

GLEP and the path of administration

Preamble

We are still on our way, not yet at the end of the journey, but with GLEP we have developed a roadmap that we can use as orientation in the administration.

For a long time, UEM maintained that administration and above all management had to be German. To be honest, an international financial administration and international personnel in administrative positions seemed almost inconceivable. To be sure, this is connected with the fact that, from a legal point of view, the UEM is a German organisation with internationalised management bodies. But there is certainly a connection with the fact that people somehow always expect administration to be a "German thing". This was particularly the case because until recently the administration was completely organised from the Wuppertal office, while the regional offices in Dar es Salaam and Pematangsiantar dealt with the programmes and projects.

I would uphold the claim that management sees itself, and is always to be seen, as a service centre for the work of the UEM. The operational staff of UEM in the various departments and fields have to be able to rely on a functioning administration which makes their work easier and not more complicated.

It was therefore soon obvious that if our programmes were to be developed and designed according to GLEP criteria, the administration would also have to follow this path and become more diverse and international.

It all started with an Excel spreadsheet and statistics. We looked into the question: who actually works for us in the UEM and in administration? That is to say, where do the people come from, how old are they, what perspectives do they have, what religious background influences them? Further questions that were asked included: are vulnerable groups represented in our staff? What educational qualifications do our colleagues have? How far are we actually privileged?

We had thought-provoking meetings with all kinds of people, where we first had to get to grips with the matter. We had to learn to go beyond our usual thought patterns and let ourselves rephrase them first of all, moving from the perspective of "we here and they there" towards the question: "Who are 'we', actually?"

In these processes, it quickly became clear that the African and Asian regions were under-represented in most areas. Even today, Wuppertal is still by far the largest UEM location, with predominantly white, German staff members. Until a few years ago, black people, apart from members of the Board, were only here for a few years as exchange workers, but otherwise an absolute minority.

We had to accept that we were significantly less diverse than we realised. We actually had to learn that we should first of all listen and accept that new ways were required in order to bring GLEP into the administration.

So that was the beginning of a path towards developing the administrative structures of the UEM according to GLEP criteria and establishing a serious diversity management system. In the following sections, I will try to explain thematically the steps we have taken, how far we have come along the path up to now, and what we have learnt in the meantime.

When we use the term "we", this includes our colleagues at the UEM, who have been involved in the processes at many different points in the hierarchy and the various fields of activity and perspectives. We are a large team.

Information Technology (IT):

The first step towards true internationalisation was taken by IT as part of the administration. Even as the initial concepts and ideas for GLEP were aired, it became clear that the colleagues in Wuppertal and the two other offices were very differently equipped. In Wuppertal, we had first-level support for IT problems and modern equipment that always worked. We also had access to servers so that we could work properly in teams, a large range of programs, data backup, and opportunities for training. The colleagues in Dar es Salaam and Medan (where the office was situated until 2018, before it moved to Pematangsiantar), on the other hand, had to look after all this themselves and even needed to use their private email addresses for business purposes.

In order to put an end to this imbalance, we started by having the Head of IT travel to both offices in 2017 to set up an IT infrastructure that was connected to Wuppertal, to provide the staff with hardware of equal quality, couple them with Wuppertal on an equal footing and train them accordingly. Looking back from today's perspective, it is almost embarrassing to think about how differently the work was done in the UEM. After a few joint discussions, it very quickly became clear that unequal treatment of colleagues – in this case giving them different working conditions – has a major impact on how and where employees see themselves in the organisation. It has a major impact on the rights and duties they perceive in comparison to others and how they rate their position in the system. There can be no cooperation on an equal footing if employees are not treated equally.

From all this we have learnt that if we want everyone to have the same rights and obligations, and all colleagues to contribute their own perspectives and knowledge and find pleasure in developing the UEM further, we must also give them the equivalent working materials and environment.

The investment required for this had to be seen as an investment in performance. It has paid off many times over.

Incidentally, the IT structure that was created at that time was the start of many other developments. Today, the team is already taking its first steps towards internationalisation, as the team has been working at two locations since autumn 2023 and has been joined by a new Indonesian colleague.

The Committees

What sounds bureaucratic is actually the UEM's most powerful tool for involving people in decision-making processes. The Board has a total of 8 "committees", which discuss and decide on different topics. The results of the committees are confirmed by the Board, which only holds further discussion on particularly extensive decisions. There is also a right of veto, but this is very rarely utilised. Examples of the committees are the Regional Committees, Finance and Administration, Communication, Human Resources and so on. Traditionally in the past, the committees held their meetings physically and therefore exclusively in Germany, where the Board and most of the staff work. That was practical, and that was just the way it had always been done. As awareness grew that this meant that the expertise of the colleagues in the other two regional offices was hardly taken into account, the managers of these offices were at some stage invited to take part digitally for certain committees.

You have to picture a group of people sitting in a conference room in Wuppertal, while the person connected from Africa or Asia was projected on to a screen larger than life without being able to see or even understand the rest of the group. Nevertheless, the first step had been taken and participation was possible.

However, as has already been described for the field of IT, it was also the case here that access and the manner of participation determined how the role was perceived and what rights and obligations were derived from it.

We learnt that we would have to develop further in this area. Then came Covid-19. Covid acted as a booster for the digital development of these committees. We came to learn new video technology, and we all held our meetings from home. For the first time, all participants had equal access to the discussions and decisions, each of us was on a video tile, and we all communicated with each other in the same way. This worked so well that the Board members decided to keep it that way. We have learnt from this that hybrid meetings, in which one group meets physically and others join in digitally, have a certain value. But only if this does not result in permanent unequal treatment. Here, too, the following applies: access determines self-image.

In a further step, we took stock, as we did at the beginning of the GLEP development, and looked at the composition of the committees. What is the gender balance? How are the three regions of the UEM represented? Who has voting rights, and who is a guest? The result was sobering and showed a clear need for action.

In a subsequent reorganisation of the committees, we applied genuine diversity criteria for the first time and made new appointments to the committees. Since then, a balance of gender, origin and also age has been achieved in all committees, both for the chairs and the participants.

We have learnt from this that these changes not only met with appreciation, but that they enabled the full potential of the available resources to be utilised by our employees. The culture of discussion changed and people who previously only felt like tokens became equal participants.

The Staff

I now come to another important topic: the staff at the UEM and their composition in the three regional offices. It has long been the case that we take great care to make the mix larger when filling positions. The aim is to have as many different people as possible working together in teams – with different backgrounds, life experiences and cultures. This is still a major challenge, as we naturally do not have complete freedom, but have to wait and see who applies and what professional qualifications they have. But we have learnt something new here as well.

If you want a diverse workforce, you have to start with the job advertisements. Our experience is that there are certain types of job offer that appeal to certain people. For example, there are key words that in many cases are aimed more at women and others but some are more for men. On the internet we discovered helpful tools that helped us to redevelop and rethink the wording of job adverts. It remains a continuous theme of discussion, how we evaluate job interviews and make our decision. Not all people behave in the same way in interviews; some of the acquired social norms have to be decoded before a decision can be made. We are particularly struck by the fact that in many cases men and women have very different levels of self-confidence despite having the same qualifications. If this leads to person A, who makes a more self-confident and dynamic impression than person B, being given the job, but we notice that person A always turns out to be male, then we have done something fundamentally wrong!

The recruitment process is a highly sensitive topic requiring a high level of awareness of diversity right from the start and therefore also a diverse team involved in the decision-making process. Then we can see together what one person cannot see alone.

In addition, in the educational field there has been intensive development of anti-racism work for the church and society in the last few years, and strong influencers have made the UEM known far beyond its own bubble. We learned that our credibility as an employer has increased rapidly, so that we are known as an organisation that does not engage in pink-washing but wants to take diversity seriously. Since then, we have seen a positive development not only in the number of applicants, but also in the type of people who apply.

This does not make everything easier, but ultimately better – I'll come back to that later.

Accounting

Following the successful internationalisation of IT, the next target was finances. An internationalised organisation like the UEM, which receives around 40% of all donations from Africa and Asia, should also be perceived as an international organisation, not a German one. Part of the colonial legacy is that a North-to-South flow of money is virtually always expected in development cooperation and also in the international ecumenical environment. This could still be observed at the very latest on the bank statements, since support for programmes and projects was always transferred from Wuppertal. The majority of salaries were also paid from Wuppertal, and the small accounting departments in Dar es Salaam and

Pematangsiantar only worked regionally for themselves. The two accountants were lone fighters and did not even know each other.

This has now changed completely. Delayed by coronavirus, we were only able to complete the internationalised accounting project in 2023. The lone wolf approach has ended and all three accounting departments now form a new joint accounting department working in an international financial system. The colleagues exchange information in regular video conferences. Transfers are now made from the office where the conditions are best and no longer just from Wuppertal, as was previously the case. This required a series of new ideas and concepts that took local legal particularities into account and developed over several years.

Once again, we have learnt something, and I repeat myself: when people have equal access, they develop their full potential. The principle of "Wuppertal leads and the others are just followers" has increasingly disappeared in the financial sector. Ideas are shared and work systems are developed together. The transparency created by the complete digitalisation of documents and full access to the entire system from all locations also helps us to enforce our own Code of Conduct to prevent corruption and promote transparency and to have this certified by auditors and the seal of approval for donations. Thus we have an overall view of the situation.

United Action

As early as 2012, an astonishing decision was made that is probably still unique in the field of development cooperation and, above all, in international ecumenism. A fundraising campaign was developed under the label "United Action" to collect donations for the UEM in Africa and Asia. But it was about much more than money. It was about dignity! It was about countering the "white saviours" and to make it clear that there are rich people in all societies, who can also be asked for donations. It was about showing that the flow of money from North to South can be reduced. That means an international community, which should work together on an equal footing at all levels, can also do this when it comes to financial resources.

Today, United Action already contributes 40% of the freely disposable donation volume. And of course this has also had an impact on the administrative structure. Even though most resources for communication and fundraising are still channelled into Germany, we have built up a structure in recent years where the staff in the offices in Africa and Asia work together with their German colleagues, develop materials, advise each other and exchange ideas about what does and does not work. We will certainly see further internationalisation here in the future. Above all, however, we have learnt that if one no longer automatically assumes that "the rich are in the global North" and "the poor in the global South", this can lead to completely new thought structures and experiences.

That happened in July 2021, when tens of thousands of euros were donated from Africa and Asia for people affected by the devastating floods in Germany. A part of GLEP also became visible, because the Germans had to change their perspective and receive help from people who otherwise see themselves as recipients.

Rethinking personnel management

Finally, a few thoughts on UEM as a safe employer for all.

The internationalisation of UEM is a success, as is GLEP as de facto "Internationalisation 2.0". The ideas and concepts are working. Much is still on the way, much is still being tried out, but I am convinced that the future prospects of the UEM have been brightened by the development of GLEP and that many successful programmes and concepts have been made possible at all.

This is a blessing for the UEM!

Nevertheless, you don't have to put on rose-coloured glasses. After all, there are also the following aspects that are only given a minor mention in most specialist literature on diversity management:

- A high degree of diversity does not make things easier, but with the right management it can make things better, more innovative and certainly more productive.
- A diverse workforce is not automatically more liberal. If we meet as equals, then we also have to accept that our world view is not always the same, and that our opinions on issues can differ. At best, this is enriching and thus part of our success; on the other hand, it can lead to disputes and, in the worst case, to discrimination and offence.
- We need to practise a margin for tolerance towards mistakes. We do make mistakes! We don't always treat each other as well as we might. This requires good communication, and the necessary energy.

Over time, we have learnt that when we bring very different people together in one place so that they can work together and spend large parts of their lives together, we need good mechanisms to make the whole thing work.

We have therefore developed a number of measures to take this into account. However, many of them are still in a kind of test phase; some are still to come, others will be discarded.

Here are a few examples in brief:

A code of conduct against discrimination and racism is an important and indispensable basis. Adopted by the UEM's highest body, the General Assembly, it is binding for us in management. Employees and all people who take part in UEM programmes can refer to it.

In-house think-tanks on various topics, to which everyone is invited, enable participation without responsibility and without further obligations. Above all, they offer a forum for exchange and an important resource for management to recognise moods and learn about potential for improvement. These are places where discussions can take place.

The meeting time, which is de facto a daily 15-minute coffee break and has a long tradition at the UEM. It is a place where we can exchange ideas, get to know each

other and also celebrate. We also use it to pass on information from the Board and to report on new developments and ideas in short sessions. Once a week this meeting is held digitally with all three offices.

Anti-racism training for white people, which is explicitly voluntary, to raise awareness for this issue. We are still developing further concepts to make the UEM a safe place and are constantly learning new things. Internalised racism is a major issue.

Empowerment for BIPOC, as a kind of counterpart to anti-racism training. This is an important learning area that we are exploring in order to make the UEM a safe place, as described above.

As described, the list could be extended and also include things that we have discarded meanwhile. But the important thing is that if you don't have the courage to try things out and, above all, to accept that some things won't work, you will fail before you've even tried.

Final thoughts

GLEP is a blessing for the UEM. Through GLEP many things were set in motion, and that which already existed was rethought. Some changes are recognisable and quantified, some had been planned and developed for a long time, some have just become a matter of course.

We are on our way and still have a lot ahead of us.

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