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International volunteers share their field experiences in South India

Six weeks after closely working with communities in South India, 21 international volunteers from 14 countries are now ready to make a new beginning. They will take back their learning experiences from "Health on Stage" project to their respective countries and continue with community development work in their own ways. "After this experience in India I will be training free arts to young people in six villages in Bagadian in The Philippines as the Community Arts Training Programme," said Felimon Blanco. He is a theatre practitioner from The Philippines and one of the 21 volunteers.



The "Health on Stage" project enabled them with the knowledge of forum theatre that they used as a creative medium to promote public health dialogue in Bangalore, Mysore and Chennai. As Felimon added: "Unlike educational theatre, Forum Theatre uses the power of music, dance and body language. This despite of all cultural and language differences, instantly connected us with the communities as we

performed."

Public health particularly water related diseases is one of the main concerns in the underprivileged urban, sub-urban and rural pockets of South India. "Lack of adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities, open defecation and unclean environment have been some of the root causes behind such diseases," noted Rubini Raghunathan, "Health on Stage" volunteer and local Self-Help-Group (SHG) member in Chennai.

These concerns were also highlighted by the communities as the volunteers directly interacted with them before every forum theatre performance. "Communicating with communities was very challenging as I do not speak their language," said Suzanne Prak, "Health on Stage" volunteer and forum theatre practitioner from The Netherlands. "However direct involvement of local community members in the project bridged that gap." Based on the interactions and observations in the communities, the volunteers prepared specific scripts for every performance.

After every performance, local people from the audience were encouraged to share their feedback. "This was one of the biggest achievements for us as local community leaders, women and young

people came forward to appreciate our effort and shared their thoughts on public health issues we addressed," noted Nagoor Kani, "Health on Stage" volunteer and community development worker from Bangalore.

Field experiences from "Health on Stage" were shared by participants at the "Open Day" event in Bangalore, India (30th September). The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS) with Field Services & Inter-Cultural Learning (FSL India) organised this event as the closing session of the "10th Asia-Europe Young Volunteers Exchange programme: Health on Stage". Representatives from civil society organisations, forum theatre practitioners, public health experts and the media participated in this occasion.

About 10th Asia-Europe Young Volunteers Exchange programme: Health on Stage

"Health on Stage" is a joint effort by the ASEF and CCIVS to commemorate the United Nations Volunteers' (UNV) 10th Anniversary of the International Year of Volunteering (IYV+10) and the European Year of Volunteering. It is hosted by the FSL India in Bangalore, Chennai and Mysore in South India (20 August – 1 October 2011).