

# BE YOUR COUNTRY?!

**A MANUAL ABOUT NATIONALITY AND  
CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE  
PROJECTS**



This manual is the outcome of the seminar „Be your country?! Deconstructing culture in (international) youth work and non-formal education“ organised online from 3-9 December 2021 by Service Civil International Österreich (<http://www.sci.or.at>).

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# Why this manual?

**What do we mean, when we say „culture“?** In youth and volunteering projects, international volunteer organisations gather international groups of young people to foster mutual understanding and a culture of peace. Culture is one of the predominant concepts in these "cultural exchanges", but what do we mean by "culture"? Is „culture“ the same as „country“ or „nationality“? How is our own individual culture shaped by our gender identities, race and ethnicity, class, growing up in the countryside or a big city, sexual orientation , etc.? Is the term " culture" actually a good point of reference for our personal beliefs and individual principles, especially for youth with fewer opportunities who often feel marginalized or excluded from national cultures?

**European youth work has quite a limited understanding of culture.** We have the feeling that sometimes the common understanding of culture in European and international youth work is quite static and oldfashioned: By “culture” and “cultural exchange” we often mean exchange of people from different nationalities – and we emphasize this by making jokes about national identities, asking participants to bring food from “their country”, talk about “their country”, etc. We usually don’t reflect that participants might have diverse approaches to how they feel about “their country”. We often lack an understanding for cultural nuances that go beyond nation states (class, race, gender, age, urban/rural, sexual orientation, subcultures, etc.).

**A manual as an intervention!** With this manual, we want to provide reflections, information and tips for youth workers and staff from volunteering organisations around Europe to critically reflect about their own practices of culturalization in non-formal education programs, energizers, support and training structures and free time activities. This manual does not want to instruct people what to do and not to do, it is rather there to raise awareness concerning this concept and try to have a critical eye on the approaches towards culture to guarantee genuine inclusion of people from different backgrounds while taking into consideration their individuality.

**This manual is a starting point!** We summarize some first reflections and ideas in this manual to share it with you and to have a first starting point to work with. This is a huge topic where still is much work to do. We want to go deeper into this topic with new projects in future and we advise you to inform yourself more about the topic, e.g. on different concepts of culture, problems of culturalization, cultural racism and more.








**This is the outcome of an international online seminar from 2021.** The seminar was a space for reflection. By experiencing non-formal education methods such as Volunteer Advice Chat, silent discussion or World Café, the participants of the seminar discussed and shared a lot of experiences they had made around culture in international youth and volunteering projects. They learned and exchanged methods and best practices on progressive approaches to intercultural learning and inclusion and empowerment of marginalized groups.

**The project had the following objectives:**

- Reflect on the term “culture” and its relations to other terms such as country, ethnicity etc.
- Understand the intersectional identity of individuals that go beyond national or “cultural” identity and include others like gender, class, education, age etc.
- Take a closer look at the term “culture” in intercultural learning, and how this can include looking at subcultures as well
- Reflect on European values that connect us and the “culture of peace and non-violence” that SCI proposes
- Create an approach to the get-to-know phase in international youth exchanges that uses “cultural” references at a minimal level if at all
- Reflect on methods such as intercultural evenings and similar in their effects on young people and their perception of culture and Europe
- Develop NFE methods to address “culture” in youth exchanges and other youth work settings in an alternative way
- Network
- Promote Erasmus+, NFE and international youth work
- Create guidelines for other youth workers
- Present the results of our discussions in a public presentation for youth workers and other stakeholders
- Promote a European identity and awareness amongst youth

**Who are we?** Service Civil International (SCI) is an international peace organisation dedicated to promoting a culture of peace by organising international voluntary projects. The network consists of 132 organisations from 93 countries at the time of writing this text in May 2022. SCI has since its first activities in 1920 made a major contribution to the development of international volunteering. The network enables thousands of volunteers each year to participate in local projects with a non-profit cause in an international group.



# Representing your Country

**What do we mean, when we say „country“?** We use this term in a bit of a provocative way - the way that we see it being used by European youth workers. People mean different things, when they say „country“: state, nation, people within a nation or even government. Rather than giving a perfect definition, we want to work with the very crude concept of „country“ that we see commonly used and deconstruct that. This is also the reason why we put it in brackets.

**Who could feel uncomfortable representing „their country“ in an international youth or volunteering project?** We have identified that especially youth with fewer opportunities get excluded or put into difficult situations when being asked to identify with their supposed nationality. For some groups it is not complicated to exactly know what „their country“ is supposed to be, to appreciate „their country“, to identify with it or stand behind what it does.

**Migrants and refugees often have several or no countries they feel affiliated with.**

People flee „their countries“, they leave and migrate to other places because of safety, work, opportunities, interests or love. People of course also after migration might have a clear identification with their country of residence or their country of origin, but many migrants and refugees might feel like they belong to several countries or to none. The topic of „country“ is a difficult one.

**Minority groups are often excluded from national narratives around culture.**

Minorities might feel complicated about „their country“, if the majority dominates national narratives around „their country“. This might be ethnic minorities and indigenous people, but also queer people are often explicitly excluded from national narratives. If „my country“ doesn't give me rights or visibility, why would I identify with it?

**People from unrecognized „countries“ and people who might face discrimination or backlash because of saying what „their country“ is.** People might feel like it is not safe for them to mention where they are from. Sometimes people might contest whether „their country“ is a country, sometimes they might experience hate speech or harsh reactions. If „my country“ has a conflict with „another country“, it might not be easy for me to say that I represent this „country“, as it might not be easy for me to predict what will happen if I do. I might feel in danger.

**People who feel uncomfortable with „their country’s“ past or present.** Many people take bloody historical episodes or even current conflicts in which „their countries“ are actively involved into account when thinking about representing it. What if I disagree with „my country’s“ actions in the past or present? What if I want to distance myself from „my country“?

**People who are against nation states.** Even on an ideological level, asking someone to represent „their country“ can be problematic. There are many people, especially working on human rights and social justice, who don’t believe that nation states are an efficient way of social organising and who want to stand up against nationalism in principle.

**Why would participants enjoy it or find it important to represent „their country“ in an international youth or volunteering project?** On the other hand, we see reasons for people to want to represent „their country“ in a project. Here are some that we could think of:

Some people do identify with their countries because of nationalism, pride, appreciation for national culture etc.

Be aware that it might be important for people to share where are they from, especially if there are people from more privileged countries and more marginalized countries together (e.g. people from Global North or Global South; people from Western Europe and Eastern Europe).

Some people want to represent „their country“ in order to contradict stereotypes about it, to promote that it exists in the first place, to promote its legitimacy as a nation in threat of an oppressor or to improve the image of where they are from.

Some people like comparing „their country“ with others in order to learn new perspectives and to understand „your own country“ better

Whether we like it or not, often nationality is part of our identity. Even if we contradict or challenge it, we still have a relation to it

**The challenge is to unify these two needs and wishes.** On the one hand, as youth workers, of course we don’t want to exclude anyone’s perspective and we want to create a progressive space for cultural exchange. How could we deal with these contradictory needs? Some tips in the next section!



# Checklist

In many international exchange organisations, when sending participants to other „countries“, it is and was a regular practice to give participants „dos“ and „don'ts“ about the culture of the countries they will travel to. We see this very critically, as it is a very static, narrow and nationalist concept of culture. We came up with new cultural Dos and Donts that are meant as some guidelines to check when organising international exchange projects.

Here we go:


## Dos

- Be sensitive that it might not be easy for people to talk about, represent or be proud of „their country“; let participants choose themselves how and what to represent
- Introduce different models on culture and reflect upon multiculturalism, transculturalism, interculturalism, multiculturality
- If you do activities based around people representing "their country", give the possibility for people to share a diversity of perspectives and opinions on the country
- Be critical of nationalism that participants might support. Support participants in discovering identities and cultures that they belong to that go beyond national identities
- Create an awareness for the problems and historical inaccuracies of national stereotypes (e.g. this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAfcPsiXuFs>)
- Create a Group Agreement that makes the group sensitive to the impact of reinforcing stereotypes within the group (e.g. national stereotypes) and refer to the Agreement if a problem occurs,
- Encourage people to bring things to the project that are important for their personal culture (e.g. food from their family or community, music they like)
- Give participants space to explore internationalism beyond their national perspective, give space for them to develop a critical look onto "their own country" while cherishing good aspects
- Create spaces for exchange on different approaches to culture and nation
- Organise fusion cultural evening or inter-individual evening or story telling evening with a living library method





# Don'ts

- Don't assume that everyone has an easy time identifying and representing „their country“. It's more complicated than that
  - Don't force participants to "represent their country" in any way. Ask people about how comfortable they feel with this rather than assuming they do
  - Don't frame "culture" only or mainly in terms of nations, countries or states. Instead, give the opportunity to talk about culture also in terms of gender, race, class, rural/urban, mental health, abilities, subcultures, etc.
  - If you have competitive elements in activities, please don't divide groups by country/nation. We don't need to reproduce national competition in projects that aim at international understanding
  - Don't motivate participants to reinforce national stereotypes about each other; don't reinforce these national stereotypes yourself (even if you have good intentions); question national stereotypes and make people aware about the problems of these stereotypes
  - Don't assume roles for people based on their nationalities – someone is not better at cooking something specific because of where they are from, someone is not automatically punctual or never on time just because of where they are from
  - Don't treat participants who don't feel like representing a country or "their" country like "exceptions" or "the others". Make sure that the whole program is made in a way that people are not excluded if they don't want to represent a country.
  - Don't ask participants to bring food from "their country". Instead, ask them to bring food from their home / community / city / family / region.
  - Don't demand for participants to share and overshare personal experiences or stories. Of course we can take people out of their comfort zone, but participants ideally have the space to decide themselves if and how much they want to be taken out of their comfort zone.
  - Don't play cultural simulation games like “Albatros” in which cultures are seen as country or as very stable box. If you still play them, put the context maybe more abstract (martians and jupiterians) AND don't forget to critically reflect on that games and its messages
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# Getting to know each other

One of the first questions that participants get asked in international youth and volunteering projects is „Where are you from?“. While this for sure can be useful information, we want to encourage participants to go way beyond that. Here we list some examples of tools and methods that we are using in order to create more interesting getting to know each other phases in projects.

**Talking Wheel:** This method helps to appreciate diversity within a room and not leaving people aside. The idea is that participants can share in duos about different topics asked by the facilitator. Two co-centric circles that move in different directions (can take other shapes). Questions could be:

- How were your travels?
- Why did you apply for this project?
- Find things that you have in common.
- What is special about you?
- What is your favorite place on Earth?

**Presenting each other through objects:** Each participant brings something that is important to them, that allows them to share something about them or tell a story (it can be an object, food, something to read outloud). Everyone can put the objects they brought on a table and someone chooses a thing that catches their attention, its owner comes forward and talks about it and themselves, and chooses the next one.

If the project is held virtually, you could do this by everyone nominating each other. We like this method because it allows participants to get to know each other but the nationality narrative is not pushed neither erased. If a participant wants to talk about their country, nationality or customs through their story, that is completely fine. Each participant can choose the space they give to country in their identity when presenting themselves.

**Storytelling** is a simple and creative way for participants to represent themselves. They have freedom to choose on what they want to concentrate and to show what is important for them.



**Don't talk about your nationality for the first days.** Participants of a project can be asked before the project to not talk about their nationalities, country of residences, mother tongues, etc for the first 2-3 days. So that nobody knows where people are from, and they can get to know each other without having country stereotypes in their head. This can also help in motivating the group to speak English. Be aware that it still might be important for people to share where they are from, especially if they come from an oppressed country. Explain participants beforehand and on the first days why you are doing this. After 2-3 days you should include a session where you end this exercise and people can share where they are living and what else is important for their identity. Be aware that there is not such a big focus on nationalities during this session, especially no guessing of nationalities or reproducing of stereotypes. This session should also include a reflection on this activity.

**Going deeper with the POWER FLOWER.** This method suits not as an getting-to know method for the first day. It is more suitable for deeper conversation and exchanges about personal identities connected with the topic of privileges and discrimination. Be aware that this method can be very sensitive, and it should just be used when you talk about structural discrimination and privileges in your project.

You need about 1 – hours time for it, a piece of paper and pens for every participant. You can either prepare a flower beforehand or ask everyone to draw one. The flower has several leaves. In each leaf you write a social category like “Age”, “Gender Identity”, “Sexual Orientation”, “Socio-Economic-Status”, “Nationality”, “Place of Residence”, “Race”, “Level of Ability”, etc. Every participant is asked to reflect on these categories individually and write their own positioning concerning these categories in the leaf (e.g. Pansexual for Sexual Orientation).

In a second step each participants colours the leaves depending on how privileged they think they are with their positioning in their social context. A coloured leaf means many privileges. In a third step the participants come together in pairs or groups of three and have some time to talk about the exercise and some reflection questions. They should just share what they are comfortable to share with others. Questions could be:

- Was it difficult to identify an affiliation or group in those categories?
- Which groups or affiliations are important to you right now? Do you associate individual group affiliations with positive or negative experiences?
- What positioning is considered privileged and deprived for each category? What are the consequences for individuals?
- How would you classify your own positioning? Where are you privileged? Where are others?
- What feelings do you associate with your positioning and the resulting consequences?
- Do you notice persons (groups) which are particularly oppressed in this society (Intersectionality)?
- ...

After this individual reflection you can add a short group reflection in which the groups can share some of their reflections, thoughts or questions.

# Intercultural Evenings

**What are Intercultural Evenings?** We have been to many so-called „intercultural evenings“ or „international evenings“ during volunteering and Erasmus+ projects. These are evening activities in which participants in an international group are supposed to share food, customs, information, etc. about „their country“, usually with a very static view on what culture is and how people might feel about „their country“.

**We advise you not to do Intercultural Evenings in this way.** We think that culture is much more complex and dynamic than static national cultures. We also think it is important to create space for everyone to be able to take part in evening activities. Migrants, refugees, people who don't believe in nation states, minority groups or people who might not feel safe talking about their country should be able to participate.

**Alternative: Inter-Individual evening:** In this concept, we take culture as a concept seriously. It is very similar to Intercultural Evenings, but has a different framing: Culture is much more than just „nation“ or „country“ and participants should have the freedom to choose what they talk about. They could talk about their lives, their interests, their community, their region or city, etc. They could present games, food, music, dance or info about their personal lives and their contexts.

With good preparation from facilitators and the sending/hosting organizations you can take the opportunity to present something innovative, able to connect not only the participants but the local community as well. You can do it via music, dance, artistic workshops.



