

Travel for Change

A School Project between Austria and Gambia

Eva Gunsch-Abendstein

“In reference to Albert Einstein's famous quote, 'Fantasy is way more important than knowledge because knowledge is limited, I say for global citizenship education, knowledge is important, but experience is way more important because it makes knowledge real.

The Global Campus brings people together, opens new perspectives, and shows how similar mankind everywhere on the planet is.”

Abstract: *The NGO RESPECT from Nature Friends International hosted a webinar for students of the Zillertaler Tourism School in Austria and the Institute for Tourism and Travel of The Gambia (ITTOG) in West Africa. The basic aim was to foster intercultural exchange among students and to provide insight into each other's school life and sustainable tourism efforts of both countries. Students in The Gambia and Austria prepared contributions on the subject and shared them during the webinar. The highlight was the small-group exchange, where they discussed similarities, motives for attending a tourism school, and future perspectives.*

Keywords: *Sustainability; Tourism; Education; Cultural Exchange; Gambia*

Members of the project:

Anna Kodek from Naturefriends International, who hosted and organized the webinar, Austria. | Adama Bah, founder of the Institute of Travel and Tourism of The Gambia (ITTOG), Lamin Bojang, a teacher at ITTOG, and students, The Gambia. | 19 students of Zillertaler Tourismsschulen and their teacher, Eva Gunsch-Abendstein, Austria.

Fig. 45: Students with their teacher, Eva Gunsch-Abendstein.



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Reasons and motives for the project

RESPECT is the name of the working area of Nature Friends International, which promotes ecologically sustainable tourism. It was they who sent an email to schools seeking someone interested in a project on sustainable tourism in Vietnam. Not knowing what it would all be about, I got in contact with this organization, but unfortunately, it was too late since they had already found another school. But I signaled interest in next year's project with a tourism school in Africa. What originally should have been a school in Uganda turned out to be the ITTOG in The Gambia.

Since tourism with all its facets is a core issue in a school like ours, dealing with sustainable strategies and the ecological, economic, and social changes that go hand in hand with it is part of the curriculum. Also on the agenda are popular tourism destinations worldwide, and when it comes to Africa, why not work on lesser-known regions rather than always the classic safari hotspots in Eastern or Southern Africa?

The language of communication in The Gambia is English. Therefore, the project was also an ideal opportunity to implement it not only in tourism geography lessons but also in English lessons, which made time management easier and enhanced language skills through the preparation of contributions in advance and the natural setting during the webinar.

Tourism connects people and provides great opportunities to get to know other countries and cultures. For tourism professionals, it is essential to be open-minded and curious about other parts of the world. Therefore, schools should not miss out on any opportunity to foster intercultural exchange, as it helps foster thinking outside the box and broaden horizons. It is one of the school's overriding educational goals to contribute to responsible, open-minded citizens fulfilling their part in a peaceful and democratic society.

As a great geographer once said, "the most dangerous of all world views is the world view of people who have not looked at the world." (Alexander von Humboldt)

Project description

First things first, before we started preparing for our webinar, we had to familiarize ourselves with The Gambia and our project partners. To be honest, hardly anybody knew about this tiny country in western Africa with its long navigable river and sandy beaches for European winter sun seekers. But thanks to Google Earth, the country has taken shape quite quickly, and the ITTOG homepage allowed us to browse photos to get a rough idea of the school we were working with.

We were given the tasks in advance. The students had to present their schools, give an insight into tourism in the country, and report on the implementation of selected SDGs in tourism. Apart from the meaning of the SDGs, which had to be discussed beforehand, the assignments were no big challenge for tourism students, but it still took us quite a while to agree on how to implement and distribute them. Teamwork and creativity were key.

One group began with a PowerPoint presentation on tourism in Austria, covering highlights from natural landscapes to traditions and regional cuisine. Another group was responsible for presenting our school. First, a drone video was produced, for which a full script was needed. Then the video was embedded in a presentation about various measures at our school to reduce our ecological footprint, conserve resources, and avoid waste. When it came to the question of how SDGs get implemented in domestic tourism, one student filmed herself on a tour through her family-run hotel and demonstrated how they use renewable energy through solar installations and a small waterpower plant, how sustainable consumption is promoted by the sale of local products, and how water and plastic are saved by means of a conscious housekeeping program. This issue was supported by best-practice examples related to mobility and education.

To avoid technical issues with the webinar transmission, we filmed all our contributions and created three 4-minute videos. So, our part of the preparation was done. We were all satisfied and proud with the outcome, and wondered how students in The Gambia solved their tasks.

Fig. 46: Students from Austria and Gambia in a live chat.



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We should find out soon. For four hours, we were connected via the internet with the students of the ITTOG and learned a lot about the tourist development in each other's countries. For us, it was particularly interesting to see how tourism contributes to the economic, ecological, and social transformation of a country so different from ours and to the implementation of the SDGs in line with Agenda 2030.

The highlight of the webinar was the exchange in the breakout rooms. They searched for similarities, shared their reasons for attending a tourism school, discussed trips they had already taken or would like to take, and extended their first invitations. When the time was up, the students on both sides were almost disappointed, as they felt the conversation could have gone on longer. However, thanks to technical possibilities, a group was set up on a social media platform within a few minutes, and a lively exchange has been taking place ever since.

Fig. 47: Students from Austria presenting a traditional dish.



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Fig. 48: Students from Gambia presenting tourist attractions.



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Anchoring SDGs and GCED

The SDGs are essential for tackling global challenges and creating a better, more inclusive world for all. Can tourism help to implement them? Yes, it can. A teacher of the ITTOG provided information on how far the hospitality industry in The Gambia and the school itself are contributing to achieving various goals. They complement national strategies to eradicate poverty by improving access to quality education for all. Young people, and women in particular, are empowered with entrepreneurial and tourism-related skills to find decent jobs in the tourism industry, which accounts for about 20 % of the country's GDP (Gambia Investment and Export Promotion, n.d., <http://www.giepa.gm/invest-in-gambia/country-profile>). Like Austria, The Gambia also promotes sustainable, eco-friendly tourism, which conserves resources, protects the environment, and benefits locals. With these measures, both countries support the efforts for responsible consumption and production and climate action.

The Austrian students also addressed sustainable mobility and the country's initiatives for electric vehicles and public transport. Many communities invest in bike lanes, while hotels offer bike rentals and charging infrastructure, which should help reduce CO₂ emissions and promote eco-friendly travel. All these efforts could be seen as a reference to sustainable cities and communities, and since goals are strongly interlinked, also to climate action.

Regarding the benefits of GCED, the webinar facilitated an intercultural exchange between students from the Global North and the Global South. This took place at eye level since students at both schools were sitting in their classrooms connected by a laptop or a smartphone. In the familiar setting of a tourism school and tourism itself, they had the opportunity to gain new perspectives while, at the same time, experiencing similarities they had not been aware of before.

The webinar allowed personal contact and communication in a real setting. It had become an individual experience for our students, fostering closeness and evoking positive emotions. These emotions impact the learner and are essential to any pedagogical work, as they set in motion

an educational process that, in this case, paves the way for global citizenship education in the classroom and in students' mindsets.

Which lessons did we learn?

Apart from the awareness for GSDs and mutual understanding, we learned a lot about tourism in The Gambia. It was interesting to see that the presentations by the Gambian students covered similar aspects to ours, since they also featured great landscapes, traditions, and food. And there was another parallel to Austrian tourism. They try to get away from their image as a winter-sun destination and promote their culture and national heritage to attract tourists traveling inland year-round. With the Ninki Nanka Trail, which takes tourists to different villages along the river Gambia and invites them to interact with local communities, they have created a flagship for a responsible tourism approach in the country.

What one must be aware of for online projects like this is the importance of technical equipment. We were glad we had all our contributions recorded in advance because what was originally meant to be just a backup soon turned out to be more than that. During the technical check, it became apparent that for doing live presentations on the smartboard being filmed and transmitted, our normal laptop cameras and microphones were simply not good enough.

Another aspect which should not be underestimated is time management—and this applies not just to the preparation but also to the webinar itself. Even though the tasks for the students sounded quite simple at the beginning, they took us much longer than expected. Collaborative work, the video shoot, embedding the videos in the presentations, and then filming the whole thing was very time-consuming.

During the webinar, a relaxed approach to time is helpful, too. When we met for the technology check, the Gambian students had not been ready yet because they had scheduled the meeting later. They were able to make up for the time quickly, but that circumstance showed that whenever different time zones are involved, misunderstandings can

easily arise. Basically, it is crucial to plan enough time so that delays, technical interruptions, or other time constraints do not cause stress.

But when it comes to what will remain most, it is best to ask our students. With their consent, I share two statements with the readers:

“I learned a lot, especially how different and yet so similar our everyday lives can be. A student from The Gambia asked me on Snapchat and got in touch with me. Now we share impressions of our lives. For example, the way to school: when she told me she gets to school in 3 different vehicles over about 3 hours, I replied, “Oh, I drive 10 minutes in my car,” and we both laughed. Now I am grateful for this connection and the new perspectives on everyday life.” (Anna, 5HLta)

“It was a great experience, just something completely different. It wasn't just that we grew as a class and did this project together. No, the exchange with the students from The Gambia was also very nice, and we may be in contact with some of them for a long time to come. I learned that we are different in many ways, but then again, we are not. We attend a tourism school, like to hang out on Instagram, Snapchat, and so on.... I'm still happy to be in contact.” (Romana, 5HLta)

For further reading

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