



North- South Connection: Partnership for a more just world between European and African schools

## CASE STUDY REPORT

# School Partnerships between Hungary and Sierra Leone



***SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP AS A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD – LESSONS LEARNT  
FROM THE NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTION PROJECT***



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SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP AS A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD – LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTION PROJECT

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The world that we live in has become smaller yet more complex due to the process of globalization. Goods, people and information, travel at unprecedented speed and magnitude, thus, the people live in a world of increasing interdependency. This has to be taken into account by the schools themselves. Global education aims at directing our attention at the global impact of our everyday actions. One of the most exciting methods to strengthen global education in the school is to establish school partnerships. This method is not wide-spread in Hungary, but there are some initiatives. We introduce the method of school partnerships, the main steps of its implementation through the cooperation between European and African schools, which was coordinated by [Artemisszió Foundation](#).

## **THE SITUATION OF GLOBAL EDUCATION**

Global education is not a radically new educational paradigm, rather a perspective that unites existing pedagogical models such as environmental education, intercultural pedagogy or education for democracy.

The most important characteristics of global education are the following:

- ❖ **Problem–focused:** it explores solutions to social problems that impact negatively the whole of humanity or certain social groups,
- ❖ **Present-oriented:** even when it looks at historical roots of current social problems or their future scenarios,
- ❖ **Holistic:** when looking at problems it analyzes their global and local causes and consequences,
- ❖ **Complex:** transmits information, develops skills, influences attitudes,
- ❖ **Committed** to the values of social equality, cultural diversity and sustainability,
- ❖ **Cooperative:** prefers methods of cooperative learning, practical problem-solving over frontal education and theoretical problem solving.

In Hungary, global education is mainly practiced within the non-formal education system, in projects run by civil society organizations. The new National Curriculum (*in Hungarian: Nemzeti Alaptanterv*) was published in 2012, and it provides the curriculum framework – the areas and themes, public education should cover. It outlines some possible links to global education: global problems and environmental sustainability are mentioned, and citizenship education and ethics are part of the program, too. Still, the aspects of global education are presented randomly in the curricula at any education level and in teacher training. Basically, it still depends on the individual decision and motivation of the teachers how much they integrate global issues into the class work. Fortunately, due to the lobby activities of CSOs, the importance of global education is now included into the National Development Strategy



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that was accepted in 2013. This states that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs is obliged to work out a global education concept.

## SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS ACROSS CONTINENTS

There are multiple ways of bringing in global education into the formal school system. One of the most exciting approaches is to establish a school partnership with a school from a different continent so that connections are created between the Global North and South. The core of the method is to connect schools and have teachers and students work together on shared themes. If possible, this is part of the regular lessons, if not, it is offered as an extracurricular activity. Ideally, the partnership has an impact on the whole school and is of a long term commitment. Through the cooperation, previously unknown issues become tangible and interdependencies become visible. The roots of inequalities, social and economic processes become more understandable. Additionally, the partnerships make us reflect on our image of the Other, direct our attention to the eurocentrism inherent in our worldview and call for global solidarity.

The [North-South Connection](#) program is based on these principles as well. The project is supported by EuropeAid and the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and connects 16 African and 16 European high schools. The list of Hungarian schools is:

- Arany János Primary and Secondary School, Budapest: [www.aranyj.eu/](http://www.aranyj.eu/)
- ELTE Apáczai Csere János Practice Secondary School, Budapest: [www.apaczai.elte.hu/](http://www.apaczai.elte.hu/)
- Fényi Gyula Jesuit Secondary School and Dormitory, Miskolc: [www.jezsu.hu/](http://www.jezsu.hu/)
- Saint Stephen Church Primary and Secondary School and Dormitory, Makó: [www.szignum.hu/](http://www.szignum.hu/)

They partnered with the following schools in Sierra Leone:

- Albert Academy, Freetown: [www.albertacademy.org](http://www.albertacademy.org)
- Aberdeen Junior Secondary School, Freetown
- Kelly's Vocational Agricultural Secondary School, Hastings
- Murray Town Municipal Junior Secondary School, Freetown

Students learnt about global processes through interactive, experiential learning, and the joint work shed light on the similarities and differences between the global North and South. The teams worked on globally significant and locally relevant challenges that are connected to the Millennium Development Goals. They included pollution and waste, nutrition and water, or the situation of disabled people and poverty. In addition, Hungarian teachers visited Sierra Leone before the projects started, and it was planned to have Sierra Leonean teachers return the favor after the school projects ended.



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## **A CLOSE UP TO THE SCHOOL PROJECTS**

Each school tandem worked on two global issues, and realized two small school projects during the school year of 2013-14. Each project spanned over a semester.

The most important steps were the following:

*1. Preparation → 2. First contact between students → 3. Offline teaching/ Introduction to the theme → 4. Independent work → 5. Sharing → 6. Action → 7. Evaluation*

These steps did not follow each other in a strict chronological order, rather they were built upon each other in a flexible manner, and re-appeared from time to time. What did this process look like in reality? What difficulties did emerge? What solutions were found?

### **1. Preparation**

The study visit of Hungarian teachers was an opportunity to get to know their Sierra Leonean colleagues, to choose their common theme, to plan the steps of the project and the involvement of students. One of the founding principles of school partnership is that it should not compose an extra “burden” on top of normal school work. Rather it should become the integral part of everyday lessons and be connected to the regular curriculum. Given that the working language was English, partnership work was integrated into English classes in three schools. In the fourth school, students could join in the frame of an extracurricular activity. However, in this school project work is one of the prerequisite of graduation; therefore, many students completed a school requirement by attending.

### **2. First contact between students**

The selection of Hungarian students was done before the visit to Sierra Leone, thus, the travel was an opportunity for Hungarian teachers to bring along their introductory materials.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of Sierra Leonean students was planned to happen at the start of the school year by sending it via email or uploading it to a blog. Already at this point, we could feel the gap in infrastructure (low Internet connection, electricity cuts), which foreshadowed that the main challenge of the project would be online communication.

### **3. Offline teaching/ Introduction to the theme**

The ‘North-South Connection’ [guidebook](#) gives theme-specific recommendations for introductory lessons including articles, interactive statistics, movies, simulation games. The materials used through the projects were very varied. Environmental issues were approached by using the Chemistry textbook, the *Story of stuff* animation clip, the movie, *Trashed* or by visiting to a waste management plant.

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<sup>1</sup> On top of photo albums, video messages, presentations, Hungarian students prepared small presents as well (in one of the schools they painted T-shirts).



#### 4. Independent work

Conducting independent work, researching, exploring their personal stands were all important parts of the project. Students created essays, short movies, presentations, diaries, survey, digital posters and collages and shared these with their partner school.



#### 5. Sharing

The most effective way was for students to come up with concrete questions that were answered by their peers.<sup>2</sup> For example, students from Sierra Leone asked the following question from their peers related to the theme of nutrition:

- How does palm oil affect our body?
- To what extent do Hungarians consume palm oil?
- What are the characteristics of healthy nutrition?
- How would you convince your friend, relative and community about the importance of healthy nutrition?

#### 6. Action

Global education is radical. It does not stop at analyzing problems, rather „it invites educators and learners to act dynamically for a more just and equal world for all” (North-South Centre: [Global education guidelines](#), page 14.). Therefore, we gave primary importance to action at the end of each project.<sup>3</sup> Donations to the partner school were,

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<sup>2</sup> Due to problems with the infrastructure, skype could not be used as a tool of sharing.

<sup>3</sup> Possible ways include campaigns, letters to decision makers, school articles, a debate club, an exhibition, volunteering personal pledges, and flash mobs.



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however, excluded from these. As it was stressed beforehand, genuine partnership and equal standing are two of our core values. In contrast, charity and donations may appear as the only way to development, whereas, multiple studies have identified the negative consequences of charity such as sustaining dependency.

### 7. Evaluation

Through joint meetings with teachers, we evaluated projects on the go. Additionally, students evaluated the projects at the end. Documentation was another important part; each project description was uploaded to our [website](#) together with the documentation of other African and European schools.



### ***ACTION!***

Student actions were of utmost importance: other educational processes paved the way to making a change in their immediate environment. Creativity manifested itself in the multifaceted nature of actions. For example, Hungarian schools realized the following actions related to environmental sustainability:

1. In Apáczai Secondary School, selective waste collection was introduced with the help of the volunteer group of university students (ELTE EKSZ). The system will be



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maintained by students in the framework of community work. Action generated structural changes in this case.

2. In Arany High School, students created a so-called [chips-brigade](#): chips bags now become the material for new products (such as recycled waste bins).
3. In addition to recycling, upcycling was also part of several initiatives. In Apáczai, recycled materials (old newspapers, sheets) were used to create fashionable clothes, which were promoted during the school day and through a video of the fashion shooting.



4. Waste was also used to create art pieces, toys and practical objects in the Fényi and Arany High School.
5. Students of Makó participated actively in a local community action: they joined the [TeSzedd! \(PickItUp!\)](#) campaign and collected waste in their vicinity.

The actions of the schools in Sierra Leone were also varied:

1. In many places, the main aim was to improve the waste collection infrastructure by putting out waste bins or providing the possibility to collect compostable waste separately.
2. There is no potable running water in Freetown, thus, the students also looked for ways to reuse plastic water bags. Upcycling in this case, took the form of establishing a school garden. Plastic bags were used as containers in the plant nursery.
3. One of the most successful elements of the actions was the involvement of the local community. One school prepared a play, and visited schools in their neighbourhood to direct their attention to proper waste management. In the other case, students raised awareness among grassroots leaders (tribal leaders, elders), who are important actors in the decision-making process besides the more formal, municipality functionaries.

In both setting recycling and upcycling were in the focus, and student actions focused on the local conditions and problems. In other words, plastic water bags in Sierra Leone can be compared to chips bags in Hungary: the same problem, just different appearance.



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### THE PRINCIPLE OF PARTNERSHIP

One of the project objectives was to change students' perception of Africa given that a lot of stereotypical and schematic images are connected to the continent. The joint work questioned the dichotomy of developed and developing, as the focus was on learning together and from each other. Thereby, the image of Africa becomes more balanced. The stereotype of an exotic continent with safari and starving children fades away, and Africa becomes a continent with different regions and countries, where richness and poverty coexist.

The basis of school cooperation is, therefore, mutual learning and the conviction that each party has equally lot to gain. To give an example from student work, the waste management culture in Hungary may look more "developed" than in Sierra Leone at first glance, but if we look at the amount of waste produced by an average household in Sierra Leone, it is significantly smaller than in Hungary. The ecological footprint (which is the numerical expression of one's energy use) of a Hungarian person is on average three times bigger than that of a Sierra Leonean. Moreover, Hungarians use 60% more energy than the level of sustainability. Last but not least, if we look a bit at deeper causes, the waste dumps in Freetown are mainly the consequence of the missing collection infrastructure. On the other hand, the collection infrastructure is there in Hungary, nonetheless, we find illegal waste sites next to each village and town.

The integration of disabled students is another area where we can learn from our Sierra Leonean peers. Most disabled students attend regular classes. The social and religious tolerance is not only the characteristic of the school system, but also of society as a whole. Of course, the situation is not perfect in Sierra Leone either, disabled people are often viewed with suspicion and illnesses are attributed to supernatural forces.



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### **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

To sum up, we would like to end with a set of advices, which are the outcome of our learning process.

- *Less is more!* – especially at the beginning of the joint work it is important to start with simpler projects so that communication gaps can be more easily breached.
- *Solicit concrete feedback!* – plan explicitly how you will showcase your work to the partner school and attach concrete question so that they can give feedback more easily.
- *Explore outside the classroom!* – community actions, visits help increase the commitment of students through experiential learning.
- *Use digital technology, but also rely on tangible presents!* – in addition to a joint facebook group or a skype conference, you may prepare small presents. These add onto the personal touch.
- *Be patient!* – getting to know each other, creating a common work culture, fostering trust need time.
- *Look for allies!* – if two teachers from one school work on the project together, they can support each other and increase the success.



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All in all, school partnerships with Sierra Leone proved to be an exceptional opportunity; teachers and students alike learnt a lot. Students had the opportunity to work on issues rooted in their own reality, familiarized themselves with global processes through creative methods, learnt about another culture and became more open. Most importantly, they could place their own contexts in a broader frame, which helped self-reflection and learning about the other.

*“The partnership lessons differed very much from the regular lessons. We spoke about the situation of the other country and watched pictures of it so it was not a regular lesson. I learnt some important things about Sierra Leone. The first is that it is unfortunately a very poor country, the second is that there is very much rubbish and the third is that a lot of children could not go to school because they cannot pay it. I realised that the students in Sierra Leone do want to study hard and they are happy for what they have. I learnt about myself that I am very lazy, sometimes I want more than I have and I do not like to go to school but if I could not do that I would be very unhappy because I will be nothing in my life.”*

*“The partnership lesson really differed from the original lessons we had. They were more funny and creative than the others. We were also able to improve our communicative skills by them. We learned that Sierra Leone is located in the western part of Africa. There is a season where it rains a lot. People are not that rich there as in Western countries. They are very helpful and they do a lot for their environment. They are also very funny and talkative sometimes. I learned that I can draw as a kid as well as an artist. I can talk a lot in English even if I don't talk that much in Hungarian. I learned that I can work well with other people if I communicate with them.”*

*“The partnership lessons differ from other lessons I have had regularly. In partnership lessons, I could sink into this. I've learnt about another culture. In other lessons not so much. The first most important thing I learnt about Sierra Leone is the toughness. People, children never give up their dream. They're learning despite the environment. It is remarkable. The second is waste management. We must heal the world by rubbish collection, saving on and recycling. The third is culture. I learnt these about students. Love, helping and learning are the three most important things I have learnt about myself.”*

*“It was very useful to learn about other people's life. We don't talk about this from other subjects. The water and streets look very polluted. The food looks unusual to the food we eat. Life is much different than here. They probably appreciate things more because they have to work much more to get what they need which makes them very hard working. I feel very spoiled, because I get almost everything I want. I learned that I don't know hardly anything about the world and what's outside of Europe.”*



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*“What I learned about students in Sierra Leone is that they are really hard-working, they are full of life all the time and they want reach something in life and for me it is really inspirational. I think my opinion has changed about my life goals. I'll never be the best but I will do that I can that's what I have learnt from them. What I have learnt about myself is that I can be changed by others even if they live in a completely different world from mine; they could influence me and I think this is a great thing.”*

Nevertheless, dilemmas and difficulties need to be spelled out, as well. Communication was hindered by technical difficulties. Appropriate infrastructure is missing in most public schools in Sierra Leone and the quality of internet is rather slow. This made sharing results difficult, making communication one-way.

The North-South imbalance impacted our project as well. We strived for equality in an unequal world. Is this possible at all? The cultural differences are significant, and the economic gap is wide, which can lead to the strengthening of stereotypes against our best will. This issue became even more prominent in 2014 summer, when the ebola epidemic broke out in Sierra Leone. This event shed light on the inefficiency of development projects, the related deficiencies in health infrastructure, and made it impossible for Sierra Leonean teachers to visit Hungary. This experience yet again underscores the importance of action. Global education cannot end with awareness-raising; it needs to promote structural and practical changes that bring us - step-by-step- closer to genuine equality.