

Discussion with Holger Knaack and Maria Letícia Ferreira

On August 8th, 2020 at 2 pm German time, Rotex International held a general meeting. This is the summary of the first hour of the meeting where we were joined by Holger Knaack and Maria Letícia Ferreira. The meeting took place via Zoom. About 50 people, including the full board attended.

1. Welcome

Emil welcomes everyone to the meeting. A special welcome goes to 2020/2021 RI President **Holger Knaack** and 2019/2020 Youth Exchange Committee Chair **Maria Letícia Ferreira** who participate in the first part of our meeting. They both take a moment to address the audience. After that there is time to ask them questions and discuss.

Holger Knaack

As past chairman of Rotary Youth Exchange for all districts in Germany, the RYE program to Holger is one of the most important things within Rotary. It was also his way of stepping into the international world of Rotary. He emphasizes the long lasting connections and relationships that are formed through the exchanges, especially with the 43 students he has hosted at his home.

The current situation is uncertain and difficult and because of that there will not be many exchanges. In some places there is a small chance of sending students abroad this year. Holger thanks everyone who is present for supporting the Youth Exchange Program and staying involved in Rotary. Rotary has a lot of opportunities and chances to learn and improve ourselves. For this and many other reasons he hopes that many Rotex will remain with Rotary and eventually become members of a Rotaract or Rotary club. Besides this, Rotex is very important for the entire Rotary family because they are peacebuilders and help us to celebrate our large youth exchange network around the world.

Maria Letícia Ferreira

Having been a part of the RYE program over many years, it has become a part of her life. She personally hasn't been on a youth exchange but was introduced to Rotary through a Group Study Exchange experience. As Rotex there are a lot of good things everyone can do. In her first year with Rotary the motto was to "raise awareness". This has been very important for her to get in touch with many people, build friendships and to network. Everyone has the potential to become a pioneer in their community to foster peace in a better way. For her raising awareness was a great

motto. This year's theme "Rotary opens opportunities" goes in a similar direction and helps us with connecting and fostering peace.

Maria Letícia has been a good friend of Holger for a long time. Maria remembers when she first met Holger in Birmingham in 2009. Seeing an old friend become the RI president has thus been moving for her. It shows what chances and opportunities the Rotary and RYE network create.

Time for questions

The first question comes from Emil Schenkyr. *The current situation is very difficult for the RYE. What do you think will be consequences and opportunities from this situation in the future?*

Holger feels sad for those who were prepared and looking forward to going on exchange this year. This time will be very important and useful for districts to improve and strengthen the program. For the future there is a lot of work that can be done in the districts. Working with host parents and clubs can be a very important aspect to help districts to strengthen the program. Holger is hoping that it will be possible to do exchanges again next year. He is sure that the RYE community is strong enough to cope with the current situation.

Maria Letícia sees this period as a chance to reflect on the program and rethink how it works. With a lot of internal work, the program could come out stronger after the COVID-19 situation. Now is also a chance for all Rotex to improve their work with their district and open up new channels of communication.

Question from Albert Hoenisch: *Many young individuals have reached out to me that despite these times of uncertainty they are willing and motivated to participate in a RYEP, but are having difficulties in finding a suitable sponsor club to support them and enable their experience and entry into the rotary family. What is your personal advice? How can we Rotex approach Rotarians and motivate to enable as many RYEP as soon as it is possible?*

Rotary is a grassroots organisation where every club is different and independent. Many Rotex are eager to step up and return into the program. If your Rotary Club is not supportive of Rotex, you should try to find a different club in your district. If you still can't find a supportive club, you could form your own Rotaract Club. This can be done with just 10 people and without a sponsoring Rotary Club.

In some places Rotex umbrella organizations have been established which could help you as well.

Question from Mauricio Pelini: *Many Rotex are worried about the future of the RYE with the dissolution of the RYE Committee. What will this bring for the future? Will there be any issues and changes on how it will work in the future?*

In short term exchange, the situation is very free as it is very different. There are not many strict rules that apply. The long-term exchange is somewhat different as it usually takes 11 months and is not so flexible. Nonetheless it could become more flexible in the future as well, but this depends on the schools which form an important

part of the exchanges. This makes it more difficult to organize it more freely in a top-down way. Holger thinks that with the pandemic situation and the changes in organization, Rotary will become more flexible in nearly everything it is doing.

Question from Emma Mulhern: *How can we help low income students to participate in the RYE program since cost is always a question for a family?*

Rotary is a unique exchange program as it is mostly run by volunteers which makes it one of the most inexpensive exchange programs. Holger had a discussion with Australian government officials a few years ago. They make a clear difference between the different programs (whether they are a volunteer organisation or a volunteer professional organisation with a lot of staff) and consider the volunteer work a great thing. The most expensive parts of the exchange are the various trips offered to the students. Holger would love to see more support for low income students. In many places, there is a lot of potential of support as there is a lot of money in the district. Sharing the cost between different parties would probably be one of the most effective ways.

Question from Frederik Pinkau: *In the context of the Corona crisis, many European Rotary districts emphasize the opportunity to go on exchange to another European country in order to show that countries close to one's homeland are also attractive for an exchange. Is this also the perception in other parts of the world? For example, are Rotary districts from Latin America planning more exchanges within their continent?* Holger doesn't know, but he thinks it's possible and especially the possibility of doing so in Europe, where one can go on exchange by car potentially. In Latin America, the vicinity aspect is not quite the same.

Question from Emil Schenkyr: *How could the retention rate of Rotex be higher and the number of Rotex joining Rotary rise in the long-term?*

Holger would like to see this. In Houston there is a trial with a connect model, which is not club-based. It would allow for people to stay in the Rotary family without being in an actual club. The traditional Rotary Club is often not the most suitable to Rotex who are based more internationally and often move around more. Most likely the number of virtual clubs and systems will rise in the near future also as an outcome from what we learn during the COVID-19 situation with virtual platforms. Maria Letícia thinks what Rotex is doing is going in the right direction and can thus be taken more and more seriously. It fills a hole in the Rotary program. Many new things are also possible that weren't possible a few years ago. Thinking outside of the box is an often-used phrase, but in this case suits very well for finding new opportunities.

Question from Emma Mulhern: *How can we better spread word about Rotex, who we are and what we do? I have been giving presentations to Rotary clubs around my district about Rotex because I realized that many Rotarians don't know anything about Rotex and what we do.*

The answer is probably the virtual way. Presenting the Alumni association and its goals is essential. Asking the district for a better platform for visibility is a good option. As the RYE program is often organized on district level, this would be the contact to have for Rotex clubs.

Question from ISP D1850: *As you hear from many RYE district representatives, the Youth Exchange could not be as successful without Rotex. How can it be guaranteed that Rotex associations all over the world will be given more responsibility in youth work in the coming years? I realise that it is already an important first step to give Rotex Associations the opportunity to become Alumni Associations, but I fear that this will not help to achieve a breakthrough in districts where Rotex is not yet developed.*

This is a difficult question and the answer cannot be a global one. Every district has its differences which means we will need individual solutions. Rotex should get in touch with their corresponding district and connect with them about what can be done and how to improve the situation. Holger is open to help in case it would be needed. If the idea of involving Rotex and promoting Rotex came from RI rather than RXI, this would probably help and make it more widely accepted in the district. This could be something to work on.

Question from Luiza Farran: *What are your thoughts on what we can we do as Rotex to keep the youth exchange program “alive” during this pandemic time when lots of countries won’t be receiving/sending exchange students during this Rotarian year?*

The districts and clubs seem to be very engaged in this and do want to restart the program as soon as the health situation allows to do so. Working with government agencies and other organizations will be an important part before safely restarting the program.

Holger would like to touch on Emma Mulhern’s question regarding low income students again. Not finding the right way to integrate students from low income backgrounds can create discrimination or inequality. Supporting low income students is important to Rotary. Together with that, the peace-building initiative is something that has to be carried out into the world which helps with acceptance and inclusion. Past RYE students can talk a lot about this. For two years, Rotary has had its diversity and inclusion statement. Putting this into action is something Rotary is working on doing, but it is very difficult as there are big differences between different countries and areas. Nonetheless it is very important to not just talk about it but really start putting it into action.

Question from Laura Ritter: *Thank you Holger for joining this meeting and sharing your ideas with us. I have a question that I’ve been troubled with for quite some time now. As Rotex we are frequently faced with the expectation to become a Rotaract member. However, many of us are dedicated to the Youth Exchange and put all their time and energy in improving this program. Isn’t it possible to lower the barriers for Rotex to become Rotarians and continue to work on the RYE from this side instead of advocating for this step in between to become a Rotaract member before joining Rotary?*

Holger really encourages non-traditional ways. The older ways are often complicated, take a lot of time and are not attractive to younger people. Try to find and take the path that works best for your association and Rotary in your area. If you have problems with the current governor or key Rotarians, look for other ways of achieving

what you want, even if it means not following the traditional ways. Usually there are always some Rotarians that want to involve younger people, even if it might not be in the classic scheme of connection.

Question from ISP D1850: *What are the chances to welcome you at the 5th Rotex International Convention in Brazil 2021 (5th-8th August)?*

Holger doesn't know yet. At the moment he has a lot of requests, be it virtual or in person. The RI Convention in Taipei is also not certain yet. He thinks doing a lot virtually in the future is a good thing. With the flexibility of virtual events one can adapt to the ever-changing situation.

This marks the last question to Holger. He has to attend another meeting and is leaving us at this point. He wishes all the best to everyone and thanks us for the opportunity to join us, which he has enjoyed a lot. Leticia leaves as well at this point.

Emil thanks them both again for their presence and the interesting discussion during the first hour of our meeting. As Rotex International we hope to welcome Holger and Leticia both at our next convention.

The minutes of the full general meeting can be found in the other file.