

IMAGE MAPPING

**A manual about volunteering
in rural areas**



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The following participants have contributed to the publication: Mirna Cipek, Mykhailo Osypenko, Jacqueline Casserly, Paul Rooney, Massimo Fianza, Luigi Pignatelli, Iryna Shvets, Lyubomir Hinchev, Aleksandar Vladimirov, Tadeja Lepoša, Urša Brinovec, Tena Miličević, Raquel Camps Tor, Lara Montoya, Ana Maria Ceballos, Mario Spirkovski, Sheila Amorós Fuentes, María Ros Silla, Carla Radnić, Camille Deberdt, Ting Wang.

The publication was edited by Iaroslav Gerashchenko and Thomas Schallhart, who facilitated the seminar.

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Why this manual?

What do we mean, when we say „volunteering in rural areas“?

In the group that wrote this manual we have experience in international volunteering in rural areas, sending youth from rural areas to international volunteering and youth projects, working with local youth around heritage, human rights or peace - and many more. Youth from rural areas are, in our eyes and in the eyes of the Erasmus+ programme, also youth with fewer opportunities, with less access and infrastructure provided for being involved in international projects.

International volunteering can have a big impact. We want our international youth projects to have positive effects to their immediate surroundings, to counter stereotypes, to reach target groups we usually don't reach with peace projects, to contribute to a positive and sustainable rural development and to give youth access to a more diverse image of what the place they are visiting or living in is like.

There is not much literature about this topic out there that is accessible to us as youth workers. When we organize international youth projects and volunteering camps in the countryside, it can sometimes feel like a parallel universe: Youth from all around Europe engage in an intense intercultural exchange, sometimes with a lot of interaction with the local community and sometimes very little. We want to strengthen the local impact of international volunteering projects and we want to discuss how to make it better. We lack forums of interaction with other youth workers and we understand this manual as an invitation to a bigger discussion around this topic.

This is the outcome of a seminar from March 2020. The seminar was a space for reflection around our practice and experiences with volunteering in rural areas, it took place in the village Kötschach-Mauthen in the South of Austria. We exchanged non-formal education methods and action forms that we use in our youth work in the countryside. We discussed how to create intercultural events in rural areas and youth projects around local heritage. And we talked about the possibilities that Erasmus+ gives us for projects in our local contexts. While a really fun and interesting experience, the end of the seminar was the beginning of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with all the challenges involved in this.

The project had the following objectives:

- to exchange tools, methods and approaches to increase the local impact of international volunteering and youth projects and to promote peace, tolerance and active citizenship in the countryside
- to share communication strategies and institutional ways to reach more youth from remote areas
- to create, improve and share non-formal education methods on interactions between international volunteers and local inhabitants
- to network between the organisations involved in this project
- to create a stronger discourse about the need to create a local impact with international volunteering and youth projects within the international voluntary service movement by creating a manual on the topic

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 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.

Development center Pangeya Ultima is a Ukrainian non-governmental, non-profit organization established in 2012, composed of youth, youth workers and third sector experts. The organisation wants to foster intercultural dialogue, create opportunities for personal development and emancipation of people and facilitate sustainable development of communities. Locally the NGO operates as a center of mobility, non-formal education and self-development, its participants uncover their individual potential and help exploit the potential of own communities for the sake of sustainable development and democratic transformation in society.

Strengths and weaknesses of international volunteering projects in the countryside

Strengths

- Can teach volunteers from rural areas in other parts of the world or volunteers from urban areas ways of living in community, natural context and heritage.
- It can broaden horizons. With this knowledge, volunteers can reflect about their own community, attain new perspectives and spread this knowledge. And the local community can develop in confrontation with people from the outside.
- Can create connections between rural areas in different places - or between rural and urban areas.
- Can increase international connection of a rural area - in terms of political collaboration, personal connections and tourism.
- Can help preserve traditional ways of living or traditional practices, e.g. by volunteering around cultural or natural heritage. Volunteers can help preserve the community.
- Often offers opportunity to learn informal methods and use soft skills.
- Buying food from local farmers

Weaknesses

- Sometimes it is hard to catch the interest of the local community for international volunteering projects. The local community sometimes lacks an understanding or connection with the work and significance of the volunteers. Sometimes there is also a skepticism about outsiders involved.
- Sometimes volunteering projects are too short to achieve a long-term connections or impact in the local context.
- Language barrier: Locals might or might not speak English and often international volunteers do not speak the local language, which makes the contact and communication harder and can lead to misunderstandings.

- Lack of infrastructure in more isolated areas. We might have problems with lack of public transport, phone signal, internet or other forms of infrastructure.
- Some youth from urban areas has no interest in rural areas, as the countryside sometimes has less other youth, less institutions and less possibilities for entertainment.
- Sometimes there are not many or no good venues for hosting groups of volunteers or no good venues for hosting events in indoor places.

Some best practices

1. Planning

- Ask the local community what they need instead of imposing your ideas. You could share your ideas and ask for feedback.
- Do not copy projects from other areas without rethinking how they work in this specific environment
- if the type of volunteering culture you do is not a well-known concept in the community, try to bring them closer to the topic by organising public events or locally relevant media promoting volunteering and sharing experiences of other communities that benefited from the type of volunteering you do
- Try to find accommodation in families
- Try to find local partners or identify active organisations, community spaces or influential members of the community for support
- adjust your language to be relatable (don't use project vocabulary and mindset when communicating with the public), make sure you are using the means of communication that is relevant
- be generous with the time you plan for communication (it is often underestimated)

2. Volunteer recruitment

- include the local community in the distribution of the call for volunteers
- include the local community in volunteer selection
- present the applications for the volunteering positions to the local community (especially if there is a lot of them) to show that people express interest to come there and increase their sense of pride

3. Orientation and training

- include the locals in orientation: i.e. giving a tour around the area, visit to the local heritage, giving workshops to the volunteers or organising a welcome party

4. Supervision and evaluation

- find a local mentor of a similar age (for long term projects), encourage volunteers to join a local group that share their interests (sports team, choir, youth club)
- organise project activities in a space that locals relate to strongly
- present the results of the project to the local community
- do an evaluation with all the actors in the local community and the volunteers and share the results with them (preferably in a public space). Make sure you include both the positive and negative comments, suggestions and open up a space for discussion.
- Assess the impact of the project on the local community and implement your learnings for the next project cycle

Public events in rural areas

We wrote down some thoughts and experiences of how we have reached young people from rural areas to get engaged in international volunteering.

Preparing a public event. One of the methods to attract more people to our projects is organizing public events. During the seminar this manual was written at, our group invited some local habitants in the village of Kötschach-Mauthen in Austria to attend an evening discussion. A person from a local association assisted and shared her experiences with previous volunteering projects in the village. She even said that she was interested in sending her grandsons here. You could make the whole public event more meaningful, if you involve local organisations in the creation of the event to begin with and you co-create it.

Some thoughts about public events. In our case, we chose a topic for our public event. We discussed in group about the topics which may most interest locals and what could be useful for us. Then, we thought about the forms of our public event such as:

- Discussions around the tables: We prepared different questions, guests may come and join a table where there is their favorite topic.
- Presentations: A discussion could start with introducing our aims and ideas to the guests and let them get a clear idea of what will happen at the event.

- World Cafe: A method of knowledge sharing around several tables. We switched tables in order to go on with different topics and get the discussion with different people.

Promoting the event. To promote public events, we can use different methods, such as:

- Social media: creating and sharing events on Facebook, Instagram, and so on.
- Connecting with (other) local organisations and important people: Getting in contact with people who have useful contacts and influence so that they could spread the events around them.
- Advertisements in the village: Putting posters in the shops, restaurants, parks and so on, sharing flayers.
- Make sure that potential participants know the exact place and time where the event takes place.

School workshops

School workshops can be a good form of interaction of volunteers coming from outside with the local population. School workshops could not only involve children but also families and teachers. These activities could allow the cultural exchange and make the volunteers feel like they belong to the local community.

The workshop could focus on many possible things. It could include art, geography, history, sharing of customs, curiosities and interesting facts, environmental awareness, games, etc. Something that has worked for us were simple language exchanges, like how to say "Hello" in different languages, doing land art with school kids or planting trees.

How to interact with the local community on social media

Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are becoming an extremely valuable tool for reaching people. So whether seminar or event, social media are powerful to help you promote or interact with local community.

Some ways to have interaction between volunteers and local community that have been successful for us:

- Find a personal contact within the community and ask them to spread it on Whatsapp or Facebook groups of the village
- Your description should be attractive (regularly posting pictures, short videos)
- Use hashtags for reaching more people
- Make a Facebook or Instagram page
- Try to include local media to spread your event (newspaper, radio, television)
- Try to find the channels that could be useful (schools, youth centers, municipalities, churches, etc.)
- Sharing an experience from a local participant
- Get straight to the point

Volunteering around local heritage

What is local heritage?

Local heritage is a legacy of tangible and intangible expressions of the ways of living developed by a community in a specific territory and passed on from a generation to generation, such as monuments, arts, food, music, traditional knowledge, nature, crafts, architecture, tools, customs, dances, legends, literature, historical and archaeological sites etc.

Why to volunteer around local heritage?

People are facing fear of the unknown, lack of solidarity and sense of belonging. Exchange of volunteers and local community can increase cultural awareness and empower people.

Action around local heritage can create positive change and motivate people to become active citizens. International volunteers can get inspired by the hosting community, learn not only about the history and the tradition but also about values and beliefs. Volunteers can raise self-awareness, self-esteem and gain new methods and tools which can apply back home. Hosting communities can be stimulated and enriched by new energy and ideas, see themselves from the new perspective.

How to do volunteering around local heritage?

Several actions can be put into practice; Making a survey, collecting data, promoting (creating posters, videos, articles...), proposing workshops (schools, community centres, public spaces...), maintaining/restoring heritage sites, etc.

Interview with Karin Schmid

Karin Schmid is the executive vice president of the Museum 1915-1918 and of the association Dolomitenfreunde in Kötschach-Mauthen (Austria).

1. What kind of volunteering opportunities do you know?

In Austria there are many voluntary organisations, such as customs associations, music bands, Red Cross, fire brigade, alpine association, etc. They all cover an area that suits them. Be it now for social interaction, help and support for the civilian population.

The association Dolomitenfreunde (founded in 1973) has set itself the goal of coming to terms with recent history, in which former war paths of the First World War in South Tyrol and Austria (Carinthia) were made accessible again by volunteers under the motto: "Paths that once divided fronts should unite today! Over the decades, more than 350 km of frontage paths have been transformed into paths of encounter. People who are first of all interested in history should meet there, but above all the paths should bring together people of different nationalities. The museum in the town hall in Kötschach-Mauthen, created in 1992, shows the mountain war from the perspective of the simple soldier, in order to make the inhumanity of a war more accessible to visitors. In this way, we want visitors to the museum to reduce the sometimes still prevailing resentment towards other nations and learn from history that a path to lasting peace would only be possible together in the form of a union of nations.

2. What would you like to gain from volunteering projects and why?

Get to know new people and their views. To find solutions together so that our next generations can look back proudly on our actions and deeds, because we have shown them that - regardless of generation, shift or nationality - it is possible to form a strong society.

3. What skills would a volunteer require and why?

Volunteers should bring a great potential of idealism. They should be aware that with their activity, be it now by supporting craft activities - in whatever form - a community grows together. And the stronger the society and the cohesion it creates, the more effective is the cohesion of a community to counter resentment.

4. What kind of volunteering projects would you like to be made into and why?

As I have been involved in a volunteer project for 27 years and am responsible for the organisation, I would simply like as many people as possible to join such an organisation - in whatever form - in order to strengthen international understanding in Europe, so that even with small projects, great things can be achieved.