

A summer with Greenpop

This summer (South African winter), 2013, I interned with a Cape Town based social enterprise called Greenpop. Greenpop is a not for profit organization that in part uses business tactics to fund itself sustainably. Greenpop's main goal is planting trees in "under-greened" and under-privileged areas, but I learned during this summer that so much more goes into the seemingly simple action.

So far Greenpop has planted over 23 000 trees. They started planting mostly around Cape Town, and they are now looking expand to Johannesburg and Zambia. I personally worked on the planting projects around Cape Town. Before a site is chosen, a Greenpop member creates a relationship with someone on site, who is excited and ready to be responsible for the trees for the coming years. Planting a tree is never a one-day event, but rather the relationship with the planting site and the people is continuous. This helps to ensure that the trees have a chance of actually growing after they have been planted. Another integral part of Greenpop's tree-planting mission is eco-education in the community and nearby schools. The planting day as itself is a joyous event, and a half of the day is dedicated to educational games, bonding, and learning about the trees as well as environmental sustainability and issues such as climate change. Greenpop believes in making sustainability fun and popular (hence the "pop" in Greenpop) and I had a first-hand experience of how they achieved this.

The game I enjoyed the most was "connect". The rules were simple; everyone would dance to the drumming, and once the drumming stopped the drummer would say a number, a body part and a part of a tree. Then we had to place a body-part to the part of the tree called out, with the number of people specified. It was a lot fun and a bit of chaos, but a great way to get in contact with the surroundings and break the ice between all the volunteers, children and locals. Through the game I also learned some Xhosa, and amused many children with my all-but-perfect pronunciation. The old and the young alike all loved the planting days and held pride in our achievements together. Often a group of school children adopts the trees, and after the planting they are responsible for bringing grey water (such as bathing water) once or twice a week to water the trees. This teaches the children about recycling, gives them a personal responsibility and a connection to the trees and hence also the issues addressed by them. During the summer we also found out that many of the schools that we had a planting-project with had independently and by the children's own initiatives started eco-clubs.

Greenpop aims to plant in the most “under-greened” areas, which often are the poorest neighborhoods and the townships. Cape Town especially has a very dramatic difference between the wealthy, “luscious and green”, as well as mostly white, neighborhoods and the townships. In the beginning of the summer, the first thing I associated with planting trees was Climate Change. However, I learned through the summer that “greening” on a community level has more significance to community pride. Often the whole neighborhood would join us for the planting and later on taking care of the trees.

Even though the plant days were part of my favorite time in Cape Town, they only happened once a week and for the rest of the time I either worked at the office or the nursery. Right now Greenpop receives some of its trees from larger nurseries, but it does have its own nursery where they grow trees from seeds. The plan is to scale the nursery up and save money and assure sustainable practices by supplying the baby trees from Greenpop’s own nursery. The nursery itself has a worm farm, which produces “worm-tea” that is used instead of fertilizers and as a whole the nursery is ran based on perma-culture ideas. There was also a small garden where we grew vegetables, herbs and spices to supply for our office lunches. Every day two different Greenpoppers would cook a vegan lunch for the whole office, that we would then all eat together. Greenpop has an “open-office” policy that means there are no closed in cubicles and every day you can sit around any table you want. This ensures better working atmosphere and communication. The people working at Greenpop were all relatively young and very inspired. Three days a week I worked closely with the marketing and research manager, as well as the fundraising manager. I learned a lot about the importance of taking charge and calling / meeting people face-to face instead of relying solely on emails. I was given responsibility to raise funds for Greenpop’s Zambia program, to create contacts with local travel businesses and much more. I feel that during my time at Greenpop I had a chance to actually do something that was valuable and had tangible results.

It was a valuable but yet strange experience to spend two months working on a local level and observing Cape Town as a “not really a tourist but neither one of the locals”. The effects of the apartheid system were still shockingly visible and tangible, and I even Greenpop as a local social enterprise struggled with having only two persons of color out of their ten person staff. There is a great surge of initiatives that sprang from the poorer neighborhoods themselves, but there also was a clear disparity with access to funding, startup-support and connections. This question, of what is truly

helpful and what is in a shuttle way perpetuating the current system seems to keep popping up. There are many great social enterprises that build this self-critical question in to their practices and I do believe that with continuous questioning, moving forward and listening we can work towards better solving these issues in the “do good” sector and actually truly do “good”.