



B.6 COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Mike Blakey 2008

Overseas ventures, usually expeditions, involving young people, often include a 'community project' as part of the itinerary. The reasons given predominantly centre on the desire to contribute towards or 'give something back' to the communities in which the venture takes place and also to provide the opportunity for greater awareness, understanding and personal development amongst the young people taking part in the venture.

Whilst many commendable examples can be found it is important to ensure that the aims and objectives which underpin the community project are sound and worthwhile and that they go deeper than simply the desire to 'do a good deed' or to promote the image of the expedition.

The community project must primarily benefit the community in which it is to take place. This in turn must be balanced against the experience gained by the participants and the potential for personal development.

The following advice has been compiled from the views, comments and opinions of established and experienced venture providers and organisers who have, between them, managed and facilitated a range of successful and worthy projects in communities across the globe over a number of years. It is hoped that this advice might form the foundation upon which future community projects can be based and from which examples of 'good practice' may be developed.

PLANNING

Planning the community project should take place early on in the overall planning process. Early consultation should take place with the community in question; it is for them to identify their own priorities. It is also important to establish realistic expectations balanced against the resources and skills available within the expedition group; the project must be physically achievable and financially possible.

Assistance in identifying appropriate projects and establishing contacts within the community can often be provided by organisations such as:

- Charities and Projects already working in the area,
- UK based overseas conservation and environmental groups
- Through the British Embassy or Consulate in the host country.
- UK based expedition providers will often have specific projects attached to particular expeditions or a range of well researched projects from which to choose.

The young people taking part in the expedition should be encouraged to become involved in all aspects of research and planning including:

- Understanding the needs of the host community.
- Being aware of their own potential and what is realistic and achievable. The Expedition Venture Leaders have a key role in carefully managing and balancing the expectations of throughout the planning and completion of the expedition.
- Exploring the culture of the community, particularly around youth issues, education, employment, expectations, manners and customs for example.
- Identifying the living conditions they will experience for the duration of the project.

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- Developing an awareness of the potential impact of their presence on the host community, particularly in respect of other young people. (Consider the appropriateness of expensive designer clothes and high-tech electronic equipment for example).
- Examining the sustainability of the project and the long term outcomes both for the host community and the expedition members.

A well-planned community project will develop a sound sense of ownership on all sides. This in turn will ensure that worthwhile outcomes emerge from the project, which satisfy the needs and objectives of all concerned.

Involvement in a community project allows the participants to engage more closely in the culture of the host community. It opens their eyes to the daily routines, living conditions and the demands made upon the indigenous population. Such an experience can promote significant personal development, greater cultural understanding and an increase in social awareness and responsibility which has the potential to benefit not only the participants themselves but also the communities in which they live; their families, friends, peers and work colleagues. The experience can reinforce the foundations of maturity, attitude and values which remain throughout adult life.

One of the most important considerations is to ensure that any chosen project satisfies the needs and requirements of the host community and involves them as much as possible. Outcomes should make a real and measurable difference to the lives of the local people. Recent projects include:

- Supplying materials and making desks for a remote village school in Kenya.
- Providing funding and manual labour to lay a concrete foundation for a school classroom in Nicaragua.
- Rebuilding a basketball court and reinstating a running track in Tanzania
- Delivering a First Aid course to teachers and senior students in an East African school together with donating medical kit bags.
- Funding and building a wellhead water pump in Namibia.

The above are good examples of projects where direct involvement by the expedition members provided the inspiration and motivation for significant fundraising and the desire to see the projects through to a successful conclusion. By being on hand to oversee or assist with project management, together with purchasing goods and materials locally and employing local skilled tradesmen, funds can be seen to be used appropriately and fairly. It also ensures that the cash flows through the local economy and benefits the community at large. The careful control of funds and resources is essential.

An important and yet almost incidental aspect of many community projects which is difficult to quantify, yet one which is clearly expressed in the smiles, gestures and friendships which develop, is the social interaction which takes place during the playing of team games, in dance, song and the simple act of sharing a meal. The opportunity to discover similarity rather than difference can become a powerful instrument for developing understanding and communication across diverse societies.

Therefore, whilst there is a place for large charitable organisations to act as the conduit for channelling funds to deserving causes, there is also a well founded justification for the small group, project specific expedition which facilitates a worthwhile and balanced outcome for all concerned.



Some other considerations which should be taken into account when planning an expedition community project include:

- Projects should be specific and have a measurable outcome (i.e. know what needs to be done and recognise when it has been achieved).
- The project should be within the capabilities of those involved and achievable in the time available.
- Tasks within the project should be carefully considered; they should be within the skill set of the participants and keep them gainfully employed. For example mixing concrete can usefully employ a large group of unskilled volunteers whilst thatching a roof may require local skilled specialists leaving the volunteers with little to do but stand and watch.
- In some circumstances it is useful to alternate repetitive tasks, on a 'carousel' basis to maintain enthusiasm.
- Although conditions may be basic and lifestyles poor, expedition members should recognise the skills and experience which exists within host communities and respect the dignity of local people. Never be patronising.
- Consider Health & Safety issues when involving expedition members in project tasks. Health & Safety standards may be considerably lower in host countries than in the UK. Consider pre-expedition and on-site training in respect of use of tools etc. Also consider the need to take personal safety equipment out to the project location (protective boots, hard hat, gloves etc). Remember, injuries considered minor at home can become far more serious in remote locations where medical facilities may be poor.
- Personal safety, hygiene, welfare and the well-being of participants are essential considerations for the expedition leader not only in respect of the project itself but also in terms of the domestic arrangements such as accommodation, down-time and social activities. A sustained period of time spent in the same location can lead to over-familiarity, over-confidence and increased vulnerability. Expedition leaders must ensure that awareness remains high and that personal and group responsibility is maintained throughout the entire duration of the project. Particular consideration should be given to the situation of female members of the expedition as expectations in the host community may differ from their own.
- Pre-arranged visits cost the host school and parents of the pupils money in preparing to welcome visitors so ensure that any gift/donation/contribution is not just a token gesture. Remember also that a score or more parents and school committee members might have given up a days paid employment in order to welcome you.
- Short term projects of a day or two are rarely worthwhile unless it forms part of a larger and longer term project.
- Consider the sustainability of your proposed project and its future benefit to the local community. A concrete cricket pitch built with the hard labour of young expedition members has lain idle for a number of years because the community do not play cricket. They do however play football but the concrete square is in the middle of their pitch. They won't dig it out because they don't want to embarrass the donors and they don't have the heavy equipment necessary anyway. This is a classic example of a well meaning but totally inappropriate project.
- If you are being fed by your hosts only take what you are prepared to eat. Do not waste food or leave any remaining on the plate. Your hosts (and their children) may go hungry in order to provide your meal. Ensure UK donors and supporters know how their money is being spent, update them on progress and invite them to any post expedition presentations. Involve the local media and consider having an expedition website.

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- Make sure host communities know how the funds were raised, the efforts that were made by individual group members and the support they received from their local communities. Our apparent wealth can often hide the hard work that goes into fundraising.
- Be aware that overseas expedition community projects satisfy many of the objectives set out in the Government's 'Learning Outside the Classroom' manifesto and the 'Every Child Matters' framework. This will help when it is necessary to identify an 'educational outcome' within an expedition proposal. Also be aware of the value of gathering evidence in the form of photographs, diaries, accounts and observations in respect of Life Skill and Vocational qualifications.
- Community project plans should be flexible enough to take account of curtailment or complete cancellation. Whilst alternative plans need not necessarily be similar to the original project they should be meaningful and worthwhile and involve a community or social aspect. Any such plans must be properly formulated and be subject to full and complete risk analysis. They must also have the agreement of all participants and, where appropriate, have the informed consent of parents or guardians. Expedition leaders must be aware of the danger of raising false expectations of prospective alternative host communities and ensure that any sponsors or supporters are aware of the potential transfer of funds and resources should the need arise.
- If possible a visit by a Leader or a reliable in-country contact is desirable. This will help to ensure that the host community also will have a realistic level of expectations, and that any materials needed are available.

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