

Learning to understand each other

Swiss cultural elements

Visit to a Swiss company in Kampala. We agreed on 10am. Out of 6 students, 2 are there. The whole management is sitting quietly with a pad and a pen in front of them on the table, prepared for our conversation. As president, I get nervous. Where are the students for whom we organized this meeting? To be able to work in a Swiss company in Kampala after completing their studies - a 6 in the lottery? No rejection phone call comes. We don't know where they are. The CEO says calmly, when I ask him to excuse the delay: "You know, Africans need about a year with us until they have found our Swiss culture of punctuality and dossier competence and are sitting there at the table prepared for the topics a quarter of an hour before the start. At 11am all students arrive. We can begin. In the future, I will set the time of arrival at one hour before the effective start.

Meeting at eye level in a hierarchical culture

The sponsors, who are willing to pay a scholarship to enable destitute young Ugandans to pursue a professional career, are dealing with major cultural differences. We need to learn to understand each other, verbally and non-verbally. On the one hand, there are key functions, as the above example shows: punctuality and dossier competence, on the other hand, we have to understand each other in language. English is not the native language on either side.

There are also non-verbal codes that have to be deciphered. In Uganda, for example, it is considered respectful not to look elder authority figures or people in higher positions - such as teachers and whites - in the eye, but to keep one's gaze on the ground during conversation. In our country, this behavior is not associated with respect, but is interpreted as inattention, disinterest, or wanting to hide something. We Swiss want to meet our counterpart at eye level.

We want equality and we ask direct questions. In return, however, our students are not used to this. Proactively engaging in dialog is considered indecent by them; asking us questions is considered highly disrespectful. We Swiss, however, are open to discussion and frustrated when the initiative for a conversation always has to be initiated by us. In Uganda, the belief in authority is very high. Patriarchy/matriarchy lives in the family; in school, the teacher is still someone to be respected without limits; people are afraid of state authorities. In systems of authority, people 'circumvent' the authorities clandestinely. We Swiss, on the other hand, demand transparency and desire openness.

Thus, we are surprised by the behavior of a student who, during her studies, hides her pregnancy and birth from us until we get to see the newborn. She hesitated to tell us because she was afraid of being dropped from the program - an unfounded fear.

New self-confidence through study

When it comes to communication, many of our students are used to responding with a single word. They don't learn to make their own thought processes in school. For them, giving an answer means inserting a word in the teacher's sentence. This requires a lot of patience and understanding of their culture from us. They also have to be patient and understanding of our culture. We are quick thinkers, speak in unguided English, have fixed ideas about how the world should be and a great conviction about what is right and what is wrong. We are self-confident, urbanized. Meanwhile, many of our students come from rural areas and poor backgrounds. They spent years trying to support themselves and their families. To do so, they had to adapt to those who supported them. Then they come to the capital Kampala to a university where the rich can study, at the Kampala International University (KIU) even with rich Kenyans. This promotes emancipation, they learn to reflect. What counts now are their results in their studies, not their ethnicity or the financial circumstances of their families. They are confronted with an educational elite.

Partnership in transition

After completing their bachelor's degree, they often choose professionally trained partners with whom they communicate at eye level. No man can force them to have sex anymore; they are free to choose whom they love. They can earn their own livelihood. Because uneducated girls in Uganda often marry uneducated men at an early age, on whom they are subsequently dependent. There are families of girls who do not realize how valuable our students have become through the vocational training and emancipation process and still see them as belonging to an undesirable ethnic group or as a former street child, even though the young man has become a lawyer or engineer and earns good money. Families are also challenged by the student development process to question their traditions - not easy for many.

Development work in vocational training has wide consequences in everyday life

The longer we run this project - already 14 years with 25 graduates - we realize how extensively our scholarships reach into the everyday life of the graduates far beyond their studies. Through this, we also see the great changes in their lives and how they change with them.

Perhaps you would like to support these processes as a future sponsor and thus get to know the Ugandan culture up close?

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