

Global Solidarity Retreats: A Brief Overview (Dec 2015)

Summary

Global Solidarity Retreats (GSRs) are a way to connect residents of Canada with changemakers from other parts of the world. The core of this 3-day 'getaway' to a beautiful location is an experience bringing together:

- One (or more) full-time changemakers from another part of the world
- Canadians, permanent residents, students and others

The weekend is a mixture of building relationships, sharing experience, building understanding, and taking action. Participants learn and explore through facilitated sessions, around kitchen tables and at the campfire. The focus, structure, and content of the retreat is co-created by facilitators from Canada and the focus region. Participants might include youth who have a keen interest in international solidarity work, undergrad or grad students seeking relevant global context for their field of study, older adults transitioning careers and/or retiring, educators, and those who have personal connections to the region of focus and/or global solidarity.

GSRs create a transformative learning experience similar to an international volunteer or service learning trip. For participants, the GSR is an opportunity to develop as leaders, build relationships, and gain a better understanding of their potential role in the international solidarity/sustainable development sector. For changemakers, this an opportunity to have quality relationship-building opportunities during a short visit to Canada.

Context

Canadians and others residing in Canada, recognizing their complicity in global and local inequality, can become isolated, even helpless', feeling they have nothing to offer solidarity movements and therefore unlikely to be involved as leaders, volunteers, or advocates for change. At the same time, changemakers in other parts of the world are leading significant movements for change locally and globally and seeking like-minded partners in other parts of the world. Current responses to this challenge often involve international travel and 'voluntourism' type efforts, which while providing transformative learning experiences come at a significant cost (both in cash and in time) for Canadian and Southern participants.

The GSR concept was developed in consultation with international solidarity / sustainable development organizations in BC. The GSR is an opportunity to begin to build an understanding of solidarity as represented by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which are intended to speak to the universality of many issues shared by people around the world.

In September 2014, CoDevelopment Canada hosted a GSR with Sandra Moran from Artesana in Guatemala. The retreat involved participants from 17 - 65 years old, from students to professionals to university faculty. Feedback from Sandra Moran and participants was very positive; after the retreat, participants led fundraising dinner and helped organize a women's march. The next GSR will be March 11-13th, 2016, with Caroline Berinyuy of Young Women's Leadership Program in Cameroon.

Retreat Framework

A GSR takes place over a weekend, from Friday till Monday, at a location somewhat removed from urban areas. Participant numbers are usually limited to maximum of twenty participants. Key elements of the retreat include activities to build relationship among all participants and the changemaker/s, information sharing about the questions the changemaker/s brings to the Retreat, exploration of how the participants might respond to the needs identified and then planning for a specific action/s or learnings to be enacted after the retreat.

Funding for a GSR comes from registration fees charged to participants and sponsorship by local groups/organizations. Some participant costs are fully subsidized. Participants apply to participant; accepted participants are expected to participate in pre-retreat and post-retreat preparation and debrief sessions.

Impact

For those Canada who are interested in being leaders, volunteers or advocates for change, the GSR provides an opportunity to listen, connect with, and learn from changemakers and also an opportunity to connect with a group of people around a shared passion or interest in global solidarity. Participants will leave with an understanding that the issues affecting people in one part of the world are intrinsically linked with those happening in their own community.

The GSR makes a direct connection between changemakers who are often marginalized and under-resourced and residents of Canada who are disconnected and wanting to build professional skills. Through the GSR participants become connected, on a deep and more personal level, to issues that may have seemed distant or hard to empathize with. As a result of the retreat, Canadian participants will leave empowered to work in solidarity with local and global initiatives, and to take steps toward employment or involvement in the sector. Changemakers will leave with a new set of relationships and allies in Canadian social networks.

Interested? Email malibain@gmail.com.