

## VIEWPOINT

# Experiences Hosting North American Students at the Gulu Women Economic Development and Globalization Program in Uganda

Pamela Judith Agwech, BS

*Gulu, Uganda*

---

**KEY WORDS** global health, women's health, human rights, community empowerment, Uganda

## INTRODUCTION

Gulu Women Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G) is a grassroots women's health and human rights organization in northern Uganda under the leadership of Pamela Judith Agwech. GWED-G has programs in a number of domains, including health, human rights, peace building, economic empowerment and livelihoods, psychosocial support and counseling, and research and advocacy. GWED-G has allowed North American students to intern at the organization since 2009 and has received 35 students to date. This article describes GWED-G's experiences hosting these students, including lessons learned about effective pretrip preparation, mentorship, and the benefits to the student and organization of such an exchange. Detailed conversations outlining student and host organization expectations before starting are critical to a successful internship, and identifying and aligning student's skills with organizational needs can maximize the usefulness of the field experience. Visiting students also need to be integrated into the communities, work alongside host organization staff, and meet frequently with their mentor onsite to ensure a deep understanding of the local issues and solutions. Planning and good communication help maximize the benefits for students and host organizations alike.

## OVERVIEW OF GWED-G

Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G) was established in 2004 as a

women's rights organization in response to the conflict in northern Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government. This region is comprised of communities that encountered conflict for years and whose residents were living within camps for internally displaced persons. Some community members are youths who were formerly abducted and conscripted into the rebel groups; many of these communities do not have their basic needs met and suffer from poor health and high poverty. Also as a consequence of the conflict, many women and girls of reproductive age are subjected to gender-based violence and have limited agency to make informed choices on sexual reproductive health. They are often excluded and marginalized from supportive networks (health, education, and livelihoods) and a high proportion of girls of reproductive age do not have the necessary life skills (decision making, problem solving, self-confidence, basic literacy, numeracy, and conflict resolution mechanisms) to access these networks and services.

GWED-G is the region's first grassroots human rights organization focused specifically on women. It aims to strengthen the capacity of communities in northern Uganda to become self-reliant agents of change for peace and development. Today, GWED-G serves more than 490,000 individuals, focusing on 6 areas: health, human rights, peace building, economic empowerment and livelihoods, psychosocial recovery, and research and advocacy. Currently funded programs promote gender equality and women's empowerment, access to justice and economic, social and cultural rights, peace building,

youth empowerment, economic security through village savings and loan associations, and support advocacy work. Health programs include HIV/AIDS prevention integrated with maternal and newborn health, and psychosocial support and counseling.

GWED-G's current partners include CARE International in Uganda, Amnesty International, United Nations Women, Open Society Foundation, American Jewish World Service, the European Union, GlobeMed at Columbia University, Trust Fund for Victims, and the International Criminal Court, as well as an array of other local and international nongovernmental organizations and governmental partners. GWED-G sits at the table at regional, national, and international levels. GWED-G is a member of networks such as the Human Rights Defender Network and the Uganda Women Network. GWED-G represents the "women's desk" in the region to influence government policy and monitors the implementations of laws such as the Sexual Offenses Bills, Domestic Violence Act of 2010, the Maputo Protocol, and the land Amended Act, CEDAW, 1325UNSCR among others.

### GWED-G'S NORTH AMERICAN PARTNERS

There have been various ways in which the connections between North American students and GWED-G have been developed. For example, in late 2009, GWED-G launched a partnership with GlobeMed at Columbia University in New York City, after students from GlobeMed visited GWED-G in northern Uganda earlier that year to explore GlobeMed's options for partnerships with grassroots organizations. The Columbia chapter of GlobeMed is comprised of approximately 45 students who aim to increase their knowledge about global health issues and develop skills by being part of a grassroots community, while documenting, monitoring, and collecting information and sharing it across the network. GlobeMed also partners with grassroots organizations to give students field experiences in addressing the global health concerns of poor and vulnerable groups in societies. From GWED-G's perspective, the students' approach is to have real conversations with beneficiaries about what they need to solve their local problems, which is very inspirational. In recent years, GWED-G and GlobeMed at Columbia University collaborated on multiple health and development projects that advocated for pressing global health issues, in particular

reducing HIV/AIDS infection rates and promoting maternal and newborn health. Annually, 5 students travel to work in the field with GWED-G for 6 weeks, during which time they monitor and evaluate the implementation of their initiatives, meet with local politicians and community leaders, and work with GWED-G staff.

Additionally, other students have interned with GWED-G through opportunities with the School for International Training Study Abroad programs, which hosts students from around the world. School for International Training Study Abroad programs have a learning center established in Gulu (where GWED-G also has its headquarters), and aims to have students step beyond the boundaries of a traditional classroom to analyze critical issues shaping local communities worldwide. Students become deeply engaged in a topic and undertake their own research, case studies, in-depth practica, or community projects. The program components are designed to respect the strengths of local partners to foster enduring relationships. GWED-G facilitates these field experiences for the students who come through the SIT program. This includes supporting student research and lectures on specific issues, especially in peace building and human rights.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO COME TO NORTHERN UGANDA

Through my role as mentor and "coach" to the North American students who come to intern at GWED-G, I have had the opportunity to become close with many students and have had extensive, one-on-one conversations with them. Of the students who come, usually about 45% are interested in promoting global health or tackling health-related issues in our communities, whereas the rest are interested in human rights, peace and conflict transformations, and postconflict needs. The students who are attracted to a postconflict region such as northern Uganda are interested in conducting research but also are motivated to directly help the communities with their immediate needs.

### EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR EDUCATING A GLOBAL HEALTH WORKFORCE

**Plan Ahead.** The best way for students to prepare for a field practicum is to have clear conversations about their goals for the internship and a clear understanding of the needs of the grassroots

organization. The conversations should address organizational resource gaps and how an intern could help address these. The host institution should discuss with students all aspects of their field experience, including food, culture, weather, security, health insurance, friends, Internet access, and other lifestyle issues. This allows the student to fully prepare and also helps them get motivated. After expectations for the student's internship are clarified, the host institution should draft terms of reference that detail what the student will be helping with on a day-to-day basis. This should be shared with the student and supervisor to ensure that students are well prepared even before beginning their experience. On arrival, the host institution should organize a meeting with supervisors to review the terms of reference and to clarify other pending uncertainties.

#### **Understand the Capacity of Individual Students.**

Students can act as a resource for grassroots organizations to increase their impact. With access to resources in North America, like the expertise of professors, cutting-edge technology, talented peers, and funding, students have the power to help fill gaps for local organizations. Many of the students who come as interns to work with grassroots institutions have a wealth of technical knowledge that may be underused. A field-based internship therefore allows students to bring the resources of their universities to the frontlines of global health. Students can help organizations strengthen their own work and empower their missions. Stronger partner organizations mean faster improvements in health for impoverished communities.

**Integrate Students into the Community and Grassroots Organization.** Students need to work alongside their partner organizations' staff for guidance so they can gain firsthand information about community health issues and how the partner organization is addressing them. There is always a lot of untapped information at the community and grassroots organizational levels, and students need to acquire this information to enhance their learning. By listening to the community's stories, they will better understand how to conduct interventions, and sharing their own perspectives will in turn inform local partners. These kinds of commitments inspire learning and successful collaborations.

**Provide Coaching and Mentorship.** The learning process must take place with coaching and mentorship by grassroots organizations' leaders to ensure that the intern is directed and motivated to carry on even beyond the time frame of their internship.

A mentor is an individual who provides expertise and reflection, not only about successes but also about failures. This mentorship should help the interns clarify career goals and how to reach those deliverables by sharing insights and knowledge they have gained through their experiences. The mentor can be conceptualized as a "learning leader" who facilitates learning process, rather than someone who passes information to the mentee. Mentoring is a goal-oriented process that seeks to compliment and add value to other sources of learning. Mentoring is a very valuable experience for both parties because they both learn, grow, and forge ties that are sustained over a long period of time and the rewards are always tangible. Mentoring sets out to capture the informal learning, knowledge, and experience, making it an exceptionally effective developmental tool for organizations, partnerships, groups, and individuals.

#### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES HOSTING AND MENTORING NORTH AMERICAN STUDENTS**

My experience as a host and mentor to students has been based on a relationship where both parties are open to learning, providing a safe environment where students have been able to bring up their personal questions. I have mentored at least 35 students, and some were at the level that they were ready to take up job opportunities. No matter what their level, I try to answer questions, yet leave unanswered the ones that I know the student can answer on his or her own. It's important to have open conversations with interns because most times they unearth things that we sometimes take for granted. It's important that they are supported throughout their internship to allow them unlock their own potential. The internship is a time for students to listen to themselves and see the results of their work. These revelations can be negative or positive, but it's important that "they learn through doing" and begin to take responsibility for their actions. As a mentor, it is important to be ready to listen as students start to "think aloud" when they are in the middle of processing topics such as navigating a new culture and traditions, understanding social justice, governance and accountability, social inclusion, the rule of law, and the impact of climate change. All these issues stimulate growth and shift in the directions for the future of an intern. Every student is affected differently, but all attain skills to take back, and their mindset will be

different in terms of understanding the needs of a low-resource community, and how they can remain a resource for change. They begin to imagine how advocacy in global health work is of importance, especially for young interns through the use of social media. This is already unlocking the potential of young people while crafting a new approach to global health.

We have encountered a situation where students are not prepared for their internship as a result of poor pretrip communication, and they come without a clear focus on what they intend to do or work on. This can be mitigated by flexibility and by holding frequent review meetings with interns to understand what contributed to certain gaps in performance or attaining some results.

### **BENEFITS OF THE INTERNSHIP AT GWED-G**

Overall, however, we have seen that giving opportunities to North American students has unlocked their academic potential, and promoted their personal and technical growth. The students have always gained knowledge and skills that have translated into their personal lives and future career development. Through hands-on work with program monitoring and evaluations, planning meetings, and dialogue with partners and community groups, the students develop the capacity to identify problems and their root causes, including the social, economic, and political determinants of the life of beneficiaries. They therefore deepen their creative thinking about how to solve these problems through

innovative approaches and active partnership with different stakeholders.

Specific skills that students gain include understanding how to become part of a community and how to learn from community members, leading and managing others, planning, grant writing, and budgeting. According to the different students who have been here, they have acknowledged that serving overseas gives young people the opportunity to become better leaders and think outside the box when it comes to finding solutions to the challenges in the world. It also gives one the opportunity to understand a different culture and environment. They also learn how to make connections between global health programs and human rights, and human rights and development. The students begin to understand a rights-based approach to development, such as the fact that that poorly designed health programs and policies can violate human rights. Moreover, they use an evidence-based approach to development, and they begin to analyze data as a way of detecting poor practices.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

By hosting students, GWED-G has allowed them have an impactful global health and rights-based field experience. GWED-G has leveraged the skills of many students to produce quality, results-oriented work through their internship, while students also benefit from critical discussions and networking sessions that allow them to learn skills that will serve them throughout their career.