

Sharing Series 10

Changing Mindset



Story of a participant at the
one month Community Driven
Development Training,
conducted by Bala Vikasa
People Development Training Centre

Bala Vikasa is a registered, secular, non-partisan, non-profit, voluntary social service organization in India, working mainly in Andhra Pradesh for a common goal: to help the people to help themselves without distinction of caste and creed.

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PREFACE

The 10th issue of Bala Vikasa Sharing Series, titled "Changing mindset", is special for more reasons than one:

Publication of "Changing mindset" coincides with Bala Vikasa celebrating the tenth anniversary of its People Development Training Center (PDTC), inaugurated by SOPAR/ Bala Vikasa on February 21, 2002.

Sharing Series 10 (SS10) is the first issue published in French and English. SS1 to SS 9 have been widely read by the English speaking readers. This bilingual issue is to enlarge its accessibility, particularly to the French speaking Canadians affiliated with SOPAR.

A third, but none the less important in making SS10 a special publication, is the fact that it has been entirely written and translated by Canadian interns who, in January 2011, attended the one month Bala Vikasa PDTC Community Driven Development (CDD) training program. They were a part of a group of 35 international participants from developing and developed countries.

This issue, in all respects, befits the Sharing Series, as Mélanie S, one of the Canadian Interns, has shared her experience and emotions unabashedly, following her participation in the CDD training program. It is a poignant portrayal. A personal testimony.

Mélanie S' text illustrates the objectives of the month long CDD training program, specifically designed for those desirous of familiarizing themselves with the theoretical concepts ingrained in Community Development, and observing through project visits, how in practical terms it is being followed in the Bala Vikasa programs and projects.

Development practitioners already involved at the grassroots and those aspiring to work in the field of community development - as in the case of the young Canadian interns-participate in the CDD course, to improve their knowledge, acquaint themselves with new development tools, and most importantly, assess and adjust their mindset to become successful 'Agents of Change' working with people in various communities.

The foundation for a successful Community Driven Development rests on understanding the attitudes prevalent in a community and the manner in which people think. In short, recognizing and appreciating people's mindset. A true agent of change has firstly to adjust one's own mindset in relevance with the community he/she is working with, before changing the way of thinking of the people, which varies from community to community even within one country, for development to sustain. Recognizing this fact, we have titled Mélanie S' document as 'Changing Mindset'.

In the text, Mélanie S. briefly illustrates how her past personal experiences and way of thinking from a Canadian perspective, was profoundly transformed during the course of her training at Bala Vikasa PDTTC. What follows is the unique story of Mélanie S, a very personal reflection. Like her, other trainees too are going through a transformation. A challenging process of re-evaluating their mindset.

Bala Vikasa respects Mélanie S' personal reflections, without officially endorsing it. The contents are entirely that of Mélanie S.'

André Gingras
Co-Founder SOPAR-Bala Vikasa

Introduction

This internship placement report follows the report previously presented. In that report, more technical points of Bala Vikasa were introduced, including the working environment, the mission, the values and approach of the organization, their main



work, the structure, the organizational resources and the main development issues faced by Bala Vikasa. Since these aspects were presented in the midterm report, they will not be included in this report.

Nevertheless, certain success stories from Bala Vikasa will be presented over the course of this report, as well as my professional, and evidently personal, experiences. The internship was the ideal occasion for me to consolidate both theory and practice in my field of study: sociology and international development. Having also had community development experience in Quebec, Canada, this internship provided me the opportunity to compare how community organizations work in Canada and in India.

Although this report was written to fulfill credit requirements, I think it is worth more to me than solely this purpose. For me, it is a tool for personal reflection that helps me in my studies and helps tie together my current job and my future professional direction. That's why I want to clarify that although I was taught to write scientific reports, this report has nothing scientific. So for all those who believe this to be such, I am sorry to disappoint but I think you will find that you will learn just as much from reading this type of report!

1. Lessons learned and overview of objectives

At the beginning of this internship, I was asked to create a list of objectives and to see if they had been achieved by the end of the placement. These objectives were: establish contacts and build a network; compare development practices in communities of Canada and India; and learn as much as possible about the methods used by Bala Vikasa.

a. Establishing contacts and building a network

Unless one wishes to remain a recluse, it is almost impossible not to make contacts or develop friendships during this type of internship. We were 35 participants from 11 different countries. Even the shyest got value for their money in that respect! The underlying philosophy of Bala Vikasa is to create a spirit of family amongst all participants. The staff and coordinators, helped with

FIRST LESSON LEARNED

The crazier we are, the more fun we have!!

As Frederick Perls would say:
"Making contact is about appreciating differences."

this. We had to choose different people to sit with at the beginning of each class session, and the group work followed the same principle of community: a number was given to each of us and those with identical numbers worked together. I could change groups several

times each day. At the beginning, the language barrier was a big challenge, but with time, it became easier and I could hold my own.

I was surprised that the best contacts I made, apart from my roommates, were with people from countries apart from Canada. We were eight Canadian interns, of whom



five were from my region, Outaouais-Quebec. Although these individuals were culturally and physically closer to me, the connections I still make almost every day, thanks to technological innovations, are with those from the furthest countries, like Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Connections, not simply contacts, were made. I now have friends in these countries. I know their families and what goes on in their work.

I would say this goal has been more than met!

b. Comparing development practices of Canada and India

When we begin this kind of journey with our own little bag of knowledge, we believe that we will be able to achieve many things. One of those things that I wanted to achieve was to collect as much information as I could about the development of communities in Quebec and India.

I quickly realized that we cannot compare apples and oranges, and even less so with Canadian apples and Indian oranges. Despite this, I learned an important notion: that I did not need to compare the two practices. Since each is different, I would double my knowledge.

SECOND LESSON LEARNED

Apples are not oranges!

As Henry David Thoreau would say:
"What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."



This goal was not achieved in the sense that I wanted to make a comparison between the two countries, but it was not a lost cause: I came back having learnt a very important lesson!

c. Learning as much as possible about the methods used by Bala Vikasa

To learn...and I surely learnt a lot!

The following section will explain in more detail the academic side of this placement. But suffice to say that this goal was not only met, but it far exceeded my expectations.

THIRD LESSON LEARNED

The more I listen, the more I understand!

As Henry Jacques Salomé would say:

The difficult thing is not in understanding what we do not know, but in understanding what we do.

The course sessions took place from Monday to Friday, nine in the morning until five in the evening. I had the opportunity to learn from five different professors, in addition to hearing the contributions from the other participants, which were extremely enriching. While at the

beginning of the session, the material seemed a bit mundane, by the end of the day, I could always say that I learned something new or acquired a new understanding, thanks to interesting topics.

One of the experiences I found most difficult, at the same time the most intellectually stimulating, was group work! I have always found it complicated to work in groups on a given topic, thus imagine working in groups on subjects totally different from what one is used to, more so with people from diverse countries with different ways of thinking. It was an exhausting but incredibly enriching activity. Because I had an open mind I was able to learn a lot from this new experience.

This goal was achieved in a way that I did not even expect.

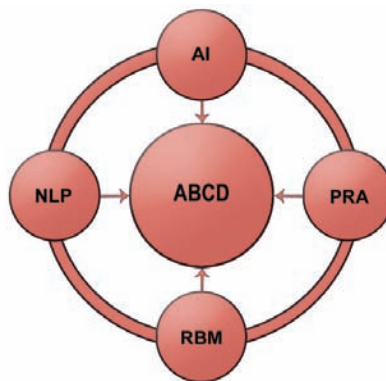
Mission accomplished!



2. Lessons learned and academic overview

At the outset, the only thing that I can say is that the theory studied in my university courses is millions of light years away from the practices and techniques of teaching at Bala Vikasa. The teaching methods were varied: lectures, videos, music, exchanges and sharing among participants, group case studies, drawing, memory games, etc. The foundational method being used by Bala Vikasa is mapping, that is, the identification of strengths, gifts and talents not only of each individual in a community, but also of the community itself. By using this capital, the idea is to make positive changes in the attitude and mentality of community members to inspire positive actions towards needs and problems identified by the community itself.

This method is called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and it ensures the sustainability and ownership of these changes in the community. ABCD is supported by a number of recognized tools and can be summarized in the following diagram:



The ABCD approach is comprised of four elements: Appreciate Inquiry (AI), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Results-Based Management (RBM). If I go much further, this could become a thesis, so I'll

¹ For more information on ABCD, as implemented by Bala Vikasa, refer to Bala Vikasa Sharing Series 5, *ABCD: The Bala Vikasa Way, An Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD): Approach for Sustainable Development*, 2006.

move on! Nevertheless, it is important to note that this approach emphasizes motivation and capital, in all its forms, as a means to create opportunities. This approach places importance on the people, communities and



associations. Its main objective is to empower the people and to offer to each the possibility of realizing his/her dream for a better future.

All the subjects, from culture and communication to conflict resolution and working relationships, are founded on the ABCD principle. Honestly, this method should be used in Quebec as well. I am certain the results would be positive.

More than just technical and practical training, what I realized is that Bala Vikasa approach is not only a means to implement community development, but it is a vision, a way of life, which inspires and guides the organization in its activities for the benefit of the most deprived people.



In India, I had in front of me, gurus of a pioneering method that allows for more than development. It allows each person and each community to realize its own potential: women

shunned by society, poor and living in the streets become community leaders and even in some cases, political leaders; men who are overworked and starving in the fields become consultants for governmental bodies on issues of responsible agriculture.

I have become a disciple of ABCD!

3. Lessons learned and a practical overview

The different visits to projects in villages were beneficial from an academic and professional point of view, but even more so from an emotional standpoint. During the course of the internship, I had the opportunity to explore and understand three Bala Vikasa projects/programs, which were the village of Gangadevipalli, as well as the widows and orphans programs.

a. The village of Gangadevipalli

Having won several national awards of recognition, the village of Gangadevipalli, located 14 kilometers from Warangal, is renowned as a "100%" model village in the sense that it is considered perfect in all



aspects

of development. Water and electricity is available to all households. In this community, there are more than 18 committees, for example water, women, health and education committees, that ensure proper facilities in the village. Alcoholism used to be a major problem in the community, but through a sensitization campaign and technical assistance, drinking alcohol in the village is prohibited and this rule is 100% respected. The village has its own medical services and each family respects the principle of two children per family. Each family has a tree in front of its house that the family has to take care of, in addition to caring for the environment of the village as a whole. All boys and girls of the village attend school. In addition, literacy courses are mandatory for

GANGADEVIPALLI

100% family planning after two children since 2000.

100% families have toilets and 100% families use them since 2003.

100% literacy since 2003.

100% property taxes collection since 1996.

100% families practice small savings since 1999.

100% women are organized into Self Help Groups.

100% families insured with LIC.

100% families have access to purified drinking water.

100% enrolment of school age children in schools.

Mr. Kusam Raja Mouli

adults who are illiterate. Even more impressive is that the village finances itself entirely (tax on water, electricity, etc.) and the people themselves manage all aspects of life (justice committee, investigation into village infractions, management of finances and natural resources, etc.). In terms of communications, the village is on the cutting edge: a community radio, Internet access and they even have their own website describing their success!

For me, the visit to this village was very positive, yet simultaneously, difficult. Here in Canada and maybe even more so in Quebec, the concept of democracy runs strongly through our individual and community thinking that the idea of imposing one



single way of doing things is inconceivable. The idea of not being able to have more than two children or to be penalized for not taking care of your household tree by paying a fine, made me rethink some deeply rooted values that I held growing up in Canada. It finally took me a week to realize that I was not in Quebec, and that in India the socio-economic conditions are difficult and necessitate more drastic, and perhaps less democratic measures. It shocked me to visit other villages that wanted to follow the example of Gangadevipalli and to be as happy as the people there! I suppose that my view of the consequences imposed on the villages are just as difficult to imagine, as a fine imposed for violating a red light in Quebec would be to a Gangadevipallian.



The fact that the method being followed in Gangadevipalli is working so well, and donors and international organizations feel encouraged to replicate the model elsewhere in India and around the world, is in itself an attestation of Bala Vikasa's success in Gangadevipalli.

b. Widows Program

The conditions in which the widows of India live are very difficult. In my mid-internship report, I have quoted Graverol to express how widows are perceived in India:

FOURTH LESSON LEARNED

Do not ever think that you know everything.

As Gaston Bachelard would say:
In the face of reality, what we think we know for certain, clouds what we should know.

"The husband's death is due to the wife's mediocre performance. The husband's death is caused by the wife's lack of potential devotion, making her incapable of using her ability to manipulate natural events and destiny for the good of the people around her. In general, widows are rejected by the community and treated like nobodies."(Graverol, 1997).



BALA VIKASA confirms that although the situation of widows in India is improving, changing the mentality and values of the people, takes generations of hard work and dedication.

In order to better understand the reality of these women, the visit consisted of participating in a meeting that had two objectives: 1) to update statistics of widows across participating villages; 2) to listen to widowed women talk about their past living situation, their present, as well as their future- hopes for themselves and their children.

I was excited to meet these women and to talk about their development and about the work that I have done in Quebec working for and with women. It was for me the ideal moment to put into practice some of the skills and knowledge I had gained on gender and relations between men and women. But what awaited us was nothing that I, nor my colleagues, expected.

Our arrival was spectacular. All the women were waiting for us, sitting on the ground. Hundreds and hundreds of women were dressed in colorful saris. A few minutes later, the statistical enquiry started. I was really surprised to see

how this had nothing to do with what I had learned in my methodology classes! The women closed their eyes in order to keep responses of other women confidential. The first question asked was: "Who among you are widows?" They all raised their hands, and people in charge started counting. And it went on and on like this, until it came to a point when they were asked: "Who among you was rejected by your family after the death of your husband?" Three quarters of the hands were raised. I felt a teardrop escape from my eyes. When they were asked "who is living in the streets with their children since the death of their husband?", half of them raised their hand: At that point I could not stop the stream of tears running down my cheeks. My colleagues, even the men, were also crying in silence. The widows were weeping as well. This method of statistical enquiry proceeded in a way I could never have scientifically imagined.



FIFTH LESSON LEARNED

Never take my assets for granted.

As Louis Aragon would say:
For man, nothing should be granted.

My academic training prepared me for many things in terms of research, but never for something like that. It certainly didn't prepare me for this type of sharing. Actually, I didn't share; I listened to the life stories of these women. Although they were speaking in the

local language Telugu, I didn't need anybody to translate. Their voice intonation, their tears, the voice of their heart, and also their wish for better days to come and their acknowledgment of an unjust life that is also filled with good moments, were all erasing the indicators of human development index I was taught in the university. The scale here was simple: from 0 to 10, 0 being always and 10 never again.

"Mélanie, how many times will you complain about your situation here in Canada? "

After my meeting with the widows, the answer has now become a simple: 10

c. "Vikasa children" Program

A meeting was arranged similar to the one we had with the widows, yet I still didn't know what to expect. Again, we were warmly welcomed. The children were excited to see us, and I was really excited as well. I do have



children and I was missing them a lot, so seeing these kids was comforting to me. As they were orphans, I thought I would give them my maternal love. But it actually ended the other way around: they were the ones who gave me love, simple love. Gratuitous love! Loving life itself, irrespective of their condition, and pure love I have barely ever experienced before. They had no parents and many of them didn't even know their birth date. Most of them had lost their parents in a tragic way like suicide or murder. A young girl had seen her mother die as her father was throwing acid on her. This was really tragic.

The orphans had planned a dance show, it was so beautiful. These children came from different villages and we came from different countries, but still something united us: their future. I had often been told how important it is to



take care of the development of the children, but that day I really understood. They all shared their stories. We all cried. We cried because we were sad, yes, but

mostly because we were inspired. These kids really want to succeed in life, they want to become policeman, doctors, social workers, etc.

SIXT LESSON LEARNED

Development is to change the world, one mentality at a time!

As Fun Chang would say:

Everything you can imagine can exist. Nothing is impossible!

I was surprised to realize that the best lesson I learned didn't come from the orphans or Bala Vikasa. It came from one participant to the internship. His nonchalant and negative "I don't care" attitude was sometimes hard to manage for me and the rest of the group. But an orphan changed him. A six year old little boy told us his story and out of nowhere he went and sat on the intern knees and gave him a hug, as if a simple eye contact had made the intern his older brother. The young man couldn't resist the boy. His life had just changed. He never was the same after that day. Me neither!



4. A summary of my personal viewpoint



This internship literally changed my life. I had been to Africa and seen its culture, but let's say that India was unimaginable. It's a huge country so diverse that my brain was having trouble imagining it.

I could spend hours writing on my Indian experience, putting every moment on paper for someone to read. But the reader would never be able to truly understand, without living this experience.

Learning in a developing country like India gave me the chance to realize that in the end, we all are the same. You may be thinking it was time I realized that! Maybe! but I learned it in a unique way.

In Canada, a single mother can get food for her children from the food bank of her community. In India, a widow is denied a decent existence. Even if these two problems don't have the same severity - in common is the oppressed life they both lead. Had I learned this lesson earlier? No, not until I did my internship at Bala Vikasa and I actually met these people.

When I returned to Canada from Africa, a few years ago, I was frustrated and sick of this world. I understood very little the behavior of these people belonging to developing countries. I could not comprehend that while I, living in Quebec, was trying my best not to waste a drop of precious water, the people in the African

continent where there is an acute scarcity of water, were washing their car three to four times a day. I couldn't understand this and it was frustrating.

Now, I understand. I understand that development is not about natural or financial resources. Even if these resources are really important, Bala Vikasa made me realize the greatest of all the lessons: development is about people taking charge of their own life. That's why Bala Vikasa vision is "TO HELP PEOPLE TO HELP THEMSELVES"!

In the end, this internship, more than changing my life, changed my attitude towards life and made me realize that everybody should have equal opportunities in life. After this realization, I decided to change my career.

At the end of my program, I will do a masters degree in project management instead of international development. I have also decided not to take the research job that was waiting for me at the Universté du Québec en Outaouais. I have gone back to my former passion: community development.

And when I grow up, I will be an agent of change directly in people's everyday life. May be in India, may be somewhere else. Thanks to Bala Vikasa this is what I want to be: not an international development specialist, but an agent of change. My main task is to change my own mindset, as well as that of others.

I like that!

5. The challenges... If there were any

Nothing is perfect, even at Bala Vikasa. Some moments were hard for me to manage, and especially hard to accept. Working with so many different people was sometimes exhausting. Our ideas and methods were often completely different, and I often had to make concessions in my way of thinking and doing things.

SEVENTH LESSON LEARNED

Not everybody thinks the way I do.

As a German saying goes:

What I don't know doesn't irritate me.

The supervision of the people in charge at Bala Vikasa was really uncomfortable for me. I am not used to justifying my actions. If we wanted to go for a walk or eat at the restaurant, we had to give

details of our trips telling where we were going, with whom, and the time we planned to be back. "It was not easy!" as would say one of my roommate.

Talking about roommates, that was also something hard to manage. I had to share my room with two other girls. Wow!! I had never done that before. It's a good thing we were all able to deal properly with the circumstances. Thanks



girls for bearing up with me, I know it can be difficult to live with me sometimes!

I think what was the hardest for me to deal with was this staging of "kings and queens". Let me explain. Every time we went somewhere to visit, or if there was a

party, our group was treated like gods. At the beginning of the ceremonies, we had soda and candies from Bala Vikasa. It was, for me and most of the people from our group, a really



discomforting situation, especially as there were often children around us. I wanted to give them my soda and my candies, but I was told it was a bad idea. Consequently, I decided to refuse the gifts I was given, but this was also a bad idea. The people in charge at Bala Vikasa asked me why? I think they didn't like my answer.

I think that these challenges would not have usually been challenges, but since I was away from home and everything was going pretty fast, all those things taken together sometimes provoked frustrations. But everything ended well!

6. The follow-up

SOPAR and Bala Vikasa are now tattooed in my heart.

Thus, I voluntarily participate in SOPAR's activities here in Outaouais, and I often inquire about Bala Vikasa. Even my family participated with me in the walk for water Canada-India, and in the activity for the school Massé. My daughter came along, we helped



prepare the activities and we walked with the kids. I was proud of her, and she was proud of herself. Just as Bala Vikasa would say... changing mentality, one head at a time!

My colleagues who were interns with me want to organize a fundraiser and we will take this opportunity to organize a conference about our experience in India and the activities with SOPAR and Bala Vikasa. It will be a nice event.

7. A positive conclusion that does not want to end

I could continue this "blah blah" about what I experienced at Bala Vikasa forever.

It is a positive conclusion concerning the objectives, the academic and the relations. I wanted to do this internship in order to learn more, and it sure is what happened. But most importantly, I earned even more: wisdom, a new vision on life, and friends. The lessons of courage that I witnessed will never be forgotten. I will never be the same girl; it's a benediction for me and my family.

Even if I have shared most of the lessons learned, there is still one I have not mentioned, and it is the most important one: I am who I am, no matter what! We sometimes think that we cannot teach tricks to an old monkey:

that's false!!! We all have the ability to change to become what we want to be, no matter what our past is or how old we are.

I am who I am, with my qualities and my faults. I am who I am, with a little bit of my parents. My children are who they are, with a little bit of me, and it's important that they know it.

I am who I am with my strengths and weaknesses. The challenge is to build on these assets to realize myself. As it is with the world, I am constantly evolving. However something stays the same: we are all humans in the pursuit of happiness. This fact remains the corner stone of real development that has to be based on a change of mindset.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON LEARNED

I am who I am, no matter what!

As Frélon would say:

Perfection is to stop trying to be perfect!

Certificate Course in "Community Driven Development" (CDD)

10th January - 3rd February, 2011



L-R

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