

INTEGRATING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES INTO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S YOUTH PROGRAMME:

A STEP BY STEP APPROACH

► Introduction

As a result of European unification and EU enlargement, a very broad range of traineeships, exchanges and language study trips is now available to young people, a growing number of whom are attracted by these new experiences. It is accordingly of vital importance that such opportunities should be accessible by all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This article aims to clarify the conditions of international voluntary service for such young people and to explain how it constitutes an opportunity for social change.

► General background

Since 1996 a pilot activity has been pursued with the aim of enabling young people with social integration problems to participate in European Voluntary Service. Apart from the implementation aspects, the aim is to study the obstacles to such participation, to devise strategies and to make development proposals (the foundations for this work had been laid one year earlier with a preliminary pilot project launched by the European Youth Forum). In 1998 the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) took charge of the activity, with the EIP (European Inclusion Programme) handling its coordination.

From the departure of the first volunteers it became clear that a step by step approach was essential to guarantee good results. The scheme was accordingly named "Step by Step", and subsequently "Further Step". Since the objective was to integrate disadvantaged young people into EVS, a constant effort had to be made to reconcile strict compliance with the European Commission's conditions for such exchanges and the need to find means of adapting and circumventing constraints which were perceived sometimes as insurmountable. The principles of a sending project and a host project and of a young person bound by a contract with the European Commission have been preserved. But it is above all the concept of volunteering, the principle of devoting one's time

to a cause free of charge, that has been put forward among young people who, until then, were more used to being on the receiving end of assistance or to merely being offered vocational training possibilities. This change of role is undoubtedly behind the success of such voluntary service. Many young people have learned a lot from feeling themselves useful, being made responsible for an activity or for others, being able to give their opinions and being listened to.

► The young people concerned

This article is not the place to give a detailed definition of what qualifies young people as disadvantaged. It can nonetheless be said that most young people in this category experience mobility problems. For these young people leaving their home countries, regions and districts and being separated from their families are all barriers, the size of which must be gauged and which they have to be helped to overcome. Taking a plane or a train and travelling on their own around a city or a region are new and intimidating experiences for them. These young people usually experience difficulties in learning a foreign language and, more generally, are ill at ease in a school environment. Merely sitting at a desk throughout a lesson is a challenge. They have limited access to training and information. Most of them have only a very hazy, debased self-image; they see their future in very uncertain terms and, as mentioned above, have rarely had the opportunity to assume any form of responsibility. Lastly, a number of these young people, who could be described as "problem youth", have had trouble with the law, have acquired habits or behaviour patterns that place themselves or their family and friends at risk or have themselves been the victims of segregation or emotional or sexual abuse. Nonetheless, a video report - called «Step by step» - has shown that they do not always perceive or define themselves as disadvantaged, and even less as socially excluded.

Their reasons for volunteering are not self-evident from the outset; leaving to do EVS may be preceded by a lengthy maturation



process (voluntary work in their home district, short stays abroad). Escaping from a difficult, harmful home environment is certainly one of the most frequently cited reasons, but they also want to discover something new, to prove at long last that they are capable of doing some good, to live a fulfilling experience and to meet other young people. Participating in a group preparatory session abroad is a means of taking an official step in this direction and constitutes an opportunity to dare to put one's wishes and motives into words and to listen to those of others.

► The sending and hosting organisations

Apart from fulfilling the usual conditions for any organisation participating in EVS, the organisations which decide to arrange this type of exchange have special skills and capabilities in dealing with disadvantaged young people, or, at the very least, feel ready to acquire them. Although it is easy to imagine that this experience is a genuine adventure for the young volunteers, it is often quite difficult to conceive that the same applies to the organisations involved.

Some of these organisations already work with young people in this category, but their criteria and perceptions are linked to their own country and structure. For them it is a question of opening up to another concept of social work and adapting it to a new context, that of voluntary service. These organisations rarely have experience of partnership with organisations from abroad. Other organisations are well familiar with the voluntary service context and international exchanges, but have had little contact with this "target group". They are initially ill-equipped to deal with the preparations for sending or hosting a volunteer and learn for themselves what additional support is needed. We have noted that there are real communication difficulties between projects, which can be ascribed to both the language barrier and the partners' quite different working methods. Under no circumstances could such exchanges be organised in an anonymous, unfriendly atmosphere. This means that each organisation is expected to appoint someone to provide the volunteer with a significant level of support.

► Coordination and networking

One of the adaptations made to the traditional EVS formula has been the creation of an international coordination network. The experience acquired over recent years has shown the vital importance of a coordination structure in terms of the institutional

links it establishes with the various partners, its negotiating capacity, its remote form of involvement and its overall management of exchanges.

From a practical standpoint the international coordination unit has dealt with many technical and logistical problems, ranging from putting together application files sent to the European Commission to dealing with the practicalities of exchanges, organising group preparatory and evaluation seminars, and writing reports, not forgetting financial management of the whole scheme.

It is also this unit which works with all the partners to amend the contracts as time goes by. For example, a volunteer may agree to a one-month period of EVS, but once he or she joins the host project and feels at home there he or she may wish to stay longer. This of course entails providing appropriate assistance in solving the problems the young people encounter and helping them to progress in assuming their responsibilities, but it also requires considerable flexibility on the part of the host project to adapt the EVS experience over time. The coordination unit is there as a back-up, sometimes playing an advisory role or serving as a negotiating ground in order to achieve the necessary flexibility.

The coordination unit's main role has unquestionably been to establish a climate of trust conducive to the emergence of an international network for exchanges of disadvantaged young people. This trust is of primary importance for all concerned. We would be deluding ourselves to assume that the problems posed are solely technical in nature; although there are indeed many technical problems, they are far from being the greatest cause for concern. It is above all necessary that a shared state of mind should slowly develop between each volunteer, each sending organisation, each hosting organisation and a central coordinator, who can serve as a go-between if need be. This underlying attitude is fragile and must be sustained through day-by-day commitment. All participants must be able to sense that they are listened to and understood and must be confident that a spirit of conciliation will always prevail. This also means that the participants must have an opportunity to meet each other, to get to know each other and to hear what each other has to say. In such a context the concept of the duty of confidentiality concerning the difficulties experienced by some young people has regularly been addressed. The network has never been a rigid structure but is more a living, adaptable organisation where priority is given to the exchanges. Some projects have left the network, because they were unable to arrange to send or host volunteers, and other new projects have gradually joined it.



The diversity of the EVS projects on offer is of prime importance. Some take place in an urban setting, others in rural areas. Some are residential in nature, while others mainly concern voluntary work solely during the day. Some call for quite a high degree of autonomy, whereas others entail comforting contact with others and take place in an almost family-like atmosphere. Some involve working with people with disabilities, others with children. Some entail work on the built heritage. Some may be able to host one or more volunteers all year round, while others offer only a few weeks' work in the summer.

During group preparatory sessions, once a climate of trust has been established, a joint decision is taken as to each volunteer's destination, regard being given to all of the above criteria. Depending on the volunteer's degree of autonomy (often determined by the volunteer himself or herself), individual or group voluntary work will be envisaged. The team managing these events has a key role in helping volunteers to arrive at a decision and also in providing support for projects.

► Impediments, lessons learned and identity shifts

It is impossible to list all the problems and learning experiences here. I will merely mention some, which concern the volunteers. Regarding impediments, mention could already be made of all those encountered by any EVS volunteer setting off for abroad. Examples of additional impediments are the risk of no longer being entitled to unemployment benefit on returning home, the risk of being "caught up with" by the home country's law enforcement authorities during a period of voluntary service, the risk of being subject to family pressure to return home and take up work. Then there are of course adaptation difficulties in the context of the activity itself, difficulties in finding one's own place and role. The language problems can be huge, and there is often insufficient time to learn. How are volunteers to occupy their time in the evening or at weekends? How can they express their problems and to whom?

The lessons learned can be seen to be in direct correlation with the impediments, which are in fact made to be overcome. Firstly, EVS is an enriching experience in human terms, leading to greater self-knowledge and self-confidence. Volunteers learn new activities, which boosts their assurance and gives them heart for the future. Quite often, feelings that have been smouldering for several years come to a head, and the volunteer at last has the courage to speak out, to "confess" his or her fears and worries. They learn to dream of a future and to make plans.

Volunteer service of this kind entails a geographical relocation, but at the same time another relocation is initiated, a shift in one's perception of oneself and the world. It is now acknowledged that one is rarely a "disadvantaged or problem" child from birth. It is the way these young people are seen by others, by society,

that shapes them as such. In a new context they will probably no longer be labelled in the same way. This shift of identity brings about far-reaching changes, which naturally have implications for the young person's future. Returning home is sometimes a painful experience.

► Post-volunteering

Several years may be needed to assess the impact of participation in European Voluntary Service on a young person's life. For a majority of them, it is the spark which lights the path to education and training all life long, as the AVSO brochure outlines. It would be risky and dishonest to draw general conclusions from such individual voluntary service or to cite success or failure rates. It is nonetheless clear that the experience often has a very positive impact; that volunteers go through a - sometimes lengthy and difficult - process of "rehabilitation to normal life", and that few of them regret having participated. Many volunteers are grateful and say they would encourage other young people to do the same. Step by Step has moreover devised training sessions in which former volunteers pass on their experience to future volunteers, to hosting and sending organisations and to our institutional partners. This has proved particularly effective and is a gratifying experience for the young people concerned.

► Conclusion?

It is important not to hide the fact that an initiative of this kind places a heavy burden on technical and policy resources and that it can have a wearing effect. This activity will end in a few months' time, and EIP is currently working to achieve a skills transfer. The objective has been achieved, in that we have shown that, under certain conditions, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate in and benefit from voluntary service abroad. ■

References and contact :

- **Ann O'Sullivan:** *Step by Step to becoming a volunteer*, AVSO brochure, 2001
- **S. Wicher:** *Step by step*, a video produced by a former EVS volunteer.

louisethelene@yahoo.fr

