

Annex 1:



# IMPACT OF CROSS-CULTURAL VOLUNTEERING ON HOSTING ORGANISATIONS - THREE CASES FROM FINLAND

ICYE Sample Assessment Report, 2013

## SUMMARY

Every year ICYE Finland receives 30-40 international volunteers, most of whom engage in social work. This study explores the impacts of international volunteering on organisations, their staff and service-users.

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# Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Methodology .....	2
3. Results of the Impact Assessment.....	2
3.1 Perceptions of Others.....	4
3.2 Self-Perceptions.....	5
3.3 Professional and Organisational Capacity .....	6
4. Conclusions.....	7
Annex: Outline of the Focus Group Interview.....	9

## 1. Introduction

This impact assessment was conducted within the framework of an international project aiming to develop assessment methods within the ICYE<sup>1</sup> network. A pilot study was carried out in Finland by the MaaIlmanvaihto assessment team over the course of four months in 2013. The impacts of long-term cross-cultural volunteering were explored on two levels – the changes in young adults who have completed voluntary service in Finland and the impacts on organisations hosting international volunteers in Finland.

This report presents the findings of the assessment conducted at three organisations, which all have several years of experience with hosting international volunteers. In addition to presenting the results, the report sheds light on the methodological issues related to assessing impacts of international volunteering.

The study was designed to address two questions in particular:

- How do staff members perceive the intercultural encounters and their impacts?
- What kind of practices and innovations do the volunteers leave behind at hosting organisations?

Rather than assessing the input of individual volunteers, the aim was to explore how the practice of hosting international volunteers impacts these particular organisations. Each organisation is of course different as are the volunteers, who come from diverse backgrounds and have varying sets of skills. For this reason the potential impacts are far from uniform and subject to a complex interplay of factors.

From the host organisation’s perspective, however, volunteers tend to share some significant aspects. They are temporary members of staff and motivated to work without monetary compensation. The adaptation process is a key facet of international volunteering, and the volunteer’s perspective on the socio-cultural surroundings is marked by the experience of migration.

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<sup>1</sup> International Cultural Youth Exchange

In the study, *volunteer* is conceptualised, first and foremost, as catalyst of manifold processes. The premise is that each volunteering experience is unique, but as the aforementioned aspects prevail, the experiences cumulate into impacts. *Impact* is understood in terms of changes that can be witnessed also after a particular volunteering period has ended.

While the focus here is on the impacts *on* the organisation, it is crucial to bear in mind that the organisation is also the context where the impacts emerge. The three hosting organisations included in the study have their own particular characteristics, but at the same time they possess one important commonality - all have in place practices supporting volunteers. This tends to increase the effectiveness of volunteering considerably.

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative methods were applied in this part of the sample assessment. Data was collected in three focus group interviews conducted at three organisations that collaborate with ICYE Finland. Each organisation was asked to invite 3-5 staff members, who have worked alongside volunteers. There were 2-5 people per focus group, and total of 11 respondents. Subsequently audio recordings were partially transcribed and material analysed. The interviews were conducted in Finnish<sup>2</sup>.

Interviews were semi-structured and intended to gather perceptions and experiences particularly regarding intercultural learning and new practices introduced by volunteers (c.f. annex). Participants were encouraged to converse informally, so that the topics that they themselves considered the most important and relevant would arise. Some adjustments were made to the interview structure after the first interview in order to take into account the different degrees of involvement in programme management.

Volunteering projects at these organisations involve work with the mentally disabled and migrants<sup>3</sup>, which provides an important backdrop for the discussion. Two of the organisations are folk high schools and one offers housing services and workshops.

The basis for including these particular volunteering projects in the study was above all their disposition to participate. Organisational commitment was deemed especially important due to time constraints; the interviews coincided with a busy period before summer holidays. Also location played a significant role in the selection. The chosen organisations are located in different parts of Finland and represent different demographics: one in the biggest city of Finland (pop. 600.00), another in a medium-sized town (pop. 30.000) and the last one in a rural community (pop. 2.000).

## 3. Results of the Impact Assessment

In the focus groups, the respondents touched upon volunteering impacts on several levels: service users and their families, hosting organisations, co-workers, volunteers and their communities at home, etc. The report will however focus on what takes places at the organisations.

Three key areas of impact were identified. The study shows that international volunteering:

- facilitates processes of intercultural learning and promotes diversity awareness
- contributes to building psychosocial capacity particularly among the socially disadvantaged

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<sup>2</sup> All the quotes included in the report are translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Here *migrant* refers to those who have moved from one country to another irrespective of their legal status, i.e. from people who have moved due to family ties to asylum seekers.

- strengthens organisational capacity

In the following paragraphs, each area will be discussed in more detail.

The way that the impacts were perceived was clearly linked to how volunteering was understood by the respondents and how the volunteers were positioned inside the organisation. Volunteers were not expected to be skilled or to benefit the organisation in the same fashion as paid staff - or not in the beginning at least. Learning was a central concept in the discourses employed by the respondents, and supporting the volunteer in developing new skills was understood as a responsibility of the hosting organisation.

The most valued contributions made by volunteers were thanks to their personality traits, interpersonal skills and ethnic or cultural background. This was illustrated by one of the respondents, who stated that volunteers manage to benefit the service-users the most when they are aware of the social role they are fulfilling (as opposed to simply performing tasks).

Motivation and attitude were portrayed as the foundation of the volunteering experience. While it was acknowledged that mentoring practices play an important role, several respondents stressed that these cannot make up for lack of care in the selection process - the right volunteer profile was seen as a prerequisite for achieving any positive impacts.

Personal growth was described as another key aspect of volunteering. Although the tasks and the role of interns and civil servants in organisations were described to be rather similar, respondents perceived the work and learning experience to be deeper in the case of international volunteers. Volunteering was understood in terms of what the volunteers gain from the time spent in Finland, i.e. the experience encompasses much more than solely work. This was characterised, among other things, by a process of adapting to a whole new environment and building a social network.

When discussing the impacts, the volunteers' perspective was very much present in the staff members' discourses. Several respondents conveyed the idea that volunteering has an impact when volunteer is happy and everyday life runs smoothly. The changes that volunteers had experienced over the course of the volunteering period were a source of pride for the organisations also – "If they have made a difference here, also we have had a big influence on them."

There were many anecdotes of former volunteers who had decided to study social work or started working in a similar field after returning home. The fact that volunteering played a big part in the life decisions of the former volunteers was considered as an important impact to which the host organisation were seen to have had contributed.

In addition to hosting volunteers, the organisations also have interns and civil servants. They are all temporary staff learning on the job. Although not always, they are generally young adults. What makes volunteering different from others is that it involves few obligations or requirements. For volunteers volunteering is a choice. For organisations there is often more flexibility when hosting and mentoring volunteers.

All in all, the respondents depict volunteering in a very positive light. Only when specifically asked about negative aspects, some experiences were mentioned. For the most part, these involved situations where

volunteers had cut short their service or had asked to be reassigned. While the respondents quickly stressed that these are isolated incidents, it is evident that unresolved conflicts are difficult to brush off.

Lack of experience and cultural differences occasionally lead to situations where volunteers instead of helping actually increase the staff workload. On some instances these were depicted as minor annoyances, but mostly they were set in a context of wider learning process that staff members were committed to support.

In the following paragraphs, the results of the assessment are discussed in three parts. The first two approach the changes in both the service users and staff. Although the discussion is centred on direct beneficiaries, the impacts indirectly affect also their friends, families and local communities. In the last part, being investigated are the changes in human resources and organisational capacity.

### 3.1 Perceptions of Others

International volunteers act as catalysts for reflections on similarities and differences. Based on the interviews, this is considered as a tremendous resource in all three organisations. Since the service users belong to minority groups (disabled and immigrants), the topics of diversity, discrimination and equality are present in the day-to-day work of all three organisations.

The benefits for the service users were explicitly expressed, but there were also a number of respondents that described their own processes of reflection that had left a lasting impact. Friends, co-workers, service users' families were often mentioned in the anecdotes. Apart from direct beneficiaries, there appears to be a wide community that engages, in one way or another, in dialogues sparked by the international volunteering.

#### Living Knowledge

As part of their work, volunteers are often asked to share customs, traditions and own experiences from home. This is a world that is generally accessible to beneficiaries only through television, internet or books. The concept of "living knowledge" was mentioned frequently by respondents and conceived as a very influential way of learning. The result is not only more information about life in other parts of the world, but also motivation to learn more and engage in dialogue. The central element is thought to be the fact that there is a living person who with his/her own voice talks about things that he/she knows.

The fact that hosting volunteers enables the service-users to gain first-hand international experiences was represented as highly important when working with disabled people - a group that generally speaking has fewer opportunities to travel, as pointed out by one of the respondents. Another respondent stated that in this sense their disabled students are truly privileged, because in rural areas it is not common for young people to have international friends and it is also a question of prestige.

Friendships are not only for the service users. Getting to know people from abroad also opens doors to new experiences for staff. Respondents discussed visits from friends and family of the volunteers and, many also had visited former volunteers or planned to do so; visits to places where they were otherwise unlikely to visit.

#### Challenging stereotypes

Meeting people can also effectively counter negative stereotypes about countries and regions, as it had in the case of one respondent. As a result of hosting volunteers, the respondent had realised that "there are nice people everywhere and one could be fine anywhere". Understanding that just as the volunteers are

welcomed into their community, visitors may just as well be received into theirs, which is something that boosted the respondent's confidence to go abroad.

In one organisation, it was deemed paramount that service users have a chance to encounter foreign volunteers as people, as opposed to merely seeing them as representatives of their group. How perceptions change after first impressions fade away was a topic that had raised a lot of discussion at their work place. Meeting volunteers from diverse backgrounds has helped people to see different life stories instead of just a monolithic group of "foreigners".

The findings suggest that special sessions and other ways of bringing forth the cultural difference explicitly are only the starting point for reflections and dialogue. What matters is that the interaction continues for a long-period of time (volunteering periods range from 6 to 12 months). The process of strangers becoming friends was a recurring element in the staff discourses. This also appears to be the base for building diversity awareness through international volunteering.

Based on the findings, the relationship between volunteers and beneficiaries is shaped over time. As it was previously pointed out, the programme length allows one to move beyond first impressions and cultural aspects that are easily discernable. Also trust and confidence between the different parties is built with time, which in turn makes it possible to discuss more personal and sensitive issues, even taboos. It is also vital for turning conflict situations into learning opportunities. Lastly, the encounters often lead to strong emotional bonds and develop a sense of empathy. In one interview, the respondents discussed how in the end all are sad to see the volunteers leave, even the ones who in the beginning had expressed xenophobic and/or racist attitudes.

### 3.2 Self-Perceptions

#### Group Identity

In addition to providing tools for understanding others, hosting volunteers often helps beneficiaries to understand themselves. The advantages for the service users were clearly articulated and many respondents saw these to be the main rationale for hosting international volunteers.

Although different aspects of the impact were emphasized in different organisations, in all the interviews volunteering was discussed in relation to identity negotiations of people with disabilities and migration background, i.e. people in minority.

The presence of international volunteers was conceived as providing a living example of "another way of being different" – and thus paramount for young people coming to terms with their disability in a small rural community, where unity is more salient than diversity. By demonstrating to the service users that they are not the only ones who are different, volunteers were considered to promote more positive self-images among the disabled youth.

The idea of volunteers as role models was expressed in another organisation also; here the benefits were articulated in relation to youth who see their ethnicity as a major obstacle in Finnish society, particularly refugees and asylum-seekers. Hosting young male volunteers from developing countries was thought to have a particularly positive impact - living examples of young non-Finn men, who have a future. The respondents saw that the service users could identify with these volunteers, who in turn gave them hope and encouragement to find ways to overcome the social barriers.

In one of the organisations, the benefits for group identity formation were contextualised in a different way. Learning about the situation of disabled people in the home countries of the volunteers was considered important, so that the service users would become more aware of how it is to be disabled in the world; not only in Finland.

### Skills and Confidence

A popular motivation for inviting volunteers is the desire to improve language skills. In the interviews, it became apparent that it is more appropriate to see the impacts on the level of communication skills rather than focusing merely on language skills. This applies to both staff and service users.

The arrival of the volunteers gives service users the chance to discover and prove their skills. This was repeatedly mentioned in relation to work with the disabled. In one organisation, it was said that in the beginning the roles are inverted and the service users take on the role of guiding the volunteer. In another organisation, service users who themselves have difficulties with language eagerly help volunteers with their Finnish. In this way, the presence of volunteers blurs the divide between the ones that help and the ones who are being helped and also increases the agency of the socially excluded.

During the interviews, there was considerable discussion regarding language barrier between volunteers and regular staff. Many respondents reminisced on funny incidents that had occurred over the years when communicating with broken English or broken Finnish or with virtually no common language. Numerous narratives illustrated how succeeding to communicate with one and another, despite difficulties, works as positive reinforcement and eases the fear of failure that many language-learners face. The reluctance of some staff members to make contact with volunteers was usually associated with lack of confidence in their language skills.

International volunteers act as catalyst for psychosocial changes on multiple levels. As previously mentioned, what volunteers go through during the period away from home is considered by the respondents as a kind of a deep impact. On several occasions during the interviews, respondents expressed admiration for young volunteers who have left their home to take a leap towards the unknown.

The impacts of this experience appear also to extend to people in the vicinity - one of the respondents stated that having different kinds of people around has helped her overcome her own shyness. Foreign volunteers push people out of their comfort zone – interacting in a foreign language or simply encountering people that are new and different provides learning experience in everyday contexts.

### 3.3 Professional and Organisational Capacity

In addition to assisting the paid staff with day-to-day activities, volunteers are perceived to benefit the organisation – particularly in ways that are linked to their cultural background or to the informality of their position.

#### Wellbeing

- Volunteers help the regular staff in many ways. In the simplest case, they offer an extra pair of hands or ears. When it gets busy, there's someone to call for help; this "eases some of the pressure", as one respondent put it.
- By offering a new perspective, volunteers can also help staff to find value in their work and the organisation to recognise its strengths.

- There are usually a lot of people involved in supporting the volunteers, and even more who share the memories that move people from tears to laughter. These are elements that contribute to creating a sense of community at the work place.

### Support and Practices

- In one organisation, volunteers live on campus and are in contact with service users even outside working hours. They were described as doing a lot of “almost-invisible work”, i.e. guiding and supporting the students in ways that regular staff is not able to do.
- In the same organisation, volunteers are perceived as support to the staff and service users by acting as kinds of intercultural mediators. For instance, when addressing a problem, students sometimes prefer approaching a volunteer rather than a teacher.
- The fact that volunteers come and go was perceived as something positive from the organisational perspective, because with new people there is a flow of fresh ideas and enthusiasm. This was understood as making the atmosphere dynamic.
- The relationship between volunteers and regular staff members is often characterised by a two-way learning experience. At times this is converted into organisational learning - in one organisation, a volunteer had introduced a practice of visually documenting activities and photos, which were then used in internal and external communication of the organisation, and this practice is still in place. Several respondents also reported having gained ideas that have enriched their teaching methods.

### Networks

- Even though many of the respondents reported keeping in contact with former volunteers who now work in a similar field in their home country, volunteering was not perceived to have built international networks on a professional level.
- For one of the organisations, hosting volunteers is a way of promoting right-based approach to disability. Respondents also expressed the hope of more active involvement on the part of the EVS sending organisations<sup>4</sup>.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on this sample assessment, few comments can be made about the impacts of international volunteering in general. Despite the small sample, the study does suggest that volunteering has impacts both on the hosting organisations and impacts on the beneficiaries of the hosting organisations. These are also recognised by the staff, though some impacts are easier to verbalise than others.

### Impacts

The organisations included in the study clearly see that benefits outweigh the negative aspects of hosting volunteers. The main rationale for inviting international volunteers year after year is the way in which they support the service users. At the same time, the host organisations are aware of impacts on the staff and volunteers themselves.

The interplay of what volunteers do and who they are provides the basis for impacts. What makes the input of international volunteers different from that of interns or civil servants, for instance, is that they are living examples of “being different” and provide opportunities for service users to use their skills. Organisations

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<sup>4</sup> European Voluntary Service.

consider this to support significantly their efforts to build self-confidence and positive self-image of the service users belonging to socially excluded groups.

Hosting volunteers provides opportunities for language training, intercultural learning and gaining international experience at home. Beneficiaries are not only the service users, but also the staff. This has increased the motivation and capacity to encounter people from different backgrounds.

The learning opportunities are expected and perceived to benefit the service users and staff, but the question of organisational learning is not as clear-cut. The staff members involved in volunteer management are conscious of how their ability to support volunteers has improved and how they are better equipped to select the volunteers that best suit the organisation. Changes in professional and organisational capacity, that volunteering has brought about, are either modest and/or tend to go unnoticed.

Currently hosting volunteers creates few direct links to international cooperation on an organisational level. Nonetheless, both the language skills and intercultural competence gained by the staff are assets that can be turned into organisational resources, if needed.

### Methodology

One advantage of qualitative methods, when examining volunteering impact on spheres of social and cultural interaction, is that they allow a broad approach. Many of the central findings of this study surfaced in the form of narratives; using a rigid set of questions would probably not render the same information. Creating spaces for dialogue and reflexion can in fact serve a double purpose - gather information and promote awareness and build commitment to volunteering by making the topic visible.

The method does involve one major disadvantage. Organising focus group interviews and analysing the data is very time consuming and takes up a lot of resources. In the case of this study, the whole process from planning to report writing took approximately 17-20 working days for one person. Preparing and organising 60-minute group interviews required 4-5 days; most of this time was spent travelling. Transcribing the audio recordings and analysing the data presented the biggest workload.

## Annex: Outline of the Focus Group Interview

### Introduction

- interviewer introduces herself, the study and the interview
- introductions by each participant (incl. name, position, relationship with international volunteers)

### Volunteers in the organisation

- How long have you hosted volunteers? How many in total?
- Can you describe the role of the volunteer? How does it differ from the role of trainees or civil servants?
  - If you had never hosted volunteers, what would be different now?
  - In your opinion, how does the professional field (i.e. working with people who have special needs) influence the way you work with volunteers?

### Views on volunteering

- What do you think are the best things about hosting volunteers? What about the worst? In which kind of situations do these aspects manifest?
- Have you personally experienced something new thanks to the international volunteers?
- What kind of feedback have you received from service users, parents, neighbours, clients, friends etc.?

### Culture

- How do you see the role of cultural diversity at your workplace? How is to have “non-Finns” among the staff?
- What do you think the foreign volunteers have learned from working here? What have you learned from the volunteers?
  - Has the experiences changed the way you perceive your own workplace/ culture / society?

### Future

- What kind of future plans do you have regarding volunteers? Are you going to host more?
  - Do you have some wishes? / What would your ideal volunteers be like?
- Do you have some tips or greetings for other organisations hosting or considering hosting international volunteers?