



Photo: N. Häusler

“When I was a child, I dreamt of becoming a chef”

More and more representatives of the private tourism and hospitality sector are showing a great interest in supporting poor or rural communities in their neighbourhoods. Yet, being a competitive industry, the service sector must still meet visitors’ high expectations. Can these high expectations be met with local labour most of whom are poor and unskilled? Yes, they can, as a notable example of non-formal training from Sri Lanka demonstrates.

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Jetwing’s company history is a classic tale of entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka. Set up in the 1970s, Jetwing commenced the construction of a hotel in the sleepy coastal fishing village of Negombo, built specifically to

suit the European charter tourists. Only two decades later, it has emerged as one of the market leaders and hospitality trendsetters in Sri Lanka, dominating the luxury, sustainable and nature tourism segments as tour operator and hotelier. In spite of rapid growth, the company’s philosophy has not changed over the years: to be a family of people and companies committed to providing excellent and innovative service with high stakeholder satisfaction.

Here, Jetwing has adopted a broad definition of ‘stakeholders’ – it includes guests, staff, business partners, investors and even neighbouring communities. Hiran Cooray, Chairman of Jetwing and son of the founder, Herbert Cooray, describes why this is the case:

“The reason of our business philosophy is very much related to my father’s attitude to life. In the 1950s, my father was a rebel and student leader. When he started to build and operate hotels in 1970s, he was still a socialist at heart. For him, it was always important that the communities are somehow involved in and can benefit from our business. And even though the company now employs some 1,500 employees, we try to keep its vision, which sometimes is not easy. Therefore, it is very important that our management team strongly believe in our vision and mission. We cannot compromise our core values such as honesty and integrity – they are not negotiable.”

Close co-operation with neighbouring communities, such as supporting the local hospitals, schools and Buddhists temples and relief and reconstruction work after the 2004 Asian Tsunami, are part of Jetwing’s business philosophy. However, the company also believes that the economic realities and its bottom line focus are crucial elements of responsible tourism. Nearly all of the Jetwing hotels meet high international environmental management standards.

The Eco-Resort Vil Uyana

In October 2006, Jetwing Hotels opened a new Eco-Resort, Vil Uyana located near Sigiriya Rock Fortress, a heritage hotspot in the centre of Sri Lanka, called the Cultural Triangle. The architecture and concept of the hotel complex are unique. The 25 private wooden luxury chalets are integrated in a private nature reserve that provides a haven for wildlife; parts of the land are used for organic rice farming. The number of staff is about 100; around a third of them are members of the nearby communities or of Jetwing Youth Development Project I and II.



Photo: N. Häusler



■ Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP)

In 2006, the company developed the Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP) to provide hospitality training, at no cost, to rural young men and women who had completed basic schooling but could not find employment in the Sigiriya area (where the company opened the Eco-Resort of Vil Uyana in the same year, see Box above), as well as to some adult women (ages 40 to 50) who were the sole providers for their families. The whole training process took 18 months (not full-time), and its success can be attributed to Jetwing's commitment to the following principles and guidelines:

Establishing trust: Although religion is an important part of daily life in Sri Lanka (as it is to some extent in many parts of Asia), most international development projects ignore this important aspect of spirituality and do not integrate it into their daily work. By establishing close contact with the Buddhist temples in the Sigiriya area from the very beginning, Jetwing earned the unwavering trust of religious and public authorities, the parents of trainees

and the community itself. The Venerable Kithulhitiyawe Kumara Kasyapa Thero, a Buddhist monk at the monastery of Rangirigama, explains the relationship with Jetwing below:

"Before Vil Uyana was constructed, a representative of Jetwing came to our monastery and asked us how we felt about their plans to build a resort so close to our community. We answered that Jetwing would have to respect our traditional ways, such as not cutting trees, keeping the surroundings clean and identifying leisure places for the tourists while respecting silent and spiritual areas nearby. Our principal monk got the permission to visit Vil Uyana at any time, and on important religious days, we are invited to pray at Vil Uyana. Other hotels nearby have established relationships with high-ranking monasteries, but Vil Uyana kindly supports us and other small monasteries in the area."

Innovative English language lessons: Instead of engaging a young, inexperienced volunteer teacher from overseas, the company was extremely fortunate in enlisting a local, highly experienced teacher for the project

who could train the students in practical, spoken English, using role-play in a series of real-life situations, as well as exercises in grammar, general knowledge and Western culture.

Training in life skills and hotel operations: Trainees were assigned to different areas of hotel operation (front office, housekeeping, food and beverage services and kitchen operations). Instructions were given in both Sinhala (the trainees' mother tongue) and English. The training included as well the following general topics: Life skills (the importance and benefits of employment), teamwork, importance of meditation, mind enrichment (finding your own identity, thinking positively), mind cleansing (avoiding jealousy, anger), respect for others, willingness to admit mistakes. In addition, meditation, drama, singing and dancing are also part of the applied training methods, because these light-hearted methods of teaching are favourable for non-academic students.

After five months of training, half of the 120 students graduated. Afterwards, they moved into the hotel for the final four months of preparation before the

hotel was opened. The English and hospitality training continued on a regular basis for one more year.

In 2009, Jetwing successfully carried out JYDP II, supporting 80 young people from areas affected by civil war in the north and northeast of Sri Lanka.

■ Benefits

The benefits achieved so far are diverse:

- **Stable income:** Most of the young staff have a regular income and deposit up to 20 percent of it into a bank account while spending the rest on daily living expenses or to provide financial support to their parents. Most of them also invest their income in house extensions, maintenance or in buying a motor-bike; a few bought computers.
- **Certification:** Although the training programme is not part of a formal hospitality training programme, certificates are presented to those participants who pass their examinations, giving them a good standing for interviews at other hotels in Sri Lanka or abroad.
- **Language skills:** All of the trainees improved their English skills at different levels.
- **Career opportunities:** Once a year, Jetwing employees can be promoted a step up in the corporate career. Nearly all the participants of JYDP I were in higher positions

within two years' time. Most of them have expressed extreme confidence that they will reach the top of their career, such as becoming senior housekeeper, bookkeeper or even executive chef, within the next 10 to 15 years.

Mr. Nalaka, 18, 3rd Comis/Kitchen, shows the possibilities a programme such as JYDP offers to rural unskilled young people: *"I grew up in an area which was heavily affected by the civil war. When I was a child I dreamt of becoming a chef and having a house of my own. The opportunity to join JYDP has made my dream come true. I can learn so many things here. One day I would like to become Executive Chef. Even having Tamils as my training colleagues was very important for me because it made me realise that they had to suffer in this war in the same way as my family."*

- **Image:** Participants of JYDP are highly respected in their home communities, especially the young women, who can now choose potential candidates for marriage from the wealthier families in their communities.

Jetwing itself has generated benefits with this programme. Among them are the establishment of good relationships with communities and authorities in the region. Also, only few incidents of stealing have been reported at the hotel site.

■ Simply offering opportunities

Many critics who argue against the integration of poor and unskilled persons into the tourism and hospitality industry usually make two points:

1. Poor and unskilled people can only work in low-skilled jobs within the tourism and hospitality industry and do not get the opportunity by business owners to climb the career ladder.
2. The need for training sessions to be long and comprehensive makes capacity building for poor and unskilled people in the tourism and hospitality sector both time-consuming and expensive.

The Jetwing Youth Development Project has clearly proven these two arguments to be wrong: Participants of JYDP usually start working in promoted positions as soon as three or four years after taking part in the training. The training programme of JYDP I itself was an investment of just 7,500 US dollars because it is adapted to the local circumstances, which includes using the Buddhist temple as a training centre and hiring skilled, innovative local teachers and trainers.

The story of JYDP demonstrates that fresh, innovative and informal ideas combined with professional experience and an open-minded organisational culture of the parent company Jetwing can yield extraordinary outcomes.

Zusammenfassung

2006 startete die sri-lankische Hotelgesellschaft Jetwing Hotel das „Jetwing Youth Development Project“ (JYDP): In einem entlegenen Gebiet des Landes bot sie – mit großer Unterstützung durch die lokalen buddhistischen Tempel – ein neunmonatiges Ausbildungsprogramm für mehr als 100 arbeitslose junge Männer und Frauen an. Mit einer Gesamtinvestition von nur 7 500 US-Dollar wurden fünfzig Jugendliche und einige alleinstehende Frauen im Gastgewerbe ausgebildet und erhielten die Chance auf einen Arbeitsplatz im Luxus-Öko-Resort Vil Uyana der Jetwing-Kette.

Nach dem Ende des Bürgerkriegs setzte Jetwing 2009 sein erfolgreiches Ausbildungsprogramm fort, vorwiegend für junge Leute aus den Bürgerkriegsgebieten im Norden und Nordosten Sri Lankas.

Resumen

En 2006, la empresa hotelera Jetwing Hotel de Sri Lanka inició un proyecto de desarrollo juvenil titulado en inglés "Jetwing Youth Development Project" (JYDP). El proyecto se lleva a cabo en un área remota y ofrece un programa de nueve meses de capacitación a más de 100 jóvenes desempleados de ambos sexos que viven en las zonas

aledañas, con un sólido apoyo de algunos templos budistas locales. Con una inversión total de sólo 7 500 dólares norteamericanos, cincuenta aldeanos jóvenes y algunas mujeres solteras se convirtieron en profesionales del hospedaje al final de su capacitación y se les ofreció una oportunidad de empleo en el conjunto eco-hotelero de lujo Vil Uyana, de propiedad de Jetwing. En 2009, una vez finalizado el conflicto civil, Jetwing tuvo éxito nuevamente en ofrecer oportunidades de capacitación sobre todo a personas jóvenes de las áreas afectadas por la violencia en el norte y noreste de Sri Lanka.