



# SOHO International . . . or Keys to Quality in European Voluntary Service (EVS) Projects

Thoughts Around an **Innovative Training** Event Held in Arnhem (NL), 20-24 November 1999

*How can organisations be better prepared and equipped for taking part in European Voluntary Service projects? The participants in a training event for EVS supervisors, organised by four National Agencies, had the chance to look at some of the key challenges organisations face in running quality EVS projects. Here are some reflections about the training and its results.*

by Peter Hofmann

## Background to SOHO International

Since the beginning of EVS in 1996 it has been obvious that one of the biggest challenges the programme faces is to keep a balance between the demands of quantity and quality. On the one hand, Ex-Commissioner Edith Cresson dreamt of 100, 000 young people going through an EVS experience while, on the other hand, the programme is in fact designed as a fairly structured approach to informal learning with a number of high-reaching objectives, such as:

- Inclusion of young people with little or no access to other Youth Mobility schemes
- Integration of young people into the labour market
- Contribution to a European civil society
- International exchange of good practice in fields where volunteers are active

After three years and the participation of some 6, 000 young people in EVS, it is hard to say if the programme and its operators have managed to reach this balance between quality and quantity. The answer will vary from person to person according to perspective and role in the programme and the quality criteria applied.

Looking at the elaborated set of quality standards for the programme that the National Agencies for EVS have developed, I would say most of it is functioning – especially when it comes to support and training structures which are in place for the volunteers. To enable the young people to reflect on and make use

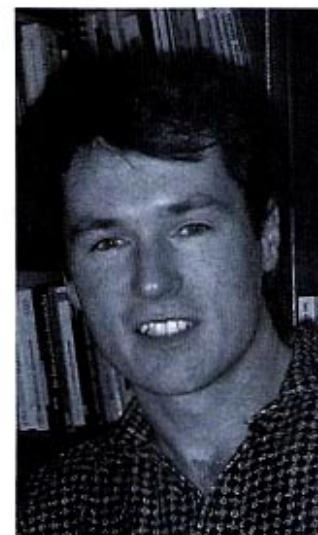
of the experience they are going through, a number of training events before, during and after their service are an obligatory part of the programme. These training events are specially designed to lead young people to become responsible for their own learning process.

## What about the organisations involved?

The success of the programme depends to a large extent on the ability of the organisations involved to foster and support the young people's learning process. An analysis of the problems that have occurred in projects over the last three years clearly shows that the shortcomings were often on the side of the organisations: a) lack of communication and/or co-operation between Sending and Hosting Organisations; b) not enough opportunity provided for contributions from the volunteers; c) clash between expectations and reality on the side of the Hosting Organisations, and so on.

Primarily, these are not the fault of the organisations themselves; in most cases the organisations were not sufficiently prepared or trained enough to fulfil their role in the projects. Organisations have their own agenda and interests in participating in EVS. They do not take part simply for the sake of helping and guiding young people through an important learning process. Their attitude is perfectly understandable.

Problems arise when programme organisers, in this case National Agencies, ignore the interests and agendas of the organisations and merely concentrate





on the volunteers. For the success of the programme, the organisations, meaning their responsible representatives, have to be supported and trained in a way that acknowledges that they too are LEARNERS in the projects and not just receivers of the services that young people offer through the programme. They can gain a lot once they are prepared to LEARN, in other words, are prepared to CHANGE. Ideally EVS projects are a constant confrontation between the three partners involved (Volunteers, Sending and Hosting Organisations) – a confrontation in the context of exchange and dialogue.

For this process to succeed, it is vital to have sufficient training and support structures for the organisations taking part. And with the numbers of volunteers expected to increase over the next few years, there should be a clear focus on the organisational level to ensure that there are a sufficient number of supported and well-prepared organisations taking part. Otherwise the balance between quantity and quality might suffer.

SOHO International is one example of the kind of training which is relevant for organisations taking part in EVS.

### Origin of SOHO International

SOHO International as a training concept was formulated during the seminar on "Training in European Youth Projects", held in Austria in April 1999. At this meeting Peter Barendse (EVS Agency in the Netherlands), Paulos Berglöf (EVS Agency in Sweden) and myself sat together to think about an international training project for actors in the framework of the EU-Youth programme European Voluntary Service. We agreed to involve volunteer supervisors from Sending Organisations and Hosting Organisations from four different countries - SOHO International was born.

Since there was a strong commitment from all three of us to make this plan a reality the development of the training project went very smoothly and quickly.

We also wanted to have participants from Southern Europe in order to have a wide spread across the EU and a fourth partner country was found with Spain. The Dutch Agency agreed to host and largely fund the activity; the other three Agencies (AUT, SWE, ESP) also agreed to contribute financially and to recruit participants. The trainers' team was agreed on in a joint effort by the three "founders" of SOHO International. I offered to be one member of the team and to use this concrete experience as the practical part of my participation in the Long-term Course Training for Trainers in European Youth Projects (see information below). My colleagues Peter and Paulos agreed and searched for two more trainers for our team. In October 1999 our complete SOHO team met for a two-day preparatory meeting, the three trainers (Ninni Magnusson, Maike Hubers and myself) and Peter and Paulos representing the organisers.

### SOHO International content and outcome of the training

Who exactly came together for four cold autumn days in the beautiful small town of Arnhem in the Netherlands? Altogether 24 so-called EVS

supervisors (6 per country) from Sending as well as Hosting Organisations. By the term supervisors we mean the representatives of the organisations directly in contact with the young people. We did not want administrators, we wanted the "volunteer managers" with at least some EVS experience to draw on.

### Aims and objectives

As initiators, the training team was driven by two main aims:

- To develop a model for a very practical training for EVS supervisors on an international level, which could be offered regularly with different combinations of countries involved
- To contribute to more quality in EVS projects.

With these aims in mind, we designed the training course in a way that would enable participants to attain the following learning objectives:

- To raise awareness of the individual role and responsibilities of an EVS-supervisor
- To raise awareness of the intercultural dimension of EVS projects
- To raise awareness of the international dimension of EVS projects and of the "Added Value" of international partnerships and co-operation.

We were very conscious of not offering a skills-oriented training since it carries the risk, especially at international level, of losing out on a number of participants due to over- or under-challenging contents. It was obvious from the beginning that the group of participants from four different countries would be very heterogeneous in terms of experience, knowledge and skills.

We did not want to provide the participants with a "golden book of supervising in EVS projects" or with a list of the ten most important tasks of an EVS supervisor. We prepared the programme with the main intention of making the participants think, and of raising their awareness of their own personal role/part in an EVS project. The participants should be aware of what it means to enter into international partnerships such as EVS projects. The training should help them to reflect on what they can give and what they can gain by linking up with a young volunteer and an organisation in another country.

### Content

The three full training days were dedicated to the following topics:

- ... The role of a EVS Supervisor
- ... The Intercultural Learning dimension of EVS projects
- ... Partnership and Communication within EVS projects

We used a mixture of methods during the training - working groups, simulation exercises, role plays, individual reflections, etc. But the most important part of the Training was the in depth sharing of experiences available in the group - with the different perspectives from Sending and Hosting Supervisors from different countries.

### The role of an EVS supervisor

Participants exchanged their experiences and opinions in two key areas: 1) the tasks of an EVS supervisor, and 2) the qualities considered necessary for an EVS supervisor to possess. Based on a set of questions we had prepared in advance, the participants discussed their views and experiences in working groups. It was important that all participants could contribute and understood that there is no "ideal" EVS-supervisor.

At the end of the day the groups tried to summarise their discussions about the roles that are to be fulfilled by an EVS supervisor, and interestingly enough, all the qualities that emerged fitted two main functions: those of an organiser and of a communicator. Many participants strongly identified with the role of a communicator as a networker - linking people to create a net which provides security as well as something to learn from (volunteer to hosting community, volunteer to working colleagues, current volunteers to former volunteers, etc.).

Another facet of the communicator is as listener and guide. In the one-to-one relationship with the young volunteer the supervisor should try to build up trust and negotiate the volunteer's needs with the expectations and requirements of the environment. We closed the day with a practical exercise illustrating this aspect of the role. Participants paired up and, in turn, one was blindfolded and guided by the other without words through the surroundings of the seminar site.

### The intercultural learning aspect in EVS projects

The design of this day had taken the least time to agree on in the preparation phase. It seemed so perfectly logical to start with a short theoretical input on intercultural learning (ICL), continue with an exercise to reflect individually on one's personal associations with this term ("ICL-DNA") and then, as the "highlight" of the programme, a big simulation exercise focusing on behaviour patterns when being confronted with different rules ("BARNGA BARNGA"). Finally we planned to facilitate working group discussions, linking the results of the exercises to everybody's realities.

Our original satisfaction about this part of the programme was a bit shaken while running the sessions, and even more doubts surfaced reading the evaluation forms of the participants. This part was the one almost everybody considered only "moderate" when it came to its relevance for the daily work. What had happened?

Whenever a European level training event is planned within the framework of the EU Youth Programmes it seems to be an unwritten law, not to be questioned, that some elements about intercultural learning have to be a part of it - no matter what the topic or how short the event. It is so tempting to take one of these fancy simulation exercises, build a programme around it and meanwhile to forget about the needs of your target group in the training.

In our team evaluation meeting afterwards we discussed this matter at length and came to an unspectacular but very important conclusion: Good and relevant training is not about impressive methods but about adequate methods for the aims and objectives you want to achieve. We agreed that in the short time available it would have been much more worthwhile to help the participants reflect on the invisible culture of their organisation - the informal decision-making process, the subtle hierarchies, the unofficial musts and must-nots, etc., all the elements forming an organisational identity, something that a young volunteer is confronted with and that a supervisor should prepare him/her to deal with it. But to do so the supervisor must be aware of this culture.

### Partnership and communication: the international dimension of EVS projects

Obviously, the international dimension of the group was an important element in the learning process with which we intended to stimulate the participants. A lot of project failures are due to insufficient communication and co-operation between the partners in the EVS-project, especially between the Sending and Hosting Organisations. The participants should become aware of the importance of the "triangular partnership" (Sending and Hosting Organisation and Volunteer) and the prerequisites for its success.



**Picture**  
Playing BARNGA, a  
simulation game on  
intercultural learning





With the help of concrete case studies the participants could focus on the needs of this particular partnership beyond filling in grant application forms. How can co-operation built on trust avoid some problems or deal with them constructively? There was a strong agreement among the participants that you should have met your partner face-to-face before exchanging young volunteers - even more so if you are talking about young people with special needs.

During the last 2 hours on this day we opened a "Marketplace" where the participants could profit from the resources of the group once more and negotiate about concrete partnerships, collect more information, review some of the things learnt through the training, and whatever else each participant deemed necessary for him/herself to strengthen their confidence as an EVS supervisor.

### The SOHO theme

For the whole programme design it was vital to create an atmosphere where the participants felt comfortable to open up and exchange thoughts, ideas, experiences - failures as well as successes, weaknesses as well as strengths.

One element of the training that helped considerably to create the right atmosphere was the use of an overall theme - in our case SOHO, the abbreviation derived from the target group (Sending Organisation & Hosting Organisation) but at the beginning it was nothing but an image without any characteristics. We decided that SOHO would be whatever the group made it.

Nevertheless, we felt it necessary to set up a starting point to inspire everyone and to show that we as a team were prepared to contribute to the development of the characteristics of the SOHO theme. To welcome the participants to SOHO land we dressed up on the first day in a fairly "cyber-spacy" way, offered people drinks and snacks in various bright colours and took pictures of them standing underneath our silvery arch. Many participants appreciated this welcome since it soon made them feel comfortable and got people talking and laughing together from the very beginning.

During the training, groups had to think about their interpretation of SOHO for the last night. Working on this task became a clear link among the participants, and something like a SOHO group identity developed. Every morning the SOHO Times was "published" with all the news and gossip fit to print. It certainly provided enough source of fun and laughter, its highlight being on the last night with all kinds of funny games, role plays and little sketches (for details please contact one member of the team).

According to the feedback and the written evaluation forms, we succeeded in creating a comfortable atmosphere. There was a strong group identity, the "SOHO group"! One quote from an evaluation form reads: "The idea of having SOHO as a theme was great - it got everybody involved. Since there were no concrete answers at the beginning, we created SOHO together; that's why it was the most important part of the training".

### The future of SOHO

Overall, "SOHO International" was a very successful training. In our team evaluation meeting in January we concluded that we had reached most of our set objectives - with the exception of the part about intercultural learning. Certainly the participants, some of whom were very experienced, reflected on their role as EVS supervisors and became more aware of the importance of international partnership and co-operation. A lot of participants mentioned that they had learnt tremendously from the others in the group. One participant even voiced that he would try to convince his colleagues in his organisation to totally rethink their approach to hosting volunteers.

We have agreed that we will offer this kind of training again with other countries involved. We will also produce a report about the first SOHO training including a description of the major training elements. Through wide distribution it should work towards increasing the number of training activities of this kind, because we strongly believe that the organisations involved in EVS need more international training if the balance between quality and quantity is to be maintained in the coming years.

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### Training for Trainers for European Youth Projects

This Long-term Training Course was organised by the Interkulturelles Zentrum, Vienna, and funded through the Youth for Europe programme. The course was designed by an international group of experts in the field of training. It contained six phases and included three seminars and one practical experience. Every participant had to have one concrete training experience as a part of the course. The course began with an 8-day seminar in May 1999 in Austria, continued with a second 8-day seminar in September in Budapest and finished this March in Italy.

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