



# Short-term volunteering

as a door for development

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1-st edition 2020

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Short-term  
volunteering

**Pepa Peneva Veleva**

**Volunteering** is a voluntary act of an individual or group freely giving time and labour for community service. Many volunteers are specifically trained in the areas they work, such as medicine, education, or emergency rescue. Others serve on an as-needed basis, such as in response to a natural disaster, environment protection and many other community causes.

**Short-term volunteering** could be a "*door for development*".

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## Who is this book for?

During a meeting in the distant year 2011, I acquainted a volunteer who had just returned home from a project by the EVS program. We conversed for a long time. I listened and listened, and I could not leave. Her eyes were shining with a brightness that I keep on rediscovering years later in the eyes of young adults who have partaken in similar projects. I was listening and thinking: "*How great of a challenge must it have been to go by yourself in a foreign country? To be alone for months on end, far away from friends and support?*"... The questions were crowding my mind.

Soon thereafter destiny acquainted me with a colleague from another organization, and, jumping from one topic to another, we ended up talking about the theme of volunteering and what a serious resource it could be for each organization. At the time my team and I were devoted to organizing a big international forum for the presentation of jazz and its inspiring branches in all spheres and arts. During those years *chalga culture* was at its peak in our

country (*chalga*: bulgarian mass and commercial pop music). The public space was inundating us with rhythms and texts which could make one sick. Our answer was not to complain and nag, but to present an alternative. An alternative which had the potential to awaken and sharpen the senses to something else. The festival which we organized was consuming all of our time, energy and attention. We worked hard all year long in order to be able to host musicians, artists and an audience in the lovely city of Smolyan in July, and to celebrate together the creativity, fantasy and talent of creators from all over the world. The problem was that the festival days were long and packed because of the insatiable appetite for events. We wanted more and more concerts, shows and exhibitions. We wanted to host as many artists as possible, as well as to make happen more exchanges between musicians from Bulgaria and other countries, which would give birth to new art projects. The popularity of the festival had gotten ahead of our confidence. A lot of people in the country already knew about it and were inundating us with questions and compliments upon hearing that we were part of the organizing team. But nobody realized how much labour had gone into the preparation and organization of such an event.

During the meeting with the colleague from the other organization we somehow naturally stumbled upon the theme of volunteering. Everyone in our team was working as a volunteer. Nobody was receiving remuneration although there were some people who were working for over 10 hours, sometimes 6-7 days a week. We



are grateful for the support of our families and partners. We were all devoted to the “jazz festival” cause, and, without noticing, we had attracted at least a dozen people to help with whatever they could. The opportunity, however, to host volunteers from European countries who would help with the festival looked like a chance to, first, overcome the limitations of popularity in our country. And second, it looked like a chance to have real support: a living human power in precisely the most dynamic days of the event.

The temptation looked very attractive. Nonetheless, as with perhaps anything in life, we looked for the unknown and potentially problematic elements that each adventure brings with itself. I am thankful to all the people who opened that door for me back then; who shared the positive and negative sides of this adventure; and who helped our team to get prepared and to be able to make the best out of whatever the program was allowing us to accomplish. Yes, projects with foreign volunteers are a real challenge. They can be successful, but they can also be a total disaster and lead to a collapse of the team, the event or even the reputation which one has been crafting over such a long period of time.

In this book I will share our experience and what our team and I have learned throughout these eight years of working with international volunteers.

We were learning and improving with each project. We were maturing together with the young people with whom we were working.

I hope that you will be able to find useful information in this book and be inspired to host volunteers. The first steps for us involved a short volunteering group project. It is not easy, but the potential of such projects is huge.

## What is it like being a volunteer from another country?

It is important to elaborate from the start that, for a volunteer to be beneficial to your organization and cause, you need to be aware of how exactly you will include that volunteer. What exactly is he going to do? And which member of your team will be helping him? Yes, you read this right: WHO WILL BE HELPING YOUR VOLUNTEER? The big challenge in working with volunteers is that they are NEW people in your team, and they need clear and detailed instructions about the things that they need to do and how you expect those things to be done.

If, however, the volunteer is international and does not speak the local language, the picture becomes much more complex. And the question is not just whether the task, which is given to him, can be accomplished in spite of the language barrier. This person comes from a different cultural reality. He is entering into team relationships and a manner of communication which might seem strange to him, or even be totally foreign to his culture.

In the years of working with people from different continents,

I have noticed countless times how, at the level of simply acquainting each other, sharing ideas and small talk (within the boundaries of the training's safe space), we all appear so open-minded and ready to accept the other person in front of us with his peculiarities. But when we start to work together and we face the first challenge in our mutual work, some underlying mechanisms and agendas that we have been carrying in our minds for a long time get switched on. In fact it becomes clear that we are not as open-minded as we present ourselves to be.

Each one of us is a product of a specific culture with its peculiarities, rules and ethical standards. We have been soaking these in for years. We have been taught how to behave in social spaces, what is acceptable and what is not. And precisely these agendas have helped us survive and function in an environment outside of home and our families. Now, however, the volunteer is in a new cultural environment where people around him are, for instance, kissing each other on the cheek not once, but three times, or, vice versa, they are not allowing him to approach them past a distance of two metres. All of this happens while he has to do something for the first time and he really needs to know if he is doing well.

The problem with people from a different cultural reality is namely understanding what the internal thought patterns that each one carries in his head are and, as far as we can be aware, understanding what is an internal projection and what is a realistic assessment of a situation. If we have previously lived and worked in an environment where body language has given us additional information that we are indeed doing

well, we might not be receiving these signals in the new environment. And the danger is precisely here- the foreigner can start developing thoughts such as:

*"Look, they do not like me.*

*I am no good enough for them.*

*They think of me as a second-hand person".*

But in fact the people around him are so focussed and consumed by their own duties and deadlines that they cannot even fathom the idea of the other person needing encouragement. You can imagine how fast such a spiral could trigger some internal fears and turn a minute task into an absolute poison for your relationship throughout the entirety of the project.

On their own, these patterns and agendas are not necessarily something bad. The bad part is when we are not aware of them. In a situation in which we are pressed for time, we need to make decisions quickly and act immediately, these internal schemes are being activated automatically and they help us function. If you are crossing the street and all of a sudden a car appears, which visibly has no intention of halting despite you being on the crosswalk, your instincts will be activated and you will run in order to avoid the danger. You will not even waist a second to analyze which foot you need to start running with or whether the bags in your hands will interfere with your movement. No, your internal mechanisms will start working immediately and you will just start running. It is only after the fact that you will be able to analyze whether this was the best decision or not: whether

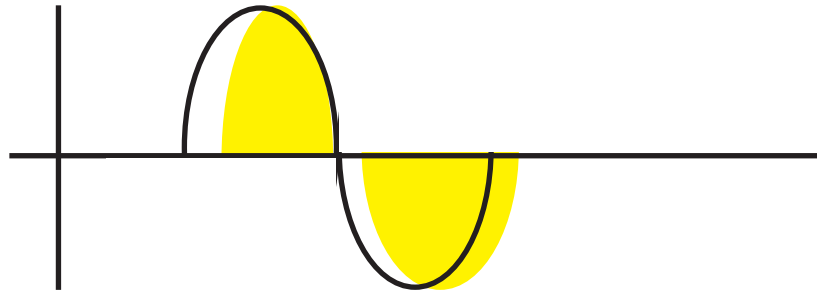
it would have been better for you to stop where you were and allow the car to go around you, or to find another possible solution. Or it is even possible that you do not analyze the situation at all, or that you just say to yourself that the person in this car is psychologically unstable and looking for someone to kill, and that you take this occurrence as a personal attack against you.

When you are working with a volunteer from another country, it is important to take into account from the start that this person has his own internal patterns and ethical norms, and these are usually very different from yours. They need to be acknowledged and accounted for in your mutual work. You need to always have a light switched on in your head and check whether its brightness is diminishing or whether it is burned out. In the next themes we will share our experience and what is helping us tackle obstacles. Our work with volunteers is much more different than working with employees.

## Short-term and long-term volunteering project

Find the ten differences.

In the last eight years we have gathered experience in hosting and sending off volunteers for different periods of time. We have hosted in Bulgaria almost 200 young adults for short-term projects and 56 for long-term ones. We have sent off 24 people on a mission in Europe and Africa. It does not matter where and how long projects are because in all of them we find a common peculiarity that looks a lot like sine waves which represent alternating currents and their frequencies:



Each project starts with wonderful expectations and excitement:

you are going to a new country, you are trying out new food, meeting new people, architecture and music... Locals are also curious, and they inundate you with questions about your culture, food and history... Sometimes you feel like a movie star: you are being stopped and asked to be taken a picture with (especially if the project takes place in a small city or town). You use each opportunity to travel and discover new places, to acquaint new people and to discover each time how these people get excited upon learning that you are using a different language from theirs. All of this greatly resembles the movement of the sine wave and the positive values in the first phase.

There comes a moment, however, when things start heading down a spiral. You enter a routine comprised of working tasks, schedules, team meetings and discussions about has been done. The days start repeating themselves. The temperatures outside change: winter or an extremely hot summer comes; the rainy season makes going outside of the office an endeavour no longer as pleasant and as exciting as before. You start missing food back home, as well as friends who know how to make you laugh. You would like to keep travelling during the weekends, but your budget makes you pick and choose and even cut down on many of your adventures. And without even realizing it, you are already in the lower phase of the sine wave when your mood is off and you cannot wait for the project to be over for you to go back home in the comfort of your already known reality.

It does not matter how long the project is. We have observed this



phenomenon both in projects that last 30 days and in long-term ones which last 5 to 12 months long. This phenomenon strikes some volunteers like lightning, while with other volunteers it comes in the form of unnoticeable suffering and sharing how they have really felt only at the end of the project when it is already over and one cannot do anything about it anymore. The important thing for you as a host organization is to be able to spot when the change of mood starts occurring and to help this person go through the motions of the sine wave successfully. It is important to be able to help him reach the positive phase again, to succeed in finishing off your mutual work in a positive manner and to part on good terms.

In long-term volunteering projects the national agencies make trainings for mid-term assessment with the idea of helping volunteers manage these emotions and the tension which has been created. The concept is wonderful. Sometimes, however, the end result is unexpected. These trainings welcome a volunteer who is so entrapped in negativity that he manages to poison a lot of people around him and to pass onto them his own disappointment and rejection. We have had cases of volunteers come back from the training and tell us: "*Do you know that other places have volunteers that do not do anything, whereas you make me work every day?*".

We also observe this sine wave in short-term projects. Please do not be naively comforted that the time frame is short and that the project will finish, and that you will part ways by the time volunteers

adapt to their environment and tasks at hand. Short-term projects hold other dangers which we need to take further notice of:

- **Everything happens in a group with more participants, each of whom needs attention and a personal approach.**
- **The emotions of one person could infect like a virus all the other participants, and this could happen so swiftly that you might not even realize where it came from.**

Therefore, at the beginning of this chapter I asked: WHO WILL HELP THE VOLUNTEER? The question is serious and before answering it you cannot be ready to host volunteers.

A common reality in non-governmental organizations is for people in them to work on a voluntary basis and to be doing a different job during the day which secures their day-to-day life and food. Their devotion to a given cause and their arduous work are traits that make them stand out. Very often they are required to work overtime and this makes them very focussed on their work and very well-organized in their time management. This requires a more specific coordination pattern of the team and for the latter to go through its operational tasks swiftly and responsibly. Here comes the big question regarding working with volunteers: how useful can these people actually be? Will they not be wasting their time and creating chaos around them instead of helping and contributing in concrete ways?

The first and most important question is:

**How will volunteers contribute to the organization and how?**

After this:

**How will you organize the work** – yours and your volunteers' –  
in order to be mutually beneficial to one another and to be  
productive?

## Accreditation: first step

If you are already sure about the tasks that you would like to give out to the people around you and about how your work would be made easier by including volunteers, then it is time to get acquainted with the different options for this to happen.

Volunteering is a model of work well-known since antiquity. Each one of us has done something voluntary in his life: for his friends, for his club and for his neighbour. This was how houses were being built in Bulgaria in the near past: the whole village would gather to help the construction work of sir Petko. The following month it would be sir Ivan's turn, and so each person would help others.

Volunteering comes in different forms; sometimes it takes up little time, while other times it lasts longer; it is shared or individual. Today we have manuals and documents which can ease our work with volunteers. There are a couple of funds which have made sense of voluntary work for both sides. They have chosen to back up voluntary initiatives by securing financial support and conditions for young people and organizations, which need support, to meet. These funds include:

- The European Voluntary Service which changed its name in 2018 to

- The European Solidarity Corps, a program of the European Union.
- The Peace Corps, a program of the United States of America.

National programs for volunteering by:

- The French government: for projects in France and Asia.
- The German government: for projects in Germany and Africa.
- Italy: for projects in Italy and Latin America,

And other similar ones which we shan't discuss here.

Each one of these programs has accepted its rules and work codex; the founding principle is **for both sides not to take advantage**.

In the current book I am describing our experience with The European Voluntary Service which, by changing its name to European Solidarity Corps, shall acquire a rather more specific focus in the years to follow and will have more geographical limitations. The experience of experts in this program have shown that, on the one hand, it is important to have a common ethical frame called the "Erasmus+ Volunteering Charter" and, on the other, to have a controlling agent in the face of national agencies, which make sure that these rules are being followed.

Why is all this control and supervision needed? In my opinion it does not really come down to money here, although money is an important factor. When there is an expenditure of resources and they come from public funds, there needs to be transparency and a clear account as to how these are being spent, for what and whether they

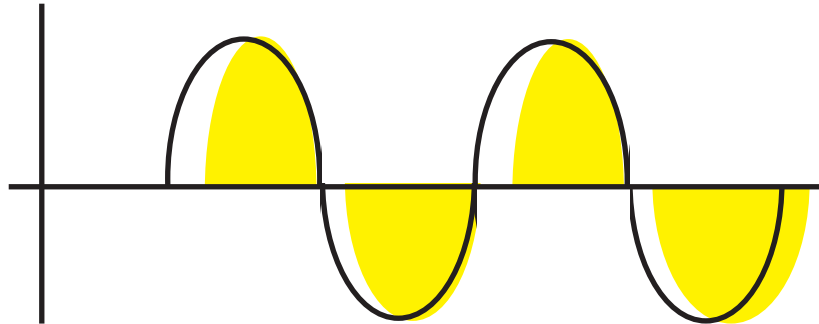
achieve the goals that are being sought. If this does not happen, these resources could be delegated to something more useful and meaningful to society.

By its nature, The European Voluntary Service has, besides securing a valuable resource for organizations which manage public causes and are useful to society, another more important goal:

- To provide an opportunity for young people to share their time, talent and skills by helping in meaningful causes. This gives them the opportunity to pile on some extra organizational experience and to expand on their own network.

In equal conditions, if the program is only focussed on securing volunteers for a given cause, everything could amount to just financially helping organizations which need human labour to accomplish their mission.

Nonetheless, this program has a different purpose and it is to create a sustainable inclination to helping in both the participants and in the society which receives this help. This is why the controlling agency has the mission of creating such conditions that allow volunteers to have the right experiences which will motivate them to keep helping. If we go back to the sine wave, the goal of the project is to arrive at a place where young people would want to help again and to contribute again for a different cause and in a different location, i.e. for the phases of the sine wave graphic to keep going on.



This sine wave is especially important to our team. Our experience throughout the years has shown that if we create good experiences and memories for the people who help us, we might count on them again later down the line. This saves up a lot of time, resources and energy. Later I will come back to the theme of motivation, but let us now have a look at the EVS Program and its segments:

- On the one hand, it **provides resources** for young people to be able to devote themselves to a certain cause for a given period of time and to not have to think about how to secure food or how to pay bills for rent etc.
- On the other hand, there is **accreditation** (in the new program it is called “Quality Check”) – this is the confirmation that this organization knows and testifies to adhering to the rules, that its capacity, including human resources, technique, office etc., has been verified by the Agency.
- Last but not least, we have the **actual contact with volunteers** in order to make sure that none of them have just gone on a trip

to a foreign country and that the actual organization manages to engage them adequately.

Accreditation (or “Quality Check”) is comprised of an application and an assessment phase. What does this mean? You open an online document on the Commission’s website and fill it in. You state what kind of “Quality Check” you want: sending off or hosting volunteers; voluntary work or internship. It is important to describe your past experience, your motivation and how you intend on engaging the young people that you will host or send off.

The Agency will then check if you have the necessary capacity to work with young people (including language capabilities); how you plan on securing the safety of the participants; how they will be occupied and who will work with them. Imagine that you go to a foreign country to work. It is important to know which organization you will get involved with and whether these people will follow the rules and will behave towards you in an honest and just manner. If the Agency approves of you and gives you a “Quality Check”, then you are already one step closer to participating in the program.

The Agency’s work on checking your capabilities does not end with this “Quality Check” nor does it end with accepting your report on a given project. Your accreditation is being checked and it could be taken away if it becomes clear that you have been taking advantage of the program and of the youths or that you do not have the capacity to work with these young people.



When saying capacity this means:

- Having time for volunteers.
- Providing emotional and psychological support.
- Having the social skills to be able to work with young people.

Young adults have shared with me how their hosting organization lacks people with these social skills and that they are even “devoid of all social sensibility”, and that “it would be better for these people to find a different job where they will not have to work with living beings”. This might sound strange, but for a young person from the southern parts of Europe the distant relationships between people in some northern countries could look peculiar and vice versa: from a religious point of view, the former might not accept all this freedom that he is seeing around him. If there is no person who can adequately respond or at least converse frankly with the volunteer, the project could end up being a catastrophe.

As far as taking advantage of young adults goes, what I mean is using them for activities which you might not have discussed in advance. I shall just give you one example albeit from a different program, “University Student Practices” by The Ministry of Education And Science in Bulgaria. A youth shared in social media that he had eagerly started an internship in his dream producing label in Bulgaria. But instead of learning and doing something productive, the only thing he was doing for three months was delivering coffee to the “great producers” and to the staff. The team did most certainly have these human needs, but it is advisable to announce in advance that you

need a person to get and deliver coffee, and to find one who is happy to do so.

There are probably people who would be happy to be in a room with you and to listen to your smart comments and remarks, but please be honest with people and be careful what you promise them.

Whenever you are filling out the application for the "Quality Check", it is important to assess your own resources, those of your organization and those of your environment. If you are organizing a big sports competition or a festival, if you are giving out food or providing a specific service in your community, you will probably need people. It is important, however, to answer:

- Are those volunteers going to be at the entrance?
- Will they need to communicate with your whole group? How and in what language will this occur?
- How many people do you need? And what skills do they need?
- Can they be internationals?
- Who is going to work with them?
- How long will their job last?
- What will they be doing in their free time?

**An assessment of your needs** is key to the success of everything which you embark on. Think about your needs and those of your whole group. And think about how you can include volunteers in meeting those needs.

## Partnerships in the project

If you have already received the "Quality Check", then you can go onto the next step: applying for financial support, which will allow you to afford volunteers.

In the early years of the volunteering program it was very important to point out who our partner or partners were going to be and what kind of experience each one had in their work with volunteers up to that date. Now, however, the picture is changing because the EVS platform is allowing us to post an ad and to find candidates for a particular job that we want to accomplish with volunteers. We exchange emails, we schedule meetings in platforms such as Skype, Zoom and others, and only then do we invite a partner or the young adult to find his own organization which can prepare him and send him off.

I would like to turn my attention to the topic of sending organizations. Their role in a volunteering project is immense: to prepare the youth for travelling, including logistics (how and by when he must get to the airport; what to wear and what not to wear), insurance and health rights, what to expect from the project and how to be most useful etc. All of this could also be done by the hosting organization,

but it is a simple fact that this first and particularly important preparation happens in his mother tongue. Throughout the years we have had cases in which volunteers arrived in Bulgaria and they knew not a thing about volunteering projects, nor did they know about Bulgaria or about us as an organization. Both our colleagues and the volunteers had decided that the simple exchange of a few files by email is enough of a preparation, but reality acquainted us with situations in which:

- The volunteer had not read his contract before signing it and his explanation was: *"I started reading it, but it was too long and I gave up"*.
- We were conducting a training upon the arrival of a group of volunteers, and, session after session, we were conversing, doodling, and at some point we realized that there was a participant in the group who did not understand any of what we were talking about. She was smiling at us, nodding in approval, but when we asked for her opinion, it became clear that she could not comprehend English well. She had not understood anything from the sessions up until then regardless of her deceitful smiles and her seemingly appropriate nods.

We came up with solutions to both problems, but if our colleagues on the other side had experience and did their job well, the project could have unfolded in a completely different manner and the chances of success could have been much higher.

If you are the start of this journey, the role of an experienced partner can become instrumental for the management of a conflict

situation within that same project. I remember a long-term project in which three volunteers had made a coalition against the fourth person in their project. Our partners from Latvia, two ladies who had also gone through EVS before registering their organization, handled the situation so gracefully and gave such good advice that we managed to restore the balance and to part ways with the volunteers on good terms even though we had previously wanted to cancel the project of all four of them. We are friends with all of them up to this day.

At the beginning of our journey with volunteering projects, we had luck in receiving financial support for a project for a contact seminar. We had previously heard about such meetings and, because up to this point nobody from our team had taken part in such an event, we decided to initiate it on our own. Our project was approved for financial support, so we gathered in Sofia the representatives of 40 non-governmental organizations from small towns. The theme of our seminar tackled the issues which we meet in small towns and villages and how the program for volunteering projects can help, including working with local youths and motivating them to be a little more active. In this contact seminar we presented who did what and what plans each participant had for the near future. And guess what! After only two months, we applied for our first short-term EVS project with six partners with experience in this program and twenty four young adults who we had to host in Bulgaria.

Of course our project was approved. We felt "armed to the teeth", and we had partners who were experienced in these battles,

with some even being ex-volunteers. When the time for the project came, and we hosted the young adults in Bulgaria, we met participants who:

1/. Knew what they were coming to.

2/. Knew what they would be doing.

3/. Had so much trust in us that they were ready to try everything that we offered them.

Going back in time, when I think about how many things we did not know back then and how many risks short-term projects hold, I think that the success of this project was pure magic. We gave our all, had an elaborate program and people who took it upon themselves to help in the project, but if our partners had not done their job before the arrival of the young adults, we would perhaps not have the same network of friends from all around the globe today and we would not have experience in so many wonderful things that happened in our work with people.

One of the good results in this first short EVS project was that a few of the participants expressed a desire to take part in a long-term project, and seven of them returned back to work with us as long-term volunteers. Though from a distance, we help others lead their own organization and we work with them as partners even in this moment. One youth from this project became an active member of his sending organization, and they are now working on the EU AID program and sending volunteers on recovery missions in Africa and Asia. This short project gave us enough confidence and hope to have enough

courage to host volunteers for longer periods of time and to organize our work with them in such a way that we could really respond to the needs of our local volunteers: to have something meaningful happen to the latter in the other subsequent eleven months of the year after the project's end. As is sung in a song: "the first love does not die", and so we kept on hosting volunteers for short-term projects.

I find the sine wave, which I already discussed, to be important. For me, it does not only represent my duty to do my job well when it comes to young people who have trusted us to help them leave Bulgaria on a high note and be content with themselves. The sine wave also helps me make an assessment of the current situation and teach the young adults that life has its ups and downs, and that it is important to have the support of a network of people who you can count on. That is exactly what our partners are to us. It is important to be able to assess where exactly you position yourself on this graph and to be able to find the strength and the value in coming back up to the positive side.

## How to choose candidates?

Internet and technology nowadays help us get in touch with people long before meeting them in-person. Social media present us with their profiles, and we can see whether they have any disturbing history, hobbies or political views.

The experts in the field of human resources have written numerous articles with advice that helps both sides of an interview. It is a fact, however, that choosing a volunteer could be described with the expression "*cat in the sack*", a.k.a. buying an item without any guarantee. On the one hand, volunteering through EVS is a chance for young people without any experience to develop one, and, therefore, we cannot seek for recommendations from previous employers or even contact them to check up on our candidate.

EVS is trying to change this to a certain extent by creating the platform [https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en) where young adults can register and describe their interests, previous engagements, workplace and education. On our end we can create search criteria and find candidates who check the most boxes for the specific profile we are looking for. I have personally had in my practice a case in which a young adult had studied and was looking for work in a particular field, but his talents and his desire for professional development were



completely different. By coming across our project, he was able to contribute wonderfully in the field which he enjoyed and to which he was ready to give his all.

In this sense the choice of candidate is a complicated task.

In previous years our partners chose the most ambitious young people whom they knew and with whom they worked. They had more youths around them ready to participate in projects and campaigns. But in the last years the motivation of young people seems to have changed. We have spoken with colleagues from all over Europe, and we have noticed that young people who are ready to seriously contact and work for a cause have in mind plans for a least two-three years ahead of them. They are busy, they study, and many of them also work, so it is almost impossible for them to go into a long-term project which could last eight months or a year.

From this point of view it becomes increasingly important for us to do short-term projects. This allows a lot of young people, who are busy, to get involved and to contribute to a given cause.

There also exists another group of young adults: those who are not very sure if such a project is even for them. If they take part in a short project, however, the chance of them having the courage to participate in a long-term project increases exponentially. This is why I strongly recommend that such projects take place in different locations for more young people to be able to experience.

It is important that the project be well done and that the volunteer feel safe, cared for, and, of course, that he live through the

assessment and recognition of his contributions. I have personally been amazed at the lack of trust among young people, especially those in the province, when it comes to starting their journey in a new country by participating in a volunteering project. I have been amazed by their readiness to risk and go work in Spain only because a certain charming man in a coffee shop has promised them an easy life there. When we offer them to go there as volunteers, however, and to see if this is their country, if they will be able to adapt, learn the language and settle in one place, they think of the offer as fraud: "someone is going to make them work with remuneration". It is hard to negotiate with such people. I see the risk they are ready to be exposed to, and a few of them even become victims of human trafficking and are exploited sexually or for their labour. At the same time I am defying the stereotype that volunteering is taking advantage of someone else's labour, and I am showing that its focus on spheres and groups, which really need support, can also bring serious benefits for the volunteer.

Today finding volunteers, especially for projects outside of the capitals, is a little bit harder. This is a fact which is agreed upon by many colleagues in Europe. No matter how many candidates you have, we advise you to seriously consider your choice and a volunteer's approval for your project. Just because you have only one candidate, you should not make a compromise. It is better to delay the beginning of the project (if your activities allow this of course), or to even cancel the project than to accept the wrong candidate. People with the wrong motivation can not only create extra problems, but also stain irreparably

your image in society. They can be a cause of conflict in your team because the person who has to work with this particular volunteer cannot motivate him or is making extra efforts that the volunteer requires.

When you are again in a situation where you can choose among several candidates, I advise you to look for a couple of important things:

Besides the skills and talents that you are specifically looking for in your project and activities, think about:

1/. Do you need a "star"? How appropriate for you work with the whole group is a person who can charm them with particular visual characteristics such as "handsome", "athletic" etc. ?

If you need a person who is charismatic and can attract people around him like a magnet, then you need to be ready for situations in which your volunteer falls in love and be ready for explanations and the chase... Not that you can control falling in love (nobody has invented that yet), but be careful about the criteria along which you choose your volunteers.

2/ Previous activities of the young adult: what was he involved with in school/ university? How does he handle multitasking? Does his brain even work in this way?

An important question here is: how does he manage his time? How did he use to balance between lessons/homework and club

activities?

3/ If he did not participate in extra-curricular activities- why so? Because they were not available in his environment or because he had no interest in such?

4/ Has he worked in a team? Does he like it? What challenges does he find in team work?

We have received CV's from young adults and assurance while being interviewed that they work extremely well in a team. But upon the first task where they needed to collaborate with others, we saw that they had neither the skills, nor the desire to work in a team.

5/ Does the volunteer live with other people or alone? Has he lived outside of his family? Has he shared an apartment with other people? If the volunteer needs to share common spaces (and sometimes even the room in which he sleeps with another volunteer), how will this affect his relationship with others?

We have had cases in which a candidate cancelled a project because we could not provide for him a single room. And we have also had volunteers who could not get along with their roommate and the issues from their living together got translated into the office. This is where they focussed their attention, but instead of working, we started solving one issue after another between the roommates.

A little further down below I shall attend more to the theme of

budgeting and how we manage to get by in such situations during long-term and short-term projects.

If the candidate has a friend or acquaintance who has already been a volunteer, this is a plus. It is even better if this person has been a volunteer in your organization and has accounted for his experience as a primary source. But in life we do not always have such a luxury. Moreover, working with just known people or acquaintances of our acquaintances could keep us in our own bubble and within our limitations.

Attention! The program encourages and looks for participants:

- With little resources.
- From risk groups.
- Who cannot afford to travel.
- Who have special needs.

The involvement of people with a similar profile in your project is of great support to them.

It is good to know:

- Usually, their motivation to help for a cause is much stronger.
- They are receiving an opportunity that they have not had before in their life, and they appreciate it.
- As everyone else, they deserve a chance and an opportunity to grow and develop.

# Preparation

Preparation is to be done on both sides- the sending and hosting organization. For your colleagues to be able to do their work and prepare the young adult for the project, they need:

- To know a little bit more about you, the project and the place where it will happen.
- For you to send an **info-pack**.
- **A contract**.
- For you to arrange all **living accommodations** (where the participants will live).
- To prepare **the locals**.

Arrange an online meeting with your partner and answer all of his questions. Do not hide any information from him. If your colleagues know all details in advance, they can find for you a participant with the right profile and prepare him. In the first years of our work along the "Youth in Action" program, we sent a person from our team in our preparatory meeting in Italy. After two days in Bologna, my colleague

came back to Bulgaria and shared in a worried manner that each thing was explained in a very difficult way, with lots of efforts and very slowly. Upon being questioned, one of our colleagues there slipped and said: "*We do not want to share that because a few participants cancelled a pervious project*". We were shocked. How exactly were our colleagues supposed to make the project happen? Were we supposed to send off young people and then intervene each day to calm down people regarding things they were not informed about before leaving? We cancelled the project. I do not think it is fair for the youths that we send on such a mission, nor do I think it is worth it for them to go into such an adventure just because it's Italy.

There is a wise teaching that says "to each his own". I am assured that there are people for whom it is important to feel safe and to have the conveniences of our civilization, as well as those that look for the silence and comfort of a pastoral heaven. It is important to find a person with the right profile and to prepare him for what he is going to face in that place.

### **The Info-pack**

There is a very good method in preparing the participants for a project. Go back to your memories during the times before each travel and make a check-list:

1/. What information were you looking for before going away?  
What did you want to know in advance?

2/. What did you imagine would happen to you there? What were you afraid of? What were you expecting?

3/. What did you do to prepare better and to eliminate your fears?

4/. What surprised you and challenged you in this specific travel?

Ask your colleagues to make their own list and go through your lists together. If you know a youth who has already returned from a volunteering project, sit down together and fill in the list. His memories and experiences will be of great use to you.

All of this will constitute the roots upon which you will build your info-pack for future volunteers.

and 5/ Do not forget to include information about the project itself:

- What do you plan on happening?
- What goals have you set for yourself?
- What results do you want to achieve?

In my work I like to set concrete **tasks for the youths before they have even arrived**. One of them is for them to research our organization and to present their hosts when they arrive. Believe me, the effects are incredible. First, these young people start to research early on and get excited which team they are going to work with. By gathering the information they start learning by themselves about our work and they



start getting an understanding of our projects and activities. On the other hand, we get feedback for our image from the outside: what do people see and understand about us? What has been communicated in an exciting way and what has been left unnoticed? After this we always have the opportunity to correct the information, to explain to the young adults what we are doing and why. On our social media and on our webpage we can try to present ourselves in a better light.

Here is a list of themes that necessarily enter our info-pack. We do not claim it to be elaborate, but it would help to compare it with yours.

- Accommodation and living conditions.
- Rules in the house.
- Project program.
- Activities along the project (in both the office and outside of it).
- Team meetings and why they are important.
- What the volunteer receives: financial aid, insurance, SIM-card, public transportation card, bike etc.
- Other participants/partners in the project.
- What to bring along.
- Whether he needs a work attire.
- Furniture in the house, including blankets, sheets, towels etc.
- Meds and healthcare- what is available and where the closes hospital is.
- Weather prognosis and websites where you can follow it.

- Internet and access.
- Banks and currency.
- Provision of specific products- this is especially important for people with specific diets.
- Suggestions about free time (sports, dances...).
- Websites with information about travelling.
- What is forbidden in our country.
- Locals and what is important for you to know about them.
- Ethical rules in team work (including politics on romantic relationships in the team and the people we work with).

Naturally, part of this information is also contained in the contract. But if you make an info-pack with pictures, colours and focus the attention, even a file of 10 pages would be looked through and checked a couple of times.

It is also helpful to make in advance a closed Facebook page only for volunteers and the members of your team. You can also publish information there. I advise you that it be with illustrations, short texts and one topic in each post. A Facebook page is very useful if you expect a group of volunteers. The questions that each of them will probably ask you before their arrival could also be published in the group so that everyone can see the answers. Undoubtedly these questions will also surface in the minds of the rest of the participants at a given point of time. This is a way to avoid answering the same repeating questions to each volunteer.

## **The contract or “The Agreement”**

This is the framework that defines your relationships. The European Program for Volunteers will give you a model for a contract with basic information about rights, duties, reporting, and conditions for terminating the contract. In this model you can add specific information about your project such as:

- Workplace and conditions.
- Tasks of the volunteer.

In our organization we add two more important elements:

- How the budget, which we receive along the program, is managed.
- What volunteers will learn throughout the project.

As a non-governmental organization, we work mainly with money that has been given to us on certain conditions, i.e. for a concrete project and a concrete purpose. At the end of each project we report on the expenditure of these resources before the financial institution. We do this anyways for the purposes of the financial audit and the board of directors, so why not show it to the volunteers, too? This increases their trust in us and in non-governmental organizations as a whole, and it also gives them a model of work and teaches them honesty and integrity.

In the annex of the contract we add information about the things which they will learn in the project. We add:

- Trainings.

- Team building events.
- Development of certain soft skills such as time management, budget management, information seeking, accommodating for other people when living together and sharing their culture.
- Learning how to cook.
- Activities in their free time, including board games they have access to in the office and the house they live in.

All of this is important because, besides provoking them to think about the project and how they might help, we also provoke them to think about planning their free time and what new things they will learn and experience.

At the end of the project, when the time has come to assess the results and their personal achievements, this annex helps them recall things that they have experienced and extrapolate skills and competencies that they have developed while having these experiences.

A volunteering project is not just support in the name of some cause. It is personal growth in many areas. Our job as a hosting organization is to help volunteers reflect on their experience and see how much they have grown.

### **Living basics:**

As a host organization one of the things which you will need to prepare is the place which will accommodate your volunteers. The budget which is provided for by the EU is coordinated in some way with the standard of living in each country with the presumption of securing a normal way of life. It is not luxury, but still, those are normal and comfortable conditions.

The sum depends on the number of days that the volunteer is going to partake in your project. From this sum you need to:

- Set aside resources for food that the volunteer will receive.
- Secure how the volunteer will travel to the place where he is going to work (this could be with public transportation, a bike etc.: there are different options).
- Provide materials for the volunteer's work (if necessary, instruments for work outside for example).
- Provide resources for the realization of his own personal project.
- Provide resources for the sending organization.
- Provide resources for the mentor who will be helping in the project.
- Cover living costs (rent+ phone, internet, TV).
- Set aside a sum for small renovations at the end when volunteers leave the house.

Yes, all of this needs to be well thought out. And you need to manage you resources in a smart way. Experience has shown that the budget does not really allow for private accommodation for volunteers

in capital cities. Rents there are usually high, as well as distances which should be covered, so you would also have extra expenses for transportation. A good solution is to find an apartment where students live and to negotiate for a room for the volunteer. If you are working with more than one volunteer, it is a little bit easier: look for an apartment where they can live together.

Remember, however, that more volunteers means more responsibilities and more time spent on each of them.

In short-term projects, the issue of accommodation becomes much harder. You have the task of securing accommodation for more people, i.e. of finding more space. Besides, you are renting out for a short period of time. This fact is not in your favour and you cannot bargain or negotiate the renting price. On the contrary, the owners of apartments are reluctant to rent out their places for a short period of time and if they do, they would like this to happen as if in a hotel. It does not matter if you are in a big city or a small village. Besides, the following question remains: is the kitchen gear adequate, are there enough sheets and blankets and what condition are they in? If you need something extra, then you have to solve some financial equations.

I have spoken to colleague with experience in working with volunteers. It seems as though this is one of the biggest challenges of organizing short-term volunteering projects: namely, covering expenses.

To manage the expenses on accommodation, some colleagues

organize the nourishment of the whole team: they hire a woman to cook or they make the whole group prepare the food, or they give out food to the team together with the nourishment of the specific groups which they take care of (as the case is with the Red Cross for example). The problem of group nourishment is that you could have people with a diet which you can hardly manage, and there is something else: for long periods of time, group nourishment could become tiring and insufficient. Young adults then start to look not just for more food, but also for more diversified food which responds to their eating habits and needs. During the festival which we organized in Smolyan, we had a group of volunteers who ate with the festival's work team in a small restaurant in the city, and this proved to be a successful solution.

We have looked for everything, including accommodation in dormitories in University City in the capital, in hostels or accommodation with families of children and youths with whom we work.

No matter what decision you make, you need to be sure that:

- 1/ You yourself could also live under those conditions for the given period of time.
- 2/ Volunteers know about these conditions in advance.

If nourishment is done on a group basis, it is advisable for you and your team to eat together with the group. This way you are setting an example and showing your volunteers that this is part of the type of solidarity you call for, and, on the other hand, you are showing that you participate with them in the project on equal terms, so you know first-

hand what the volunteers themselves are experiencing.

### **Local people**

This is a very important theme, which we advise you never underestimate.

If the project is happening in a small town or village, it is important to inform the locals in advance of what is going to happen, where the participants who are going to arrive are from, and what exactly they will be doing. Make locals your partners in crime and you will see how much more support you can receive.

When I first hosted volunteers in the city of Veliki Preslav, we went through an absolute nightmare with accommodation. The town is replete with vacant houses. People have moved out not just from the region, but from the country, and there are entire floors which are furnished and locked. We started meeting people whom we knew to have the right properties. We would end the night by confirming that we would rent out a floor of their house, but by the morning we would receive a phone call informing us that they were cancelling. In fact, there was nothing strange about this whole picture. People were scared. Years on end nothing had happened in their town. In the transitional years after the communist regime the only hostel in town had been sold a couple of times, and its doors and windows even to



this day are still broken, and now the hostel stands as a symbol of the town's centre's destruction. Tourism in town was completely dead, and if someone decided to visit the old capital Preslav, he would visit the museum and the archaeological reserve and immediately leave. There was no infrastructure, no hotels; in short, nothing that could attract or keep tourists. Consequently, nothing interesting was happening. Each year the population was not only diminishing, but outright melting down like snow. For the people left in town, letting some volunteers stay in their property with the furniture that they had been collecting for years was an unsurmountable challenge.

But we succeeded. It was hard, but we did it. After the project we started getting calls from people who would offer us their houses for accommodation. We had conquered the first obstacle. These people knew from others that once "the foreigners" left, our team was ready to respond and cover all damages, to paint the kitchen walls; in short, we would them back their property the way we had received it.

After three consecutive years of hosting volunteers in Veliki Preslav, there are still people who "stalk" and take account of the amount of alcohol these young adults drink, of whether girls and boys meet in the same place and whether they are doing something bad. There are always gatekeepers in a community who will look after the morality and good norms, and who will be much more critical towards the young people that come into their town. But if you have made in advance some informational campaigns, if you meet more locals and tell them what is happening, if you distribute in town certain messages

which contain a phone number where one can call with questions, then you will secure for yourself a certain peace and acceptance in town, and you could even attract more unexpected incoming resources.

Up to this day there are still two general practitioners in town who are taking care of our volunteers free of charge. In the past we organized parties for the volunteers with the landlords and the local community, and people were happy to prepare food and share fruits and vegetables grown in their gardens. We were pleased to observe how our infamous Bulgarian hospitality was being revived through the last few years.

## Upon arrival

Usually ten or more people partake in short-term volunteering projects (or so-called volunteering teams nowadays). As with each member of your team, you need to introduce these people to the project by acquainting them with:

- Your team.
- The tasks that they will have.
- Rules in the office and outside of it.

We personally make a three or four day long on-arrival training, which we combine with team building activities. We speak about the project, the work and their contribution while playing roleplay games and doing simulations. Each session includes a discussion in which young adults are the active side: they share opinions, compare positions and look for answers. At this point we put them in different teams, and each task is followed by a discussion of the benefits and challenges of working together. Short-term projects have a tendency to finish fast. We have no time to wait for participants to get to know each other and to get over their shyness. Through the help of different energizers and constant rotation of their work groups, we help them to

start communicating between each other. By the end of the on-arrival training they should have already planned their first trip in Bulgaria. If the whole group has organized itself and they leave together for that trip, then we have done our job.

This type of training also allows us to discuss conflicts and what it means to constructively solve those. There are wonderful games which make people with leadership qualities stand out. The nice part about these games is that they help us determine if these leaders are more oriented towards solving a task or towards people and human relationships.

Let us speak more about locals and what conduct etiquette is.

We are turning our special attention towards the safety instructions. Will the volunteers be working with technical gear? How will they need to use it? What can they do, and most importantly: what can they not do? I am not speaking here just about taking care of expensive gear and equipment which you could hardly buy again if it breaks or stops working. I am speaking about their personal safety, their safety where they live, in the office, on the working field, where the project takes place, as well as their safety during entertainment and trips in their free time.

It is advisable to speak about sex and your organization's personal rules, i.e. whether you tolerate relationships between members of the team and the group in which you are working. Discuss your politics when it comes to alcohol and drug use. Do you allow smoking in

living spaces?

We have had cases in which participants got away from their families for the first time in their lives, they travelled for the first time, and lots of other things happened to them for the first time. The risks in those first experiments are enormous. We had a case in which a volunteer disappeared for thirty six hours. I mean this literally: nobody had access to him in those thirty six hours. We had gotten to know each other well enough to know that when he would start drinking in the bar at night, he would become joyful and hyper social. His chattiness could be easily noticed, and his desire to be in close contact with the people around him could sometimes have the opposite effect. We had serious reason to get worried about his disappearance. Police officers had found him close to a place which was frequently being vandalized, and since it was apparent that he had consumed alcohol, plus the two officers did not speak English, he was taken under arrest on Saturday night. You can probably imagine what we went through, both he and we (while looking for him), until he was finally being set free on Monday afternoon.

I have had a case where someone called me from an unknown number at two o'clock at night, and the foreign voice would tell me that two girls had gotten lost and that I needed to send a car to pick them up. I found out that they were in Varna and the best that they could do at that time of day was to find a hotel where they could sleep for the night and get back the next day.

Yes, they are not underage. But during the project you bear

responsibility for these young adults, for their safety and health. And for this reason it is good to “arm” them with all the necessary information: phone numbers for access to you and your team, phone numbers of the emergency hotline, drivers whom you work with, as well as reminding them about carrying passports/ID's and finding information for travels and accommodation.

## Treasure box

In the projects of the EVS and Erasmus+ programs I really like the surprise and the great diversity of personalities, talents and curiosity which the participants bring with themselves. In volunteering projects I find it very useful for youth to make their own personal project, to try to develop their talent in an area which seems interesting and important to them. Some ideas are far from our main goals, while others require time and resources which we do not have at hand. But despite all this, it is amazing to witness the atmosphere in which one person suggests one thing, another person suggests another thing, and you see how a specific energy flows through the whole group and new ideas are being born.

Starting with the on-arrival meeting, we give them an opportunity to present themselves and to make suggestions about organizing different events. Some of their proposals are geared towards the group of volunteers itself, others are for children or elders from the local community, and others yet are set up to deal with a concrete problem in the city such as the high numbers of stray dogs for e.g. These proposals are related to sports, the arts, nutrition etc.: the themes can be varied. More importantly, at some point the more timid participants

might propose ideas and gather enough courage to stand before the group.

I call this process "a project within the project" and I like it a lot because it allows us to see the treasures we have around us and what talents our team displays. In group projects we have at hand an army of people, and each person has some hidden talents. If we get to know them better, and what's more, if we understand what volunteers want to share with the world around them, then it is simply a question of good organization for volunteers to be able and to have the opportunity to contribute to the cause in ways far beyond our initial personal plans and expectations.

I like the opportunity of having "a project within the project" for another reason, and that is because it provides great leisure opportunities to all participants. Imagine how after the end of the workday the young adults go back to the place where they've been housed, prepare something to eat (either with their roommates or independently), and then get consumed by the Internet and social media when vividly recounting their experiences to their friends back home. In this specific moment they ARE NOT in fact in this foreign country, but have returned back home (even if just virtually). However, if that evening/night they have another event organized for them by another member of their team, then THEY ARE ATTENDING an event. They are hearing and seeing something new, talking, dancing, drawing or having beer together, and in this way they are kept busy for at least twelve or thirteen hours of the day. Then they continue to be together



and to get to know new people with whom they shall part ways just a couple of days later.

One of the most important characteristics of short projects is their terrible speed. Time is scarce. So many things ought to happen! They need to happen swiftly and intensely. The group of our project in the summer of 2020 was incredibly active. There were wonderful events outside of the initial plan of the project which were visited by almost everybody in the group. In spite of this, however, when we would make an assessment upon the project's end, there were some young adults who shared their disappointment at not being able to get to know all the participants because of the lack of enough time even though this group had spent so much time together, including group trips through Bulgaria on weekends.

After all of this, one can see them cry and be saddened about their upcoming separation.

## The schedule: getting into the projects' routine and the supervisor

"A project within the project" is an amazing opportunity, and I personally like taking advantage of this chance's potential. But let us go back to the core objectives and the work tasks that we hold onto as an organization. The inclusion of volunteers, especially if there are more people, requires from us to be aware of who is going to do what, and to create a good schedule which indicates what each person needs to be working towards. Depending on the mission and the nature of the tasks (if you are organizing a sports event, a festival, distributing food, organizing excavations and rescue missions etc.) it is important to clarify:

- **The working hours:** could be organized as shifts, rotating groups could switch one after another or there could be a strict mobilization of everyone in the morning/night hours of the day.
- **The specification of volunteers** into different groups: a couple people could for e.g. help with technically securing the stage; another

group could greet participants and guests of the festival and help them settle as well as follow the festival's schedule for repetitions, eating and whatever else one has planned; the third group will secure the safety of the moving crowds of people, secure the safety of entrances and will distribute food packages...

- **Supervisor of each group:** this is the person who will be instructing volunteers and following through if they have accomplished their tasks. At least in the beginning the supervisor needs to be constantly around the volunteers until each one understands his task and knows how to execute it. Later when the supervisor is sure that things are going as planned, he can leave these people and redirect his attention towards a different task. But do not forget to establish a rapid communication method in the case of an unexpected situation when volunteers have to know where to find their supervisor or at least how to get in touch with him. Usually supervisors should be available 24/7. If a volunteer is ill or cannot work the following day, he must be able to contact the supervisor so that the latter can plan the work of the group accordingly.
- **Team manager:** a person from a concrete group who knows what must be accomplished, knows the members of his team and has been given the power to make certain operational decisions regarding the group.
- **Reaction protocol:** clear communication rules, meaning that each volunteer must know who to turn to regarding a specific situation.
- **Safety instructions:** specific for each concrete group and task. It is

advisable to have it in written form. Make sure that these instructions have been understood by all participants, even those that are not as comfortable with English. You can illustrate it with graphics/pictures (for the use of a ladder for example) or you can ask one of the volunteers to translate it for the people of his same nationality who have trouble with understanding. Please collect their signatures under the safety instructions. The act of signing makes the volunteer think about the following question: "Have I understood all that I was told?"

### **Feedback from volunteers**

Short-term projects (as well as the organization of a specific event) are extremely dynamic. A lot of things are happening simultaneously, and sometimes this could lead to real chaos. A very useful instrument in working with people is their feedback. Please ask for their opinion, especially when it comes to their tasks and the challenges they are experiencing.

Sometimes it is necessary to modify the protocol or our way of acting. It is advisable to hear from the people who are responsible for the specific task at hand and to see if they won't come up with a suggestion that could improve or make the work easier. During the years of working with different people from different continents I have learned a very important lesson: one must be flexible and be able to change.

Yes, it is easy to rely on known systems and procedures at work especially if you have seen that they are effective and they work.

Sometimes, however, you could encounter a suggestion which could make your work even easier. Be open to hearing and considering thoroughly such ideas. I am not suggesting that you should immediately jump on board and reorganize the protocol with which you are working. This could lead to an even bigger chaos. Instead I am asking you to consider the suggestion and to even discuss it with a colleague, to think about whether there isn't something that is good about it and think about what and when exactly to implement something in your operational work. In today's ever-changing world, we all need to be flexible and adaptive. This applies even more to you as a leader and a person responsible for the team and project.

All of this is exhausting. It requires constant attention and following whether the changes are benefitting your project as a whole and the results. A colleague of mine likes to joke, but this is absolutely true, that each project is in itself a sort of "time-travel back to first grade": we are taking on first-graders, and we have yet to teach them certain things and do the job together. The only caveat is that these "first-graders" are probably different from the ones before, and if we are not sensitive to their opinions, openness and susceptibility to ideas, we risk not succeeding in teaching them the fundamental things which we have planned and ultimately not achieving our goals.

## Living actively each second of the day

or the fatigue from the lack of sleep, partying and travelling

I have always been fond of people who are curious, active and looking for meaning. Some of them are quiet and not as talkative in the room during trainings, but they bring on something valuable: they are open to new things, they are interested and they are growing. They create contacts, and if one follows their development (social media help us stalk nowadays), one will notice how these people “get ahead in the game” very quickly. We had a volunteer who describes his life as “before Bulgaria and after it”. He was a long-term volunteer from Uganda, but what I would like to share about him is that he managed to create so many contacts in the span of ten months that we would joke about him being more famous than many Bulgarian celebrities. He learned our language and practiced it. He participated in all sorts of extracurricular activities outside of our project. He lived so intensely that each second of his day was planned and made use of. Of course,

he would compromise on his sleep, but he never complained. He knew that he only had so many days here in Bulgaria and that he needed to make the most out of it.

The same thing happened in our first volunteering group in Veliki Preslav. I had to leave behind my colleagues and the volunteers for ten days in order to come back to Sofia. We had already entered a routine of repeating activities, so I knew that nothing could go wrong. They would be fine without me. What happened? I came back ten days later. The schedule dictated that we had to host a cultural night for the presentation of Turkey that evening. What could be a more wonderful excuse than this to see them all together having fun in a pleasant ambience? From 7:30 p.m. onwards they started coming into the room one by one. They were smiling, they were dressed thematically (they had a special dress code for the party) and were all excited to see me. Distressed, I noticed, however, that they had lost weight during those ten days. Almost all of them had dark circles under their eyes and had lost cheek fat. Just like a concerned mother, I was trying to quickly find out what was going on. They answered giggling: "You know... Parties, dances, beers, then work, sleeping for two hours and then partying again". I was a little concerned. It was obvious that they were lacking sleep. They confessed on their own that they would cut down on food in order to save money for partying, get-together's and travelling. My colleagues assured me that everything on the project was going as planned: each volunteer was doing just fine and doing his job, and that as long as the latter was true, I should not worry.

Yes, young people have energy. They recover more quickly and have the necessary emotional stimuli and good company which make them able to last through such a regime for longer periods of time. I agree with this thesis. Being a supervisor, however, for you it is very important to observe the young adults and, if necessary, to send them back to take a break (even if by force), or to even cancel a certain event in order to prevent an accident that could happen from tiredness or sleep deprivation.

During the on-arrival training we speak with volunteers about burn-out, partying and their responsibilities, and about the fact that we count on their punctuality and good work ethic. We have always done well until now. One year we had a strong Swedish presence: eight people from Sweden in a group of a total of 25 volunteers. They worked outdoors during the summer, so the volunteers asked me if they could start the work day at 5:30 a.m. so that they could be already done with work and inside the colder rooms by noon. For us there was no issue with this, so we organized everything that was necessary: everything, including transportation and the excavation team, would happen according to this early schedule. Alright, but during the evenings they had planned certain events and workshops, and they wanted to make them happen. Then they offered a solution: to start earlier so as to be able to finish earlier and to be able to go back home and get some sleep for the following day of work. The young adults were wonderful. We worked together and adapted to each other.



## The Mentor: Superman or an additional resource for support?

The Mentor. This is an incredibly important figure in projects with volunteers. In our team we often jokingly call him Superman or Superwoman.

By definition the mentor is someone who helps you grow and develop. In volunteering projects the mentor is a great resource, which helps with dealing with tension and with the requirements of a new reality.

One of the important task of the mentor is to help the volunteer go through the process of adaptation. Can you imagine a young man from a puritan community who is being air-kissed on the cheek three times upon each meeting, or being smiled at in a kinder way by a young lady and asked about his family back home? All of these signals could seem normal in France, but in Bulgaria such a behaviour from a French girl, especially if directed at a boy from a puritan community, could be interpreted as signals of a closer relationship and could lead to awkward situations and love dramas. If such signals come

from someone from the hosting organization's team, they could be interpreted as sexual harassment coming from someone standing higher in the hierarchy.

The mentor is the person who can help the volunteer read through certain confusing signals or assure him that the people in the office have just more constraints when it comes to expressing their emotions and do not have a personal issue with the volunteer. I call this "helping the volunteer find out how the land lies" or helping him find his way in the environment and new culture.

The volunteering program requires us to have a mentor, and it is our task to find a person who can take on this mission. Whether you pay him or not rests on the agreement you come up with together. I personally believe that you should not compromise and that you should settle the terms of this person's engagement even before the project starts. It is important to note that the mentor must not be a part of your organization, so that if needed, he can objectively help with resolving a conflict between either the volunteers, between the volunteer and you or between one of your colleagues in the organization and a volunteer. We had a project in which three of our volunteers made a coalition against the fourth boy in their project. The conflict was so deep that it permeated the office space. Each time I tried to find a solution, the three young men would attack me and claim that I liked the fourth volunteer more because he was a workaholic. In order to come up with a solution we had to include a second mentor, and so with two mentors and some serious negotiations we managed to alleviate the tension.

You probably already begin to understand that the mentor needs to be a natural psychologist. He needs to be able to put himself in the foreign volunteer's shoes, understand him and help him with appropriate advice. I say appropriate advice because the mentor's job is to listen and help the young adult understand the situation in its entirety, including the emotions that this situation gave birth to. Even though the mentor's role is not that of the older brother who will go defend his younger sibling on the playground and beat up the bullies, the mentor will indeed have to sometimes participate in a meeting between the two sides of the conflict.

I have even had the mentor help me take charge of my emotions, calm down and find the best solution in the given situation. This is what the mentor's magic is all about: helping you find the solution by yourself and, if needed, pushing you in order for you to take the necessary actions. He is there to help you deal with situations with varying degrees of difficulty and to help you function normally regardless of the circumstances and the peculiarities of the people around you. That is exactly why he is called the mentor.

Sometimes the mentor dedicates a lot of time to a given volunteer. There are some youths who are insecure and constantly need advice and direction. Can you imagine dealing with the emotions of volunteers every day instead of doing work at the office? This is where the mentor comes in to help you!

Some of the young adults hardly let anyone new in, and the mentor needs to put in effort to break down those walls. In one of our

projects a volunteer shared with me that in the beginning she had no problems and, therefore, she wasn't taking seriously the mentor and his presence. Later, however, when problems started kicking in, she was not able to share them because she was not close enough to her mentor. This is a type of closed loop which the girl had managed to analyse and to share with me. Since that happened, we have started acquainting volunteers with the person who is going to be their mentor even before the arrival of the volunteers in Bulgaria. In the first days we send the two parties for a beer, and thus make them spend some time together and get to know each other. Then volunteers start to look for information about logistics, travelling and other useful things, so if a problem comes up, the mentor is already in on the volunteer's story and the latter can look for help much more easily.

Given the budget that the program provides for us, it is more than clear enough that we cannot hire specialists who are prepared professionally. Nonetheless, you can put aside a sum which can cover the costs of meetings between mentors and volunteers while they are together, help them pay for the beer, as well as for phone calls because the mentor needs to be available 24 hours a day.

I personally believe that mentors could also be given certificates or accreditation just like organizations are. A year ago there was a training course for mentors. As far as I know, nowadays the national agency for the "Erasmus+" program in Latvia is acquainting volunteers with their mentors during the on-arrival training. At the beginning of 2020, an online training for mentors appeared on SALTO, and I

believe that this practice should continue because the mentor is the powerhouse which can save you from a lot of trouble, alleviate tension and take on the heavy emotional baggage, while you get the luxury of focussing on your work.

Our long-term volunteers have always developed friendships with young adults from other organizations. We had a case where our volunteers asked me if our mentor could become the mentor of their friends. This is what I mean when I speak about certifying mentors: to have a database which enlists people who can help and do so wholeheartedly. Since these people cannot receive a good remuneration for their expertise and help at the moment, we could make a hotline, for example, where such people could be available and be working on a contract.

From what I have heard from one of our volunteers, a lot of NGOs and organizations in Bulgaria do not have mentors. This could be because there are no people speaking foreign languages in small villages or because of other reasons. However, I certainly believe that the mentor is a powerhouse which I recommend having by your side.

If you have the opportunity, please hire more people as mentors in your short projects. You could have ten or more volunteers, and each of them could at some point in time need a personal meeting and personal time for his issue. If your mentor can afford to be available during the whole month and work only with your volunteers, then one mentor could suffice, but when you are hosting a group, you must be certain that you have taken care of all recommended elements.

## Motivation and some “keys” to help

During each project there comes a time when the motivation and energy levels of volunteers are just not the same. In other words, this is when we are heading towards the bottom of the sine wave.

### **What are the signs? And how will you recognize this bottom?**

- Tardies.
- Distracted looks.
- Unaccomplished tasks.
- Illnesses.
- Excuses.
- Behavioural changes towards other roommates.
- Opposition (reaching confrontation) etc.

In long-term projects you have more time at hand to find a way to get out of this negativity by trying out different things. In short-term projects, however, the picture is a bit different: you must finish a lot of tasks in a short period of time and you have a lot of people on board working simultaneously.

You need to be able to recognize potential problems and act swiftly. Do not let things work themselves out.

**What should you be cautious of?**

- **People in the group who complain. They always exist.**

I don't know if you have noticed this, but the easiest way to create a friendship and start communicating is by complaining about the same exact thing, meaning that nagging is an easy way to start connecting with somebody. This is also a purely psychological mechanism for one to pour his soul out to another person.

Scientific research has shown, however, that when we complain, our brain produces stress hormones which damage neural connectivity in brain areas responsible for problem-solving and other cognitive functions. The same thing also happens when we listen to the complaints of others.

The good news is that in most cases people dislike being in the company of people who complain and try to avoid those. A good technique to deal with such moods if we are forced to spend more time with a person who complains a lot is to continue his complaint with the word "but" and finish on a positive note, i.e. to defeat him through optimism. We won't change forever the person who is complaining, but at least we will give others a tool to deal with it for themselves.

Complaining could also be something alien to the complaining

person's inherent nature. It could just be a way to attract attention to himself in the given big group setting. I personally like challenging such people by asking them if they could figure out at least three ways to change the circumstances which they do not like. In a lot of cases this has helped them. The more important thing is that in this way you are putting the opposing side in a situation where they can look for solutions instead of throwing mud.

- **The competitor and the competition**

There are certain people who are competitive by nature. They are ready to go through anything to be first, to shine and prove their success. You will notice them during the first tasks during the on-arrival training when they turn the simplest task into a competition. I am not against competitions, but it is important not to turn everything into a race to the end. Each person has their own speed of working, and we should appreciate and respect diversity.

If you have such a person in your team, however, you can guide him to focus on competing with himself. He could make a plan and analyze how he is improving himself and growing in comparison to the previous day or week for example. The issue with such people is that they make others be in opposition to them and create tension in the group.





- „The slacker“

Each person has a different style of work, a different reaction speed, different skills and capabilities. Sometimes chaos could build up only because someone does not have the necessary skills and is afraid/ashamed to ask for information.

In one project we had a volunteer who wanted to create and write texts. She was taking on tasks, but then we learned that she was passing them on to a different member of the team. She looked like a typical slacker. It took us some time to figure out that she could not work with computers at all and that she was incredibly ashamed of this fact. She thought that others would be mocking her, so she was passing on her tasks despite her love of written word. She understood the hard way that there are people who are ready to help her. Unfortunately, she had lost valuable time and opportunity to acquire new skills. Now she has her own organization and is working on her mission to provide free access to Internet in schools in Africa and to provide an opportunity for kids there to learn and educate themselves.

It is important to know whether some deeper problems do not stand underneath the seemingly obvious.

- **Taking on too many and very diverse tasks**

We have had volunteers in more than one project who constantly suggested ideas and new things to organize. Some of them really sounded useful and valuable. We started considering and planning those, but very soon it became clear that the person no longer had an interest in those ideas and so they remained unaccomplished.

The opposite also occurred: a volunteer jumped head first and started working on a couple of things simultaneously. In the end none of the tasks were finished because the time was insufficient. The person was frustrated because of the lack of success, and was at the same time tired from the efforts and extra hours that he had put into resolving the tasks.

The danger here becomes a potential burnout of the volunteer. The solution is to look for feedback regarding the development of these ideas and to try to help prioritize the tasks depending on their importance, difficulty and the time needed for them, so that if necessary only one task remain, but it be brought to an end.

- **Right time management**
- 

This is something that we should develop in our early years (while

we are preparing for school and juggling between soccer, piano lessons and electronic games). It seems as though this is not the case, and a lot of people cannot manage to do it correctly.

The problem with being late in group projects is that tardies can lead to different consequences:

- Everything else present in the schedule will be late;

- Frustration builds up in others because they have to wait. This then leads to the sensation that you are not well organized as the leader of the group.

- If you manage to start before the person who is late arrives, then you will need to repeat yourself (and you might not have the time to do so).

A good solution is to discuss with the whole group what the reaction should be to lateness. The volunteers will point you to the best decision. They could suggest certain sanctions for tardies or suggest that a concrete person take on the task to introduce the late people into the discussion. Be honest with the group and you will be surprised how productive they can be and how they will take it upon themselves to put pressure on the separate members.

- **Slackers and the snowball effect**

Let us not underestimate the personal characteristics and the desire of some people to use the program just to travel or to fill in

a gap in their life. You will always find such people in the group. This is why the selection, the participation of the partner organization and the preparation (if possible including a training before departure) are important. The risk of such individuals participating in a group project is that they could "contaminate" other members, and you could thus end up without people whom you cannot trust. This could compare to the snowball effect when a snowball starts from the top of the mountain and very soon turns into a huge snow mass which devastates everything along its way.

What are the solutions: individual conversations with the person in order to establish what the issue is and to eventually find him a different job which aligns with his interest and skills.

You could introduce the sending organization to the conversation and find a solution together.

And of course, you could cancel that person's project altogether and release him from any work. At the end of the day, even marriages that started off with a huge amount of love are being dissolved, so there is nothing scary about this kind of situation in which a person is not supporting your mission.

It would be sad if you allowed the behaviour of such a person take over as the main topic of interest in the group and for you to have to play the role of a detective and waste the time of everybody instead of creating positive experiences.

- **Is there a good group atmosphere and what are the conditions for work?**

"There should be work".

This sounds like a line from a typical workaholic, right?

The truth is, however, that if a person does not feel useful, if he has nothing to do, then he will fall into apathy and wonder what to do to fill up his time.

What is more interesting than being outside, wondering around, drinking beer in a cool garden or travelling (especially if you are in a foreign country)? These trips and walks, however, cost money, and if you do not a 5-figure salary, then that is impossible to support such a lifestyle.

I have had the opportunity to talk with volunteers from different organizations in different countries, who are dedicated to a variety of missions. It always makes an impression on me when volunteers are busy and feel useful, or when they are doing nothing and completely bored. A bored person will complain and poison the ambience around him; he will create conflicts or even contaminate people around him like a virus, which could fail all your efforts to accomplish your mission.

The key is to determine in advance what type of work your team members will be busy with and to create the conducive conditions for this work to happen.

Of course, nobody likes workaholics (except maybe other workaholics and CEOs of business companies because this guarantees

that there is someone to do the job). However, in a team it is important to always have room for laughter, a good mood and a supportive spirit. I am naturally a workaholic and I have had to many times finish off the job of somebody else who was for some reason not assigned to do the right task for him, but this has not been such a huge issue for me. The problem is that you cannot just be working all the time. You need something fun. You need laughter around you or at least interesting conversations and people. This formula has always worked and has always helped in finding more power within yourself to push through more sleepless nights. I even think that it is easier to forgive and accept the work overload and the hours of extra work rather than boredom and a routine of work followed by work and more work.

**What helps:**

- Having a proactive person in the group who can suggest, but also take on the organization of additional events.
- Acknowledging each success and contribution.
- Giving a small extra break.
- Changing up the type of work.
- Having a person who can make others laugh.

## Prospects: set them up on the first day of the project

Earlier it became clear that volunteering projects are also a way for young people to learn something new, to improve themselves and to create a network of contacts. Even during the distribution of food packets one can learn a lot of things. Besides learning safety, logistics and how to organize the process (which are incredibly valuable skills in a lot of other future business ventures), one meets many people and their destinies. One learns what does not work in the social system. One learns about the healthcare and the morbidity in the region. One starts to ask himself questions about retirement funds and the management of personal finances. One discovers artists who are little known to the world, doctors, teachers etc.; each one of these people stands as his own unique universe and carries a personal archive comprised of memories and literature. All of this can be learned in just those three hours a day of food delivery to people's homes.

Imagine if you have conversed in advance with the volunteer and discussed what could happen! Then the latter has his senses

opened and keeps absorbing experience.

What could happen if you sit down and discuss his impressions at the end of the day or week? You will certainly learn something new yourself.

This is what volunteering projects are like.

Some people have grasped all of this and have decided that it is important to have a program which helps make such things happen. It does not matter what populists or pseudo-socialists claim, nor does it matter that there are people who are trying to abuse the financial support and to use the program for their personal goals. The idea is that the program's initial idea is amazing, and if it is used as recommended, then the effects will be multilateral.

One of them is namely the development of these young people who participate as volunteers. At the end of each project they are given the right to think through and describe for themselves what they have learned and developed as skills and competencies. We give them a "Youthpass" certificate which officially **acknowledges** whatever has been learned during the volunteering project **as educational experience.**

In our organization, as I mentioned, we make an additional annex at the end of the contract of the volunteer in which we describe the various skills and knowledge that the young adult could develop during the project. We have even included cooking skills and board games, which we have at our disposal in the office.

In addition, during the first few days we invite the volunteer to



sit down and write "A letter to myself". In this letter, he must make his own personal plan for development and describe what he would like to experience during the following days of his adventure. The letter is personal; volunteers write it in their mother tongue, then seal the letter and give it for us to keep.

At the end of the project we give it back. We have had a case in which a volunteer cried because of the personal and intimate things that he had previously written in his letter. Another volunteer saw how many things he had experienced and how he went above and beyond his expectations. And a third volunteer understood that he had not accomplished everything that he had laid out at the beginning. To a large degree the issue was his own and it lied in his organization, or rather his lack thereof.

It is not such a big drama if volunteers have not completed their plans through and through. As I said, I am happy to be among active young people who are discovering the world and to see how they grow up and develop. We cannot be maximalists for a short period of time (30 to 45 days, which is the length of our short projects). The value is in seeing that certain lights are being switched on in the heads of volunteers and that we have set the start of some future plans. This is also an accomplishment which is worth it. Some volunteers have shared with me that in a future project in life they shall really plan their program more seriously and put in more effort to make it happen.

Either way, the youths were with us and they helped us accomplish our mission. We cannot not be grateful or not love them.

I like giving back. What I really enjoy doing for them is sharing information that could be useful for them. During the first days of our acquaintance I tell them that they have so many opportunities to learn, improve and travel. I already have knowledge of the "other times" (during communism), and I can see the difference between then and now. Nowadays it is not necessary to "know somebody", to be close to a person of power or to be part of a certain politician's family in order to succeed. The world today is full of opportunities, so one can take charge of his success and growth.

Even in short projects I find time for us to speak about the different programs and funds which support young people, or about the organizations in their countries and cities where they can receive information, but also seek answers if unclear about something. With some of the young adults we even start planning our next projects together. We are proud of the seven people who have returned for a long-term project with us. Four of them started their own non-governmental organizations. Five of them took on additional pedagogy courses and are now working in the field of education. Others are helping each other look for jobs, continuing their education or organizing tours and adventures for tourists. We have created wonderful networks and friendships. For us these are the treasures which we crafted by ourselves.

## A few notes on etiquette

In the group volunteering project you have the freedom of including people from many different countries. This turns out to be a mix of cultures and diversity. When we considered getting the accreditation for working with volunteers, we thought of the festival that we organized in the past and we imagined the potential of the presence and support of young adults from other countries. The cultural diversity that we were fond of would be happening both on stage and in the repetition hall. It would be in the streets, among the public and everywhere around us.

Two years later we started imagining other options where cultural diversity would be the focal point. We went back to our roots, to the history and meaning of stimulating a local community to believe in itself and awakening its own potential for action. That is how we ended up in the old capital city of Veliki Preslav doing excavations, working with kids and youths from the city and building up the region as a tourist destination.

But let us get back to group volunteering. There is an incredible abundance of different countries, languages, religions, foods and

tastes... Each of these countries has its own ethics code or morality, which is the principal way of regulating human behaviour. This is a system of norms, principals and unwritten laws which determine and teach us what the right way of living is and, above all, how to live together.

Etiquette, on the other hand, teaches us politeness, but also the correct presentation of oneself: it dictates the norms in clothing and behaviour. Even though in most cases the accepted social norms of behaviour are not mandatory, but only recommended, their abolition could lead to judgement from society or could even lead to being ostracized.

In our organization we have chosen for our mission to be the provision of opportunities and conditions for development. This applies to all areas of human life and all strata of society. We look for and create bridges between generations, religions and cultures. We strive towards solidarity, justice and, above all, towards living together to help each other and to grow together.

Volunteering teams are a great way for this to happen. We meet people from different countries. We acquaint them with our history, culture and customs. We open the doors of our homes and we share our food, and we are equally as curious about their foods and customs. Thus, by participating in different events and mutual work, we forget about religion, culture or the battles that we have had in the past. We understand that we are all people, we all dream, hurt and look for a life

which fulfils us.

Then we go back to being by ourselves. We go back to our day-to-day life, but we have changed, even if just a little bit. We are different now. We are not as judgemental and we are not such chauvinists.

## The return back home and the role of colleagues

The return back home is in itself another shock. For short projects, this is not the case so much because one has only been absent for 30 to 45 days, but in long-term volunteering it could be a total drama. In the span of a year businesses could have gone bankrupt, kids could have been born or the first wrinkles and white hairs could have appeared.

In both cases it is interesting to devise some type of application of the experience and knowledge gained in the project. Colleagues from Africa have shared with me that after their return home, they have tried to keep all the volunteers within the organization because they see the progress and growth of these young adults. Therefore, they give out recommendations about programs which are geared towards the provision of opportunities for a sustainable transfer of results because it is a shame to waste the valuable resource created during the work together.

As a non-governmental organization in Europe, we also face the issue of being able to keep young adults and youth workers if we do not have resources for operational expenses. Then what is left behind

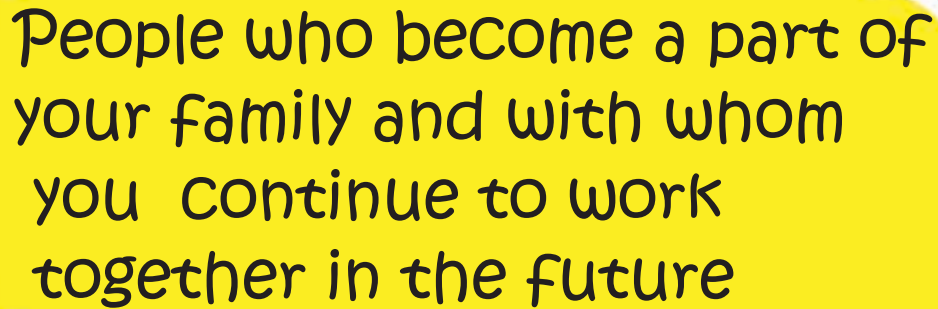
is for us to be joyful that we have somehow contributed towards the personal development of young people, towards them becoming more confident and finding their path which could at some point in time cross ours again. We have numerous such examples and we accept with joy everything that reality offers us. At the end of the day it what is more important is that there is an increasing number of interesting and valuable people regardless of whether they work for us or for other organizations and companies.

We can help the young adults who are returning home after a project by talking about their achievements, what they learned and how they could apply it. As Winnie The Pooh says, two jars of honey are better than one, i.e. if we speak with the young person who just concluded a volunteering project, we will certainly be able to recognize and to suggest where and how he could transfer whatever was learned. If we have contacts and we can connect him to more people, this would be more than wonderful.

When hosting long-term volunteers in Bulgaria, during the first week I pose the question about their life after the project. It is interesting for me to learn about their dreams or whether they have concrete plans. In the period of working together I always find some programs, materials or just a good example which could motivate them to make their next steps. This works with some, but not with others. Some volunteers immerse themselves in our time together and are focussed mainly on their life within the project. When the end approaches, they start to frantically look for jobs and for other things to happen

in the future. I understand them. At the end of the day one of the characteristics of youth is thinking that one is immortal, believing that one is special and that a lot exceptions and chances will come one's way. I like the optimism of youngsters. It is what drives the world and gives birth to so many creations.





People who become a part of  
your family and with whom  
you continue to work  
together in the future

My husband jokes that after each project with volunteers our family gets bigger and I become a mother of even more children. It is a fact that in non-governmental organizations we work, help each other and think of each other as a family. It does not matter whether you were helped by your sister or a friend from school. More often than not, the second is true. Similarly, when volunteers arrive, you become something like a family.

As in each family, we have difficult moments that we go through with them. After those, however, we trust each other even more and we know that this is exactly what made us stronger as individuals. Those are precisely the people that we continue to work with afterwards. And we are not afraid of any obstacles.

To all the volunteers who were with us during the years,

**I sincerely THANK YOU!**

To all the colleagues who helped us online, **I sincerely THANK YOU!**

A few people who have worked for the volunteering program throughout the years deserve special merits and they hold a special place in my heart. With their patience they taught me how to be tolerant. **I sincerely THANK** them for allowing myself and my colleagues to grow!

**Heartfelt THANKS** to the mentors with whom we have worked and continue to work! You pr superpower helps me a lot!

**Heartfelt THANKS** to my family for showing patience and understanding, and for allowing other people be a part of our life together!

## EVŞ through the eyes of volunteers

"I can define my experience in volunteering with a one word: "happiness", not only for the friends that I made and I am still in contact with them, but also because of the experience of knowing a new culture, and who knows, maybe you fall in love with that culture.

About the negative things: First of all, I was afraid of the coronavirus but with measures you can be sure. In addition, the most difficult part was cleaning the house with the other volunteers.

As a tip for projects organizers, only tell them to choose volunteers with the greatest possible cultural diversity, in order to learn about many cultures.

Finally, it is one of the best experience on my life and I do not regret having done, so, if you have the opportunity and difficult times will end, do it, you will not regret it!"

*Jaime Cano from Spain,  
a participant in short-term volunteering project, Bulgaria, 2020*

"I started my European Solidarity Corps' project in October 2019, in Pau, France. I was very enthusiastic to go there and have the opportunity to practice a language I had already studied in high school.

During this short-term volunteering I had the chance to meet a lot of interesting young people and to share my personal story with them and to get to know their culture.

Although this experience was precious and very formative, there were also difficulties with regards to living together in the same house. Now I can say that these difficulties have made me better and perhaps more able to manage stress but I would have preferred the organizers to have taken more concrete actions to solve these problems.

In these cases in which different cultures come into contact and also people of different ages live together, it is not always easy to lay common foundations accepted and felt useful by all.

But nonetheless some difficulties I decided to take part to another internship under the Erasmus+ umbrella and each time I talk with people younger than me, I encourage them to go out their comfort zone and start these adventures, I explain to them what is about European Solidarity Corps, how much they will love this experience and how useful it will be because it helps you build those soft skill that each one of us needs both in work field and in personal life."

*Marsida Bermuca, Italy*

*a participant in short-term volunteering project in France, 2019*

## About OPEN SPACE foundation

OPEN SPACE Foundation is a Non-profit organization that partners with communities and schools in Bulgaria, Europe, Africa and Asia to activate the creative potential of young people and to ensure conditions for their development. Founded in 2006 to support and promote cultural dialogue and relationships through various forms of arts and communication, we seek and create bridges between traditions and modern, between cultures and generations. We respect cultural diversity and encourage cultural dialogue and interactions to take place in all spheres of life.

What we are doing:

- **Capacity building activities:** work with colleagues from Bulgaria and abroad; with youth, teachers, parents;
- **Advocacy** for people in risk of isolation or victim of hate speech and hatred; promoting talented young people;
- **Cultural awareness:** presenting cultural heritage, exploring our roots and make a bridge between traditions and nowadays streamings;
- **Youth mobilization:** hosting and sending groups to various youth exchanges and training courses; encourage and develop volunteering actions; ensure conditions and space for trainings, internships and real practices for youth, grant making for youth initiatives.

**To see more about us, visit our web-pages:**

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This book is produced in the frame of the project “European Volunteer Service as a door for development”, 2017-2-BG01-KA135-036574, co-funded by the “Erasmus+” Programme of the European Union, Key Action 1

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The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

1-st edition 2020

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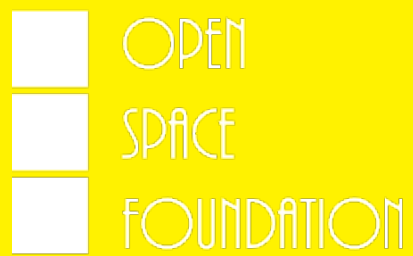
Editor: Zaharinka Kutzeva

Translation: Maria Kadieva

Design and prepress: Ogi Popov

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