindsight, I think it is then I realized that whatever I do in the future, I want to serve people.

With time, the desire to serve people grew. I am now happy if what I do makes someone happy. Here in India, I learned the famous phrase “You are happy - I am happy.” I used to scoff at that phrase until I understood what it meant: those who mouth these six words indicate that they want to help others, that such things fulfill them.

Now, I am at the International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (IISE) and partaking in a great course. In general, participants at IISE are blind or partially sighted. I, however, am fortunate to have been accepted as a participant despite my sight. Although I have no visual impairment I have the privilege to be with blind people, and share a room with my blind roommate. I have learned many

things from blind people. Being with them has taught me patience, and to enjoy simple pleasures.

What makes me very happy is to help people with visual impairments to be as independent as possible in their daily lives. Their independence is my passion, because when I or other sighted people are not available, my friends should be able to function independently. I realize that my dream is to help people to obtain the gift and skill of independence.

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## ***BEYOND IISE***

*Sabriye Tenberken  
(Catalyst from Germany)*

### **The Fortune of Becoming Redundant**

Ladies and Gentlemen! We are about to land in Lhasa Gongga airport. Please fasten your seatbelts and put your seat into the upright position.

After one year amongst coconut trees Paul and I arrived in our old barren home, at an altitude of 3,500 meters, where the air tastes as clean as water from a crystal clear mountain spring. But it is just so thin that you have the feeling of not getting enough of it.

As it happens, every time we arrive at this high altitude, slowly but steadily a slight pain creeps into our temples. It feels a bit like a red wine hangover. Nothing to worry about, since water and aspirin help immediately.

There is no one at the airport to welcome us home. A Norwegian tour group agrees

to squeeze us into their minibus. On the long drive towards Lhasa Paul describes the landscape. Some green meadows around the Kyichu River, blue, blue sky, a wide view and of course no palm trees. The perfectly paved streets are wide like autobahns but there is hardly any traffic. Lhasa seems a bit empty. Not many tourists despite the fact that it is the peak of the tourist season.

The Norwegians are accommodated in a hotel directly on the Barkhor, the major pilgrimage road that leads around the famous Jokhang temple. "Can we drive you somewhere?" the Tibetan driver asks in a friendly way. "Don't worry," we reply, "the school is just a couple of hundred meters away."

It somehow feels like coming home from a long long trip; in fact I haven't been to Tibet for more than a year. The smells of butter, incense, leather and urine, the sounds of temple bells, turning prayer wheels, cries of "Wu Kuai qian" and "Gormo Nga!" ("Only five yuan!" in Chinese and Tibetan) make me understand how much I have missed this beautiful place.

Paul and I slowly approach the school, walking with suitcases packed with goodies and equipment through the narrow winding roads. After crossing a big dangerous street-- they call it the Lhasa racing track-- we turn into a small alleyway and then we stand in front of the big red gate with two pillars plastered with the English and Tibetan Braille alphabet and a big iron yak bell with a string. "Home sweet home!" This is the place where we have lived and worked, cried and laughed for more than ten years.

The gate opens and we are surrounded by cheering children and smiling

colleagues. "Gen Paul la, Gen Sabriye la!" "Who is this and who is that?" I ask. Names are thrown at me, names I have never heard before. Most of the kids and some of the teachers are new. I don't know them, but they seem to know everything about us.

I am amazed by how beautifully and independently the school is running. Since Paul and I are busy with the IISE and fundraising activities, two former blind students of Braille without Borders, Yudon, 23 years old, and Nyima, 22 years old, are now mainly responsible for everything. This was the big goal we had aimed for from the very beginning of the project. One day, we said, the project will be managed only by local blind former students. Most of the other NGOs told us we should be realistic. The minute you are gone, they said, the project will fall apart. But the producer of the movie BLINDSIGHT, our friend Sybil who had visited the project last year, made the following remark: "In my opinion it runs even better without you!"

I think she couldn't have given us a greater compliment; besides, she didn't even exaggerate!

The two young social leaders Nyima and Yudon are doing a marvelous job. And what a job: With joy they are working from early morning to late evening on the following tasks:

- Further development of the curriculum for the preparatory school,
- Scheduling classes for seven teachers and four levels,
- Hiring and firing teachers and other staff members,
- Preparing the monthly bookkeeping for the Lhasa project,

- Registering new students,
- Organizing renovation activities on project buildings,
- Fighting with rude neighbors,
- Discussing serious problems with lawyers,
- Coordinating activities with the farm in Shigatse,
- Training workers from other NGOs in special skills for the blind,
- Showing tourists around,
- Giving speeches to governmental delegations and ambassadors who visit Tibet,
- Communicating with Chinese and international donors,
- Engaging in fundraising activities for the Lhasa project,
- Marketing farm products (carpets, cheese and bread) in local hotels and restaurants,
- Coordinating eye surgery camps together with international ophthalmologists,
- Having long meetings with governmental leaders about project related matters,
- Partly supervising the blind children, graduates of the BWB preparatory school, who are going to regular schools by talking to teachers and printing Braille books in English, Chinese and Tibetan,
- Doing interviews with local and national media,
- Coordinating a team of teachers, house parents and kitchen staff,
- And on top of it all, teaching English, Tibetan, Chinese and computer skills in the Lhasa preparatory school.

Paul and I are just watching from the sidelines and are blown away. Nyima, a young man from Ganze, a very remote

region in the east of the autonomous region of Tibet, never attended school before he came to Braille Without Borders. He only studied three years in the BWB project, where he learned to read, write, and speak English, Chinese and Lhasa Tibetan. In 2005 he received a scholarship to study in a language school in the UK in the hippie town of Totnes, and now he has applied for the IISE training in 2010: "I want to make sure that the project is running also when Paul and Sabriye are not in Tibet."

Yudon, a lively young blind woman from Metrogonka joined the BWB project in 1999. After three years of training, she was one of the first four blind students ever to enter a regular school in Tibet. Together with Gompo, a present IISE participant, and two girls, Nyima Chokpa and Sonam Bungzo, she enrolled in the third standard of a regular boarding school, in a class with 50 sighted students. At first the teachers wanted to refuse the four blind students, but we convinced them to give it a try six months and then we would see. To the surprise of the teachers, the blind students soon became best in class in all subjects. However, not all teachers were so happy about this development. The English teacher felt inferior and the headmaster requested from us computer equipment and sanitation work as a payoff for the "extra burden" to keep these blind (and a little too outspoken!) students.

After four years of schooling, Gompo and Yudon decided to give up. They were simply bored, scored 90 to 100 % in almost every subject, and when I asked them how would they see a perfect school, the answer that came was, "In a perfect school the teacher should know more than the students."

While Nyima is a real manager and networker (he knows almost everyone in town, and if Paul is looking for a rare device, Nyima finds it immediately), Yudon is more the leader of the training program and additionally she charms all the officials who were thought to be tough. Right now she is here at the vocational training farm with us, training the local teachers in mobility and Braille printing skills.

Paul, Yudon, and I arrived at the farm last Saturday. It took us four and a half hours to drive 230 kilometers. Compared to Kerala, it was actually a quite fast trip but it was also very strenuous for Paul, not so much because of heavy traffic but because of two dangerous valleys where the mountains rise 2,000 meters high on both sides. At the moment it is rainy season and there are plenty of landslides and lots of rocks that fall on the road. So driving is very spectacular but also rather dangerous. The biggest problem is to find a place to pee. There are no trees to hide behind -- just yellow-brown sand, turquoise rivers and, if it is not raining, bright blue skies.

The training farm in Shigatse is a project we started five years ago and is now run by a strong local Tibetan woman and by a former housefather of the preparatory school in Lhasa. Eventually we hope that it can be run partly by blind people as well. Back in 2004 we received the 40 acres property from a local NGO with a fifteen-year contract. Most of the property had never been cultivated before and most of the buildings were rundown army barracks.



*Mike and Sabriye*

Through the hard work of managers, trainers, and blind trainees, the place looks green and gorgeous. Flowers, trees and green meadows wherever you look! A little oasis on the barren high Tibetan plateau. It is slowly becoming a tourist attraction, and even governmental officials love to come by to picnic and party.

The farm functions as a vocational training center for blind and partially sighted adolescents and adults in the following areas:

- Organic kitchen gardening,
- Composting,
- Animal husbandry (we have horses, cows, pigs and chickens),
- Production of cheese, bread, carpets and other handicrafts.

Recently we have also set up a music center that is run by a former blind student of ours, a highly talented professional Dramnyiae player (a Dramnyiae is a Tibetan guitar). Besides trainees the farm also hosts a number of former blind children of ours who integrated themselves into the neighboring elementary school. Instead of staying in the boarding facilities of the elementary school they live at the farm and bring a lot of liveliness to the place. In

the evenings, singing, dancing and laughing are heard in the courtyard.

It is indeed a small paradise and the best thing is: Paul and I are mainly here to enjoy the outcome of a dream that we envisioned almost ten years ago. Back then everyone was telling us: You are crazy, you don't know anything about farming and your plans are totally unrealistic! How can you plan all that without having the special knowledge? And we always replied: "We just need a good team with capable local people who believe in our dream and then you will see!"

It took us five years and through the strong motivation and commitment of our colleagues, the helpful positive attitude of the governmental officials and several sponsors that were open and supportive, our dream came true.

Today the sun is shining, horses are trotting freely around the harvested fields, a boy plays the Dramnyiae in the courtyard and blind students are sitting in the shadows of trees on bright green lawns doing their homework. And then comes a soft knock on the office door. "Paleb, Paleb!" (bread, bread) Three broadly smiling ladies come in with bags of fresh warm good-smelling bread and crispy croissants. "Life is beautiful," Paul sighs, chewing joyfully on a homemade organic cheese sandwich.

Yes, we are lucky, lucky to be able to work with such committed colleagues and students, lucky to enjoy the beauty of Tibet and lucky to now live and work in Kerala where we are surrounded by so many motivated and talented people! But wait a minute ... is it just luck? I guess we allowed ourselves to dream, were stubborn enough not to listen to the discouraging comments of many people

who were telling us to stop dreaming, and we didn't give up, continuing to believe in the projects even in difficult times. And, maybe the most important thing, we always knew that we couldn't do this all alone and we will never forget who helped us to come this far!

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*Hussni Bugis*

*(Participant from Saudi Arabia)*

## **Different Celebrations In One Evening's Shot At The IISE**

Saturday July 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 was the last weekend of Act Three at the IISE. All IISE participant groups (the preparatory school group, the blindsite group and my own group, "DEVISE", or "Development of Visually Impaired Systems") had to present our project proposals at the premises of UST Global, in Technopark, Trivandrum. The event was to begin at 9:00 am.

The DEVISE team included Khom, from Nepal; Julius, from Ghana; Victor, James, and Johnson, from Liberia; Gompo Gyentsen, from Tibet; and lastly, myself, from Saudi Arabia. All together we presented our project, the "International Center for Research and Assistive Technology" (I-CREATE) for the blind. We prepared a short play, and my lines came last. This was because on that day 12 members of my family, including my mother, wife, son, daughter, aunt, two sisters, three nephews and two nieces were arriving at Trivandrum International Airport at 8:00 am. So I was at the airport that morning to welcome them and take them straight to the hotel I had already booked for their stay. Only then, after I had settle in my family, did I rush to

Technopark, bringing my wife along.

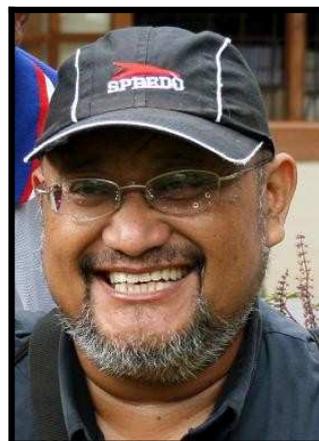
As soon as I entered the UST Global auditorium, I noticed my group had already started the presentation and that my part would begin within three minutes. I took my seat in the front row and prepared myself. I introduced my wife to almost everyone in the auditorium after the presentation.

A couple of days before my family took off to Trivandrum, I had asked them to prepare themselves to do a Saudi cultural show at the IISE. I announced it on Friday, July 24<sup>th</sup> during our GA (General Assembly). On Saturday afternoon, I brought my family to IISE campus to show them the place. We came back the next day around teatime. To my great surprise, my family had brought with them some Saudi cookies, dates, sweets and cakes from home. As soon as they arrived, my wife (Ferial) and my sister (Amal) entered the kitchen of the IISE and started making some Arabian coffee and hot almond milk drink for my IISE family.

That evening was one of many celebrations. We started by celebrating our final weekend of act three, after eight exhausting weeks of continuous project work. During dinner, Victor from Liberia announced the celebration of the Liberian Independence Day. He came up on the stage of the dining hall and called all the Liberians (James, Johnson and Sahr) to join him. They started their act with Liberian chants and ended with their National Anthem. Victor started by his most impressive chant from Liberia. As Paul (Co-founder of Braille Without Borders) describes him: "He was bending down backwards so far that I was afraid he would fall over."

A few minutes later, Jessica, the

participant from Germany came up to the front and delivered a very short speech about the occasion of Karin's birthday (a participant from Norway). We all sang for Karin the birthday song. After that, I joined Robert from Kenya, Julius and Eric from Ghana, Yoshi from Japan and Kyila from Tibet to deliver our traditional recital of African chants; we sang the Ghanaian chant and the famous "Malaika" song for our Karin. She stated: "I will never forget this birthday because I celebrated it jointly with so many occasions at the same time in the IISE."



*Hussni Bugis*

Shortly after we finished the songs, I announced the start of the Saudi culture show. We celebrated all these occasions: the end of Act Three, Liberia Independence Day, Karin's birthday, and a farewell party for Sabriye and Paul (Co-founders of Braille Without Borders), who were leaving for Germany early the next morning. Sabriye stated about the evening: "There was so much love and great vibration on this weekend!"

That night, my son Hommam, my three nephews and myself were wearing our Saudi traditional dress called "Thoub," and our headwear called "Omamah." My daughter Mountaha and my two nieces were wearing also the Saudi female long

fashion Arabian dress.

I asked my son to play a folklore song called "Mizmar," on the occasion of which dancers hold a stick in their hands while dancing to the rhythm of drumbeats. Since we didn't have any sticks, I ran to the audience and collected white canes from Jessica, Yoshi and Sabriye, who are totally blind. My son, nephews and myself started dancing on stage, moving the white sticks up, down and around with different movements. Everyone in the audience started clapping and moving. Suddenly some participants and catalysts started coming on stage moving and dancing with us to the Mizmar beats.

People were standing very close to the stage to capture this special moment of group bliss. Many were holding white canes and dancing. After the first song, all shouted "We want more! We want more! We want more!"

My son Hommam played the second song and again everybody moved from their chairs, dancing and clapping to the drumbeats. Even the kitchen staff were dancing and clapping to the Saudi folklore songs. When the third song was played, all dancers went crazy. They all moved in a circle on the stage while someone went into the center and danced. Sahr from Liberia told me that night: "It was a Saudi wonderful night without the Saudi flag." I had forgotten to bring it along when I came to India.

After the show, my family left IISE to go back to the Residency Tower Hotel in town, while I stayed at the campus. They said goodbye to all my friends, participants and catalysts. My family enjoyed everyone at the IISE very much. Next morning, all participants and

catalysts told me that they had a wonderful party and that they were amazed by the Saudi show and the Saudi food. Isabel (one of the catalysts) stated "I remember very fondly that night, the atmosphere was magical". She had a lot of fun with my family and enjoyed every single moment of the Saudi night show.

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