



The price of volunteering

by Delon Pereira
delonpereira@yahoo.com



In the summer of 2000, I looked at volunteering in another country as a destination. In the summer of 2001, I looked back and was a changed person. Volunteering in another country was a journey that changed my life.

The price of volunteering

This journey had its share of challenges and lessons learned, highs and lows and feelings of elation followed by doubts and uncertainty. The first dose of reality was how ‘financially exclusive’ this opportunity was and the question of whether I could afford to participate. It was clear from the start that a decision to participate in a programme like this involved the issue of affordability. One would have to pay to participate in this programme and given the demographic it addressed, a large portion of society that could not afford to pay was eliminated. In a country like India this was an opportunity for a select few; it was not based on merit and people who could not afford the programme were not allowed to participate. I knew that the decision was going to be an uphill battle, weighing the pros and cons of this programme and how I looked at this opportunity.

Making an informed decision

The programme offered one year of international voluntary service to students and interested individuals below the age of 30. I had experience volunteering with many non-profit organisations in India but most of the volunteering was of my own initiative. I wanted to experience something more and had absolutely no idea what this programme entailed. I spoke to a few people who had returned from the same exchange and they shared their experiences of working in day-care centres, farms,

youth organisations, local community centres and projects, their travels and their volunteer year. This was something they would not have been able to do otherwise and though it came at a price, they were willing to pay for it. Each participant informed me that they paid the member organisation an administrative fee as well as their air tickets, visa costs, etc. The organisation did not have any grants or funds for individuals who could not afford to participate in the programme. Many participants were encouraged by their parents to use this experience as a ‘gap’ year. They looked at the payment more as an investment in their children’s education than an expense. People who returned always ended the conversation by saying that this volunteer experience had changed their life. I weighed different options on whether to participate in this programme and concluded that an opportunity had presented itself – recognising this opportunity and acting on it would only increase my awareness and scope in volunteering. If I did not pay for this programme, there were no others in India which gave us such an opportunity.

I was informed by International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE) that I had been selected to go to Belgium. To prepare the 25 volunteers going abroad, the organisation co-ordinated sessions acquainting us with situations related to living with host families and work. The sessions brought together previous exchange participants who encouraged us to travel, learn new languages,

» The price of volunteering

participate as a member of a host family, showcase our culture, etc. The preparatory workshops helped me a great deal in preparing for this programme. I met other volunteers who were preparing for their volunteer stint in different countries – each one riding a roller coaster of emotions including anxiety, excitement and uncertainty. It is an emotional catharsis to be voluntarily removed from your country and planted somewhere else.

The price you CHOOSE to pay?

On arriving in Belgium, I was introduced to the participating ICYE member organisation and volunteers from other countries, who had all paid to participate in the programme. Some of them were students who had just finished university, some were in their gap year and some were individuals who were already working but used this year as a break. No matter what their background was, discussions of payment to a volunteer programme focused on cost comparisons in countries with ICYE programmes. Many from India, Africa, South and Central America had taken loans to participate in this programme, but participants from Europe came through local programmes and did not pay to participate. It was a decision most of us had made and there was no looking back. Some of the volunteers from Africa informed us that their families had borrowed money and had sent them on this programme to increase their prospects of moving to Europe. Some of the volunteers from our group left the programme even before it started. We never heard from them again. It became evident that this volunteer opportunity was not looked at as simply participating in a volunteer programme but as a means to an end: better and brighter prospects. As the member organisation conducted its volunteer orientation, introduction and integration activities, a new trend and thinking emerged – one where discussions on cost ceased and the long-term value and benefits began to set in. Participants started looking at the

bigger picture and putting things in perspective. The benefits of paying for this programme far outweighed the costs and the concept of volunteering took on another meaning – something that was intangible. You cannot put a value on experience gained, learning a new culture, your time, relationships and friendships forged.

A steep learning curve

One of the biggest benefits of participating in a volunteer programme like this is that you learn things quickly. Everything is so new to your senses that you feel you are having an out-of-body experience: a foreign country, language, food, culture, way of life, work styles, streets with names in French and Flemish and a lot of cross-cultural learning. The volunteer orientation was amazing; it equipped me with knowledge on what to expect and what to do in my new environment. This was all done in a fun learning environment. This orientation was not a one-time event as they organised weekends and getaways for volunteers to constantly provide feedback on the work programmes, living conditions and experiences. Most of the team-building activities with fellow volunteers helped us go back to our projects with a renewed perspective.

Investment and added value

One area that creates positive change and increased global awareness in the volunteer year is the project or organisation with which you volunteer. I was placed with an organisation in Belgium that co-ordinates volunteer and training programmes in Europe. The office was very welcoming. Although they knew that I was going to be there for only a year they involved me in their office activities just as if I was going to be a long-term employee. They invested in my learning by first understanding my strengths and what I wanted to experience in my volunteer year. I was encouraged to participate in training programmes and workshops on 'minority



development', meet youth from different organisations, use my skills and background in marketing to promote their organisation and highlight their work. Their investment in my learning added immense value to my volunteer year because it gave me a whole new perspective – one where each experience was seen as an opportunity to learn and explore global issues such as human rights, peace, tolerance, youth co-operation, integration, equality, discrimination and above all, serving others.

Volunteering with this organisation renewed my thinking and revitalised the purpose for which I had undertaken this endeavour in the first place. It was not a one-way street – I was given the flexibility to be creative in my work for them while they undertook to make my volunteer year memorable.

Pros and cons and lessons learned

It is unfortunate that not many countries have opportunities to participate and engage in cross-border learning like in Europe. There was only one organisation that offered a programme, so you paid whatever price they asked. It was financially exclusive. There was not a standard price for volunteers – different programmes in different

countries had different prices. Participants felt short-changed because they could not quantify their experience. Hosting situations and work programmes were not always amicable and well prepared but I learned early on in my volunteer year that you cannot put a price on learning and positive experiences. You have to keep an open mind and embrace every new topic, person and learning opportunity that comes your way. This enriches your experience.

Acceptance, appreciation and awareness are key. I learned that if you are open to accepting another culture, people and country, you will be amazed how appreciative you become of your own culture and country. You become aware and you create awareness for others. You value and share your experience and in the process are enriched by someone else's values and experiences.

When you give your time and effort unconditionally, you get much more in return, something that no one can quantify. Paying for a volunteer programme can be seen as an investment. An investment in oneself – where the dividends and interest on your investment keep paying beyond your volunteer year!