

UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA

FACULTY OF EDUCATION



Portfolio for the EUTOPIA Programme
Reflective Writing on My International Experience
Volunteering in The Gambia: Challenges and Insights

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In recent years, I've had a few international experiences that I want to reflect on today. Besides the many trips and travels I've been privileged to enjoy, one of my most meaningful experiences abroad began in September 2023, when I moved to the Netherlands for five months as part of the Erasmus+ programme. Those months taught me a lot — from connecting with people from different backgrounds to strengthening my academic knowledge. I also learned a great deal about myself: how I handle difficult and unfamiliar situations, what I find important, how I function in an international environment, and more. One thing I discovered is that I truly want to go abroad again in the future and take every opportunity to explore new environments and cultures, connect with people from different backgrounds, and reflect on how these experiences shape me as a person.

Therefore, after returning home, I worked hard and eventually got another opportunity to go abroad, this time in a completely different context. In March 2025, I volunteered in The Gambia, working in a local nursery, welfare centre, and school. Each of these settings brought its own challenges. I want to share more about this experience — not only because it's still fresh in my memory, but because it left a significant mark on me. It was demanding both mentally and physically, and it changed the way I think about many things I had taken for granted.

What made this journey truly special wasn't just the travel or the volunteer work, but the people I met and the strong connections we built in such a short time. We lived together, which meant we could spend a lot of time talking, sharing stories, and learning from each other. I was especially curious about their lives, childhoods, and ways of thinking, and I could talk with them for hours. Through these conversations, I learned that religion plays a major role in their culture and is deeply woven into everyday life. I was fortunate to be there during Ramadan, the holiest month in Islam, and I saw how everything changed during that time. People were fasting, which made working more difficult. They prayed not only five times a day but also during the night. Every evening at 18:20, they broke their fast together with a cooked meal. There was a noticeable increase in generosity during this period. However, they also refrained from music and dancing, focusing entirely on prayer. For me, this was eye-opening, as I didn't know much about Islam before. After 28 days of fasting and prayer, Ramadan ended with Eid, a major celebration. Everyone dressed beautifully, we shared a big meal, and there was a noticeable shift in atmosphere — as if the country had transformed overnight. Life returned to normal, and people resumed working and celebrating.

Witnessing this strong connection to tradition made me reflect on my own culture. As Slovenians, we don't seem to feel such a deep connection to our identity, at least not in the same way. We celebrate some holidays like Pust, Miklavževanje, Božič, and Velika noč, and on those days we may feel closer to our traditions, maybe even dress up, but the rest of the

year we rarely think about them. Being from a small country of just two million people, with a language that isn't widely spoken, we increasingly use English in daily life. Even our slang, especially among younger generations, is full of English expressions. Still, I had a different feeling about being a Slovenian when I was in the Netherlands. Every time I heard someone speak Slovenian or even Croatian, I would go up to them and start a conversation. It was a way to feel connected to home. We even cooked Slovenian and Balkan dishes a few times — not only to share our culture with international friends but also to reconnect with our own roots.

Returning to The Gambia, what struck me most was the way people live in their families and communities. The position of women is still unequal, and violence is a part of everyday life. Many children grow up in environments where physical punishment is common, both at home and in school, and they may adopt similar patterns in dealing with conflict. This was something I struggled with deeply. I remember seeing a teacher hit a child in the classroom and wondering what I should do. Should I say something? Stay silent? Who am I to judge their actions? On the other hand, how else is a teacher supposed to discipline 60 children in a tiny classroom with almost no materials, just chalk? I respected her ability to manage that environment, but I still found it hard to process. I found myself questioning not only their way of disciplining children, but also how I was raised to think about authority, discipline, and care. Perhaps my reaction said just as much about my own upbringing in Slovenia as it did about theirs.

I spoke with my Slovenian friend who was there with me, as well as some local friends we had made. They told us they had also been hit as children and that their schools even had teachers specifically assigned for discipline. They laughed while telling us these stories, but to me, it seemed like a defense mechanism — a way of convincing themselves that it wasn't so bad. It left me with many questions. How can I say something is wrong if it's the only way people know to function in those circumstances? And how can anything change when it's so deeply rooted in the culture — a culture I'm not part of and barely understand? Even though I wanted to help, I couldn't ignore the fact that I came from a privileged background. I asked myself whether my presence did more good than harm — and whether I was unintentionally reinforcing a saviour narrative, even when I tried not to. Looking back, I realise I was experiencing a form of culture shock — not the kind that causes panic or homesickness, but one that challenged my core beliefs about childhood, care, and justice

Another challenge I faced was working in the orphanage. Seeing babies only a few months old, left without their parents or any real affection, was heartbreaking. I could feel their pain and struggle. In the first few days, I tried to comfort every baby who cried, but I quickly saw it wasn't possible. There was only one of me, two to four nurses, and 21 babies. As soon as I put one baby back in the crib, others would start crying. It became clear they were severely

lacking in attachment, touch, and love. We spent the whole day with the toddlers, took them outside to walk and play, but when it was time to return to the cribs, they cried intensely. Some even started hitting their heads against the wooden bars. Watching this I felt my heart breaking and the only thing I could do, was to step outside and cry. I felt their sorrow with my whole being, and it left me feeling helpless. I devoted my time and affection to them, but it could never be enough. The nurses were understaffed and underfunded. We brought many donations like baby formula, diapers, and wipes, but I couldn't stop thinking — what happens when those supplies run out? They can only hope someone will come and donate the things they need soon enough.

All of this made me think about how different our worlds are and how much of life is determined simply by where you are born. I always knew I was fortunate, but this made me realise just how much I had taken for granted — things like a functioning school system, safe family life, women's rights, good healthcare, and of course, material resources. Even having a passport and the power of it. All I had to do was buy a plane ticket and I could go there and volunteer. But for my friends in The Gambia, even if they had the money to visit me and Slovenia, they'd need to fly to Egypt just to apply for a visa at the Slovenian embassy, which is expensive and not guaranteed. It can easily be denied. Before this trip, I thought I had a good understanding of what it means to be open-minded. But now I see that true openness goes even deeper — it's about being able to sit with discomfort, to resist the urge to judge, and to remain genuinely curious, even when things feel unfamiliar or difficult to accept.

I often wondered whether the people I worked with saw me as a learner, a guest, a helper, or something else. Did our conversations leave a mark on them as well? It reminded me that intercultural exchange isn't just about observing — it's about relationship-building.

Reflecting on everything I experienced, I feel this is just the beginning of my journey — learning about different cultures, living abroad, meeting new people, and building genuine connections. My time in the orphanage, working with neglected babies, made me think more seriously about the kind of work I want to do in the future. I've always been interested in working with children, but now I feel especially drawn to supporting those who experience neglect or trauma early in life. I also feel more committed to working in intercultural settings, where sensitivity and awareness are essential. These experiences made me realise that social pedagogy — the field I'm studying — isn't just about helping. It's about listening, asking difficult questions, and understanding the systems that shape people's lives.

They also sparked a deeper curiosity in me: What are we really doing to protect children and prevent such suffering — not just in Africa, but in Europe as well? As a student of social pedagogy, I've learned some things about this field, but not enough. There are many children

in Europe who aren't treated well, who live with trauma, and who are misunderstood. Trauma-informed care is essential, yet we don't always acknowledge its importance. That's why I'm excited to begin my internship in September at the Centre for Child Protection and the Institute of Anthropology in Rome. I hope to gain a broader understanding of safeguarding, become more sensitive to intercultural and international perspectives, and learn how to apply academic knowledge to real-life situations.

One of the most valuable things I gained from participating in the EUTOPIA programme was the habit of reflection. Writing regularly about my experiences helped me process them more deeply, recognise patterns in my thinking, and better understand how social, cultural, and structural factors shape people's actions. It also deepened my ability to reflect critically and write about complex intercultural encounters — skills I now recognise as essential. In our group discussions, I learned to listen actively, especially when someone expressed a view very different from my own. This was sometimes uncomfortable, but always eye-opening. Engaging in meaningful conversations with people from diverse backgrounds gave me new perspectives, and I'm sure the knowledge and insight I gained through this programme will continue to shape my future experiences.

When I first left for the Netherlands, I was eager to experience something new. I didn't know then that those first steps abroad would lead me to question not just other cultures, but my own assumptions — and that this questioning would become part of who I am.