

## EU and Asia European Voluntary Service Project: Youth and Intercultural Dialogue



Project Documentation  
September 2007 - June 2008



Education and Culture DG

**'Youth in Action' Programme**

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# 1. Introduction

This document is an outcome of the **EU and Asia EVS Project, Youth and Intercultural Dialogue**, supported by the EU Youth in Action Programme (Action 2 - Agreement Nr. 2007-1242) for young volunteers from European and Asian countries run by the ICYE International Office in cooperation with its member and partner organisations. Four Asian countries (China, India, Nepal, and Vietnam) and seven European countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) participated in this 9-month project from September 2007 to June 2008. This documentation charts the intercultural journey of 13 young volunteers through their voluntary service period and their experiences of living and working in a different culture and country.

The project comprised an initial training on intercultural learning addressing the themes of identity, culture and cultural diversity, the cultural adaptation process, prejudices, communication, conflicts and their resolution, as well as discussion groups on the concept of volunteerism. This training aimed at preparing volunteers for their EVS experience by affording them the opportunity for a deeper understanding and appreciation of differences and similarities between people and cultures. In its entirety, the project aimed to stimulate mutual aid in the developed and the developing countries for cultural, educational and social purposes; to encourage the exchange of ideas; to improve the relationship among youth from countries with different political systems, religious beliefs and traditions, thus fostering understanding and respect; to work together on issues affecting people and their environment.

This document examines the extent to which the above-mentioned goals have been achieved through personal texts and narrations by the volunteers, as well as through a look at their preparation and the final meeting in Berlin.

We would like to thank all volunteers of the EVS EU-Asia Project, "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" and partner organisations for their invaluable contributions to this documentation, their enthusiasm and team spirit that made it possible to create a positive and fun working atmosphere and has led to promising results.



## 2. EU and Asia EVS Project: "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue"

In September 2007, 13 volunteers aged between 18-30 selected from different national and cultural backgrounds from EU member states and from Asian countries gave 9 months of their time to work abroad in centres for the elderly, with disadvantaged children, in centres for HIV/Aids prevention and care, to mention just a few.

This multilateral EVS project: Youth and Intercultural Dialogue, dedicated to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, aimed at highlighting the fact that dialogue represents a prerequisite for living in and benefiting from an increasingly multicultural environment. The main project aim was to foster intercultural dialogue between youth from European and Asian Countries by enabling a reciprocal voluntary service experience in EU and Asian countries.

The term "interculturalism" expresses a belief that coming in to contact with and experiencing other cultures personally enriches us. At its core, intercultural learning focuses on understanding, awareness, and acceptance of individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Developing ethno-cultural empathy is important in promoting mutual understanding, on both cognitive (recognising and understanding the thoughts of others, and affective (identifying and understanding the feelings of others) levels.

This was the first time many volunteers had been so far away from home, worked with people from different cultures and learnt a different language - this added up to a sometimes difficult cultural adaptation process. The volunteers were given a training focusing on intercultural learning to help them prepare for this. On arrival in their host country, they received a further three-day training, which provided details on the life in the country, and further intercultural learning sessions. Language lessons were also available where needed. These activities aimed at developing the perspective taking ability of the volunteers. Perspective taking is the ability to see things from a point of view other than one's own. In describing perspective taking, Moskowitz says: "We must be able to stand in the shoes of others, see the world through their eyes, empathise with what they are feeling, and attempt to think and react to the world in the same way that they think and react to the world."<sup>1</sup> Thereby our strategy has been one of de-biasing social thought. Perspective taking is also helpful in effectively reducing stereotypes.<sup>2</sup>

The pre-departure training coupled with the actual contact, interaction and work with the local community in the host countries formed the ideal setting to increase social bonds among individuals and groups, achieve greater ethno-cultural understanding, enhance social skills, empathy and conflict management skills. For most volunteers, the nine-month experience proved enriching and maturing.

The host communities benefited from the time, energy and practical ideas brought by the volunteers, as well as their personal skills and a different cultural perspective. At the end of their stay, volunteers had the chance to meet up at the final meeting in Berlin. Here they exchanged experiences, learnt about the possibilities of further involvement in human rights work and discussed their future plans.

Volunteering projects like this have a long-term impact on the volunteers as well as the local communities in which they work. It is a way of gaining the commitment of a new generation of ambassadors to the values of intercultural dialogue and human rights.

Gordon B. Moskowitz, *Social Cognition* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 22 in Forum on Public Policy. Perspective Taking in Language Learning and Teaching, Allison H. Hall, English Language Institute, Wayne State University. [www.forumpublicpolicy.com/archive06/hall.pdf](http://www.forumpublicpolicy.com/archive06/hall.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Epley et al., « Perspective Taking, » 338 in Forum on Public Policy. Perspective Taking in Language Learning and Teaching, Allison H. Hall, English Language Institute, Wayne State University. [www.forumpublicpolicy.com/archive06/hall.pdf](http://www.forumpublicpolicy.com/archive06/hall.pdf)

### 3. Preparatory Training in Berlin

The focus of the preparatory training in Berlin was to address and share the hopes, expectations and fears of all the volunteers vis-à-vis their forthcoming voluntary service experience, prepare them for working on the common theme of this EVS project, to introduce to them the idea and concept of volunteering, its complexity and differences in different cultural contexts, afford them a greater understanding of themselves and their identity, introduce them to alternate behaviour thereby assisting them in finding solutions to conflicts that may arise during their EVS period, and to provide background information on issues related to the work areas of the volunteer's host organisation. All in all, the training aimed at sharpening their intercultural communication skills in order to facilitate a better and smoother integration in their host country.

#### Highlights of the training

##### **Expectations, Fears And Hopes of my EVS**

In two groups, the participants received 4 sheets each with one topic: home, language and culture, host family/accommodation and host project. For each topic they had five minutes to write down, their expectations, motivations, fears and capacities. The session ended with a discussion on their inputs. A brief look at some of their thoughts and views:

**HOME Motivations:** To get to know new people, live life to the fullest. **Expectations:** Keep in touch with friends, become less dependent. **Fears:** Homesickness, missing home, family and friends, what happens when I go back home, do I want to live there anymore? **Capacities:** I always try to enjoy and not be nostalgic.

**LANGUAGE AND CULTURE Motivations:** To experience a different way of living and language, interested in any different language and culture, especially Asian. **Expectations:** Learn it properly and be able to make people understand me, get to know the culture, participate in the country not just like a tourist, have a mentor or contact person, become more independent, self-assured and open-minded, expand my horizons, learn about another religion, language and culture, English speaking host or coordinator, language or intercultural classes. **Fears:** Culture shock, it will be completely different, understanding people, pronunciation, not learning the language fast enough, getting to know people, role of women, conflicts, taboos, how to react if I am of a different opinion, cold weather. **Capacities:** The wish to learn the language, can learn different languages fast.

**HOST FAMILY / ACCOMMODATION Motivations:** Independence, living with people from a different culture, to live differently, get to know my own country better and my host country, new food. **Expectations:** Nice people of my own age, good living conditions, travel a bit - see the sea, friendly atmosphere, helpful family, to learn more about their culture and traditions, my private space! **Fears:** Transportation, living with a family or roommate, habits and conflicts, vegetarian food, not knowing what to expect, what kind of house will I live in, do I get friends. **Capacities:** Positive attitude!

**HOST PROJECT Motivations:** See/learn another view, help people, get to know new people, ways of working, get experience in a field I want to work in whilst helping people, do something completely new, another step towards international cooperation. **Expectations:** Contact person or mentor; work with youth or children, 'art' activities, possibility to realise my own ideas, help in organising the work, increased confidence, a better understand of the needs of the people.

Fears: Not know what or how to do something, unorganised work, no help., handling everything on my own.

**Capacities:** Knowledge and experience from journeys, living abroad, volunteering, creativity, helpful, experience working with children and children with disabilities, willing to try new things and get to know new people, wanting to help and good at listening, make children happy, work in a team and good organisational skills.

### Intercultural Learning Session I

Intercultural Learning Session I focused on Identity and Culture, Home and Host country and intercultural dialogue. Three segments comprising this session are:

1. **The Talking Wheel:** Short specific personal 1-on-1 interviews with participants on various topics. This session enabled participants to find out about other's views, opinions and possible prejudices on specific topics, offering participants time to reflect on their own opinions while also highlighting that everyone has many different ideas and experiences about certain issues.
2. **Home & Host Country:** This activity had 3 stages. For the first, the participants described the importance of a symbolic object that they were taking with them to their host country. The second stage was a reflection on 3 things that they are glad to leave behind and 3 things that they are glad to take with them. The final stage entailed drawing their image of their host country.
3. **Intercultural Dialogue:** The session consisted of a creative exercise - making a collage on intercultural learning and dialogue in small groups, followed by Rosebush - a short drawing exercise that shows how different people interpret words differently and thereby have dissimilar results. The drawing house exercise makes clear how different ones perception of basic things (eg. a house) can be very different from another's, based on ones cultural influence. The final exercise, collecting articles, focused on multicultural teamwork, and was followed by an explanation of Dr. Kolb's Learning cycle.



### Intercultural Learning Session II

The second intercultural learning session focused on a reflection of different values and behaviour. **The Value Pyramid:** A method on different value systems, prejudices and stereotypes ended with a discussion in plenary, which was followed by a look at and an explanation of the Iceberg Model of Culture.

### Intercultural Learning Session III

This third session on dynamic problem solving involved the development of cross-cultural skills: active listening, observation, communication skills, and respect for differences and conflicts resolution. In groups, the participants enacted role-plays of potential conflict situations at the host project, host family or accommodation etc. At the end of their enactment, they were also

asked to find solutions to these situations. The rest of the participants put in their own suggestions. A brief presentation of the conflict behavioural model ensued, followed by a description, through experiential narrations, of the cultural adaptation process or "culture shock".

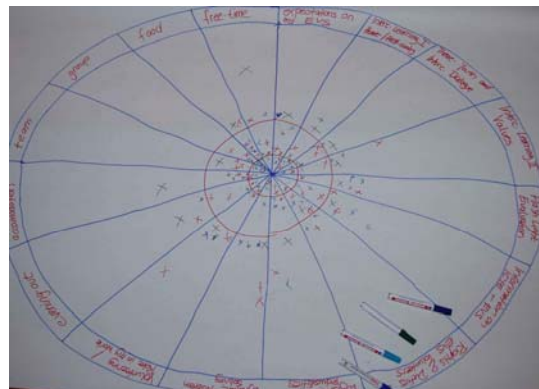
#### **Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal**

We had 3 fully packed days in Berlin. We made speeches, played games, had discussions, arguments and many more things. It was a really great start for the coming volunteering time. We shared our hopes, fears, expectations and reasons why people even want to work without getting a salary. We were all in the same position so it felt relaxing to notice that other people have the same kind of feelings too. I left Finland alone, but seeing the others doing exactly the same thing, I didn't feel so alone anymore.

#### **Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China**

"Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" is an intercontinental EVS projects enabling exchange of European and Asian volunteers. No matter the country of origin, volunteers have tens of questions about cultural differences. The answers as well as practical information and plenty of advice on problem solving are given in the training in Berlin before departure to host countries.

#### **Final Evaluation of Preparatory Training in Berlin**



## 4. The nine-month voluntary service experience

This section of the documentation affords a glimpse at the various experiences and the learning process that inevitably took place for the volunteers in their host countries through their own narrations, texts and reports, also photographs taken during this period. These have been divided in to various sections beginning with their **initial impressions** on arrival; their different **living situations**, whether with a host family, in a shared flat or at their host project; the **host projects**, their experiences while volunteering, the problems some faced and how they were overcome, including a look at their the last few weeks at their projects. Subsequently, a look at the **differing cultural encounters** whether positive or negative, and how the **cultural adaptation process** evolved for each of them, ending with what they learnt in the process and the **things to take home** with them. This also gives us an opportunity to examine the effectivity and success of intercultural learning through a volunteering experience abroad.

### A) First Impressions

#### Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal

Coming out of the airport was a shock! Immediately there were Nepali men and boys all around me trying to put me in a taxi or trying to grab my luggage. Everyone came very close to my skin and stared me all the time. The driving to our sleeping place took an hour and I spent the whole trip in silence. I felt like I was part of a movie. The view including all the strong noises coming from outside was something I hadn't ever experienced before. It seemed unreal, like I



Karita with a friend

have jumped in to a different century. And everyone was moving in a different direction, at a different speed and crossing each others in a different sides, making the traffic look chaotic and very noisy, and even now, two and half months later, I am not still sure whether they have any street rules here. Everything was a big mystery to me - but like almost everything in Nepal, all goes forward slowly and slowly.

#### Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania



Ly at the DEINETA office

I arrived in Lithuania around 3 pm in Vilnius. I was taken to the Deineta office. I was surprised in the car when they said that they could turn on some traditional Lithuanian music. It turned out to be some Vietnamese pop music. They took me to a high building surrounded by a lot of high buildings. All of them look the same and I thought that for sure one day soon I would get lost here. I went to Amelie's flat where there was an international dinner to welcome me. Meeting a lot of new people, new way of cooking, eating, talking, dancing, all at the same time, caused me to get mixed up and somehow a bit scared. It was my first day in Lithuania.



### Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China

The way I spent my first evening could be a recipe for discouraging a foreign girl. First the wave of hot and humid air hit us at the exit of the airport, then right after arrival Jennie and I were taken for dinner. Tired after almost the whole day on the plane we were entertained with the local specialties -Wenchang chicken staring at us from the table decorated with all the entrails and several dishes seemed at least strange to us. And here the nightmare of a vegetarian started. Chinese cuisine known from European restaurants has nothing to do with the greasy and full of meat Hainanese food. The first week was a crusade for veggie food as a concept of not eating meat is too difficult to understand for the locals as well as requests for not using animal oil.



Sylwia dining with friends.

Overwhelmed not only by the noise and dirt of the streets, tens of 'hellos' and heat, but also by Chinese hospitality, which means huge meals every few hours, we were relaxing with refreshing coconut drinks in our air-conditioned hotel room. Despite one week's national holiday our host, Chenzhu, spent a lot of time with us arranging our work and accommodation. Then Xu Da, sent by ICYE to accompany us during the first few days and the only person here who knew what EVS was, seemed to be a saviour. Thanks to his help conversational classes were arranged and our flat equipped properly. And finally the typhoon came and immobilised us at home for the rest of the first week. Welcome to the tropical island!

### Shashikala Mariswamy, Indian volunteer in Italy



I am living in another country for the first time, so I can't forget this, specially the first day. When I arrived in Turin people from the hosting project were awaiting me and took me to the hosting place. On the same day, another volunteer told me about the place, and in the evening I met my tutor. He's very nice, he asked me about my journey and told me what my work there is, really I was very happy that day. From Monday I stated my work (feeding old people, taking them for a walk, playing with them). The work is not hard; I like it very much. On the weekends, I don't have anything to do, and I didn't know Italy well enough to go out, so for whole two days, I was very home sick.

### Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India

The first week, we spent with several "cultural learning" lessons. We had the possibility to ask questions and we talked about certain „dos and don'ts". Unfortunately our language teacher was sick, but all in all it was okay! In addition, we spent a great „sight seeing" day in Bangalore, including the possibility to buy some Indian clothes (for which I was very grateful when I arrived in the village where my project is located). All in all, I felt perfectly well and in good hands.

**Brihaspati Sapkota, Nepali volunteer in Italy**

Arriving in Italy is a long tour, very funny and at times difficult too. When I arrived at my project, I felt as if I came from another planet. Everything is different. I needed help from others everywhere because the food, accommodation and friends in Italy are vastly different from Nepal.

**Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal**

My first impression about Nepal, better about Kathmandu, was that there are too many cars, too many motorcycles, too many bicycles and too many people but no traffic rules. They have to drive on the left side but there is no left before right rule. Sometimes there are traffic lights but without electricity they do not work and most of the time the one whose horn is the loudest drives first. In the beginning I really hated Kathmandu. So many people staring you, the city is so dirty, so loud and there is heavy smog. At night I couldn't sleep because of the many mosquitoes and the barking of street dogs. In the morning roosters started screaming at four o'clock. But you get used to everything and at the sightseeing tour we visited many beautiful Hindu and Buddhist temples. I started to like Thamel and Kathmandu, and when I visited it for the second time I enjoyed staying there.

**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland**

On landing at Helsinki Airport, I was tired. One volunteer from my host organisation received me and then we were constantly in hurry to catch the bus to Helsinki and then quickly bought the train ticket to get Seinäjoki to my project place. At the Seinäjoki train station, I was received by my mentor and flatmate. They were nice but I was too tired, hungry, cold and homesick. The next days I still kept my Vietnamese timezone, so I always felt sleepy and couldn't eat enough because of the strange food. During the first week, my flatmate helped me to go to some common places in the village and my mentor introduced me to my project and my work. In general, I found it very interesting.

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**

The first night, I remember when we sat in Ravinder's car and outside I could see Bangalore by night: the rickshaws, the traffic, the people and I felt excited and calm at the same time because I had finally arrived. And the camp started, and our first experience was Indian time. The people from the ICDE told us that they would meet us at 12 o'clock, and Franziska and I sat in the garden outside and waited and read books and talked, and at three o'clock, the crew finally came. After three or four days we were finally going to our projects. I felt excited, horrified, happy and sad. Excited and happy cause I was going to the real place, which I had longed for,

fancied and thought about for months. Scared because I knew hardly anything about the place, the people or what my work would be like. Sad, because I felt good and safe and liked to be at UTC and with Franziska. So finally I sat in Ravinder's car again and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry so I didn't do any of it. We got to the old-agehome, and the house was bigger and there were less patients than I had expected. My boss/host mother Sneha made an immediate impression. She is so outspoken and she told me a bit about the work and the previous volunteers and she asked me about who I am (no religion, why?!, Vegetarian? Why, no foreigners are vegetarians). And I felt a bit left alone sometimes, because suddenly I was alone with just two patients and everything was new.

### Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany

I reached Germany on 6th December; it was very cold and freezing. I was full of fear and had tears in my eyes, I felt very lonely. My friend Kathrin received me at the airport and we took a bus to the ICJA office. I was crying in the office and they told me to call India. I spoke to my parents. I really do not know why I was so scared, I felt very lonely on the first day itself. I wanted to go back to India. I was not excited or surprised only in mind I just wanted to go back to India at that moment. Kathrin took me to her town where I stayed four days. It was winter



in Germany and getting dark at 4.00 clock in evening. I was scared; there was no sound of people, birds or transport. I felt so lonely, it was very strange and it was difficult for me to adjust. I was homesick. I had never left my family. This was my first time traveling out of India.

### Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam



### Julia with a girl and a baby from the orphanage

we wanted to know, taught us our first Vietnamese and showed us a slideshow about Vietnam and cultural differences. I don't really remember my feelings at that time but I know that I was quite nervous and excited. When I talked to my parents on the telephone I kept telling them that I have to get used to everything and then I could tell them how I liked it.

When Francesca and I arrived at the airport in Hanoi, it was 4 pm. That meant that we had to go to our dormitory, crossing the whole town during rush hour. Thousands of motorbikes were zooming on the streets in every direction, not respecting any traffic rules at all. On one motorbike there was a father driving with two children behind him and in the back the mother, who kept the children from falling off. That was my first impression of Vietnam. I could not understand how people could survive on these streets. On Monday and Tuesday we had 2 introduction days with the long-term coordinator. She tried to answer everything



Selina with Sylwia and friends

### Selina Keranin, Finnish volunteer in China

I arrived in Wenchang on the 1st of May. The place is indeed quite different from what I had imagined. I expected it to be less developed - to the point that I actually brought enough cotton swabs from Finland to last for my whole stay. It turns out they do sell them here as well... I guess I also expected Wenchang to be much more crowded than it is. It is quite easy to find deserted places here. The town can get a little boring sometimes, but in general I like it here.

### Francesca Fedele, Italian volunteer in Vietnam

My project partner and I arrived in Vietnam around 5.30pm, and the sun was setting. The car drove fast along the streets surrounded by the palm trees and rice fields and lots of billboards advertising the last trendy mobile phone or a new built golf centre. A volunteer was waiting for us at the airport and we arrived at the host organisation office 1 hour and a half later. It was peak hour, so there was a lot of traffic and I was amazed by the thousands of motorbikes on the street and by the workers walking out of the factories: Canon, Yamaha...all walking in pairs in an endless queue, wearing blue uniforms and keeping their heads down. When we arrived at the office, which is at the ground floor of the dormitory building, we entered the common room, another 12 volunteers and staff-members were having dinner. We sat with them and ate our first Vietnamese meal. It was really good.



Francesca enjoying a meal with friends

## B) Host Family / Living Situation

### **Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal**

After the 2 weeks orientation course I went to my hostfamily's place in Bharatpur. The welcoming moment was very warm-hearted. They give me flowers, I got my own room and the first things what they said to me was: "You are now part of our family, you are our daughter, this is your house and we are very happy to have you here." Those words touched me and almost put me in tears. Apart from not having my own time, I also needed to get used to sitting together with my family on the floor,



Karita with the kids of the Children's Home

listening to Nepali language all the time understanding only a little and seeing all their relatives and neighbors who were very curious to see a foreigner. We visited many families and many people also came to our home to talk and drink tea.

### **Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania**

I live in Silainai, the area is in the outskirts of Kaunas, in an old building with Helene from Berlin and Pierre from France. We have a lot of fun living together. There are a lot of cockroaches in the flat in the kitchen and bathroom. They are small but quite a lot. The anti-cockroach medicine somehow makes them crazy. They come out of their place even during the day. But it seems we all are now used to living with them. Disgusting but little by little it becomes normal.

### **Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China**

I live in a bungalow for teachers, in a 2-room-flat with a small yard, bathroom and toilet shared with my flatmate and neighbour. The flat is well furnished (beds, desks, wardrobes and bookshelves) and equipped (fridge, air-conditioning, internet). It is comfortable but also a bit damp and mouldy like most of the buildings in this humid climate. There are only minor conflicts about cleaning the place, as my current flatmate is the messiest person I have ever lived with. The only way, I have tried so far, was honest talk but without any results -it is still me who cleans the flat, as she does not mind the mess.



Sylwia with students of the Hainan Foreign Languages College

### **Shashikala Mariswamy, Indian volunteer in Italy**

I have a big room with a beautiful balcony. I live alone, but in all we are four volunteers all living on the third floor. On this floor, there are only four rooms. Here we also have Internet, which is only for volunteers, and we have televisions and a telephone, so I am very, very comfortable here.

**Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India**

I live in a small flat, in Ramasamudram. It is by far big enough, I have running water (which I can heat with a immersion heater) and an attached toilet and even a small backyard. Except for the fact that it is a bit dark it is perfectly fine. I lived here alone during the first months but in January another volunteer moved in.

**Brihaspati Sapkota, Nepali volunteer in Italy**

My living accommodation is good. We live near the city centre. There are only volunteers in our house. It is different than at home as we behave differently and eat different food. We discuss everything and divide all the work between us. We are careful in doing the work so we have no conflicts with each other.

**Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal**

I live in a small village in Chitwan near Narayangarh. There is no bus station and no cars in my village. I live with a Buddhist family who has six members; my host father Som Lama, his wife Rita, his two sons Salim and Ayush and his parents. I have my own room. My family has three buffalos, two goats and two dogs and a few fields. The toilet is outside and at night I cannot go to the toilet because of the rhinos and the tigers. It is a very peaceful and very simple life in the countryside. I do not have any problems with my family. They are very friendly people and I really feel at home. I learned to ask for everything and I learn many different things just because I watch them doing their daily life.



Eva-Maria's host parents



Diep with her mentor, Ira, and others

**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland**

I live together with a German volunteer in a house and I have my own room. My house is 150m far from school. It is good. My flatmate and I don't have any big conflicts, only a small difference in thinking - wanting to discuss, and then we understand each other more.

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**

stay at my project. The first months I had a room of my own but for the last months I've been sleeping in the same room as two of the patients (ladies). They need some help during the night and somebody should be there if something goes wrong, so I sleep in their room. I cannot that say I've ever had a real conflict with my host mother, and I must say that I think it is partly because I'm quite afraid of conflicts. But, we have had different opinions about some things, and in the beginning I was



Karin during her visit to Franziska's project

really bad at giving my opinion because I was too cautious and afraid of claiming something. And my host mother is very... what word to use... instantaneous and really good at saying what she wants. And even if I agree with all the things, I sometimes just don't know who made the decisions. So now, after five months or something I think and I hope that I've learnt to be more explicit with what I want. And I try to learn to be less cautious and not to care too much about what other people will think about me.

### **Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany**

We are four volunteers staying in the living quarters of the project. They are all ICJA volunteers. Each of us has our own room and we share a kitchen and living room with a television. The accommodation is very comfortable. We try to cook together on Sundays, which actually doesn't work very often. I like living with the other volunteers as they are nice and we get along well.

### **Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam**

We live at the Peacehouse, an international volunteer dormitory. It is in an industrial neighborhood and Peacehouse itself is on the property of a factory, called COMA 6. The volunteers who work and live here come from all over the world. We have a kitchen but don't have to cook as our very talented cook prepares lunch and dinner everyday. Living at the Peacehouse is like living in a community. Our accommodation is not a very high standard one which means we sometimes have no water on the weekends. It was not very clean, there were ants everywhere and so on, but it was okay for me. After a week at Peacehouse, we moved from the 8 beds room to a 4 beds room, sharing it with a Canadian girl. This was a really good idea because from then on I had the feeling of living there together with all the volunteers but of having my own private space as well.



Julia eating with friends



Francesca with a friend

### **Francesca Fedele, Italian volunteer in Vietnam**

The first three months I lived in a dormitory in the building where also my hosting organisation's office is located. It's a three floors building inside a factory compound. We had a cook who provided daily meals and we shared toilets when there was no running water on the weekends as the factory turned off the pipes. There's a curfew at 11pm and when we wanted to stay out longer at weekend the guard complained 'cause he had to wake up and open the back door for us. Bored with this situation I asked to be moved downtown and I'm now living in a big house with 2 Australian volunteers. It's just 10 minutes from the old city centre by motorbike and my workplace is now easier to reach. I do enjoy my current accommodation more as I have more private space but still I wake up and chat with the girls sharing impressions, making plans for the week and so on.

## C) Host Project

**Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal Aishwarya Children Home** is an orphanage that looks after 47 orphans in Nepal. It has been providing a homely environment and education to underprivileged children.

It was big surprise to see the life in the orphanage. Nirmala is the biggest reason why the children are so happy, healthy and polite. Aishwarya is a private orphanage and Nirmala, a 48-year-old Nepali lady, is the director and owner of the place. My work is really flexible and changeable, leaving a lot of responsibly on my own shoulders as to what I want to do there. Not only do I cook Nepali food, I have also been teaching

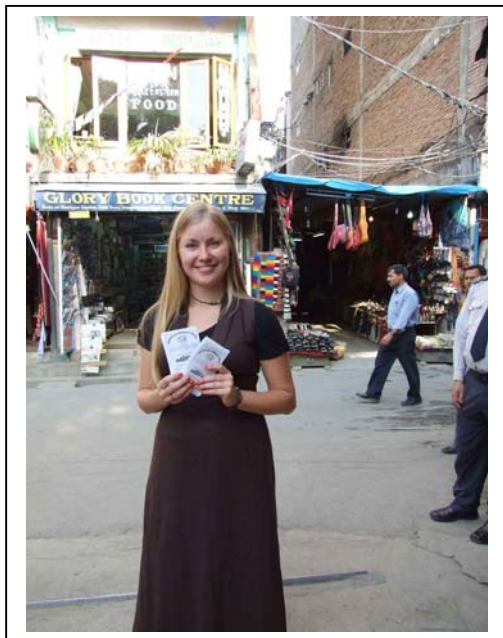


Karita and the kids preparing sweets

the kids 3 hours everyday. This year the kids didn't go to school because of the lack of money, so I have tried my best to give them some knowledge. The responsibility of what I teach lies in my hands and that of our two other volunteers.

The three volunteers at the Aishwarya Children's Home organised a fundraiser to be able to provide the children with basic necessities including schooling.

It has been really great to see the changes that the orphanage has gone through since I've been here. Now the children sleep on beds, go to school, have healthier and changeable food, and the place has more money to use on the kids. From the fundraised money we have been able to buy more things: dishes, iron, fruit and milk and furniture like 6 bookshelves etc. As I write this



article, this week we got 6 new children, 2 boys and 4 girls. Now the orphanage has 32 children in all. One saying, I don't know if it is a Nepalese saying or just my Nepali mother's (orphanage owner's) saying, but I like it a lot. She first raises one hand and says, "One hand doesn't clap. You need two hands to clap." And she puts her hands together. She has done it many times and it symbolises how one person can't do everything alone but needs other people's help too. For me it tells also that the orphanage's owner is a really amazing person who takes such good care of the children and house but also that she also has many Nepalese, Tibetan, and foreign friends who help in the house. Many Nepalese have been volunteering and giving so much help. Many people have seen how good a place it is and then automatically feel like helping. Without those "helping hands" like the owner calls them the orphanage would not be a reality.

**Karita distributing flyers for the fundraiser** The last weeks have disappeared really fast. I have been saying goodbyes to my two foreign working friends, Anne (Finnish) and Stephanie (English) with who I worked together for many months and also realising that my time to go is coming soon too. So I have been the only volunteer in my last 3 weeks in the orphanage Aishwarya Children's Home and the days have kept me busy. One week ago I started to practise Salsa. And the reason for this is; April 18 when we held the orphanage's fundraising event, there was a Nepali singer and his friends in the audience. After



the programme, they sent an email to our orphanage's email address and asked whether Stephanie (the other volunteer) and I would want to do volunteering in this singer's music videos and in return they would make a donation to the orphanage. We met the singer, Ashish and his director and we said yes! They have already shot one music video (it took one day) with Stephanie. I watched the shootings that they did outdoor, nice view of the Himalayas and Stephanie needed to act (to look like she was in love and walk hand in hand.) with Ashish. For me they had different plans. I have never danced Salsa before but neither has Ashish. Still they decided that Salsa looks so nice that we need to learn to dance it in 2 weeks time.

So since 30th May I have been taking 2 free hours of Salsa lessons everyday together with this Nepali singer. Being involved in a music video, the singer will donate 10000 rupees (around 100 euros) to the orphanage. So for the kids, why not?

Monday, June 9 I also got a huge surprise. It was a normal morning, walk the children to the school (but luckily we left the house a little bit earlier than normal, to get school photos for the identity cards). A foreigner lady was standing near the school gate with sunglasses when I was starting to go back to orphanage. I looked at her, as in that area there are normally no foreigners. She also looked me, smiled and said suddenly hello in Finnish and finally, after she took her sunglasses away, I realized who she was. One of my best friends in Finland! Best surprise. Now she has spent a few days in the orphanage and I have been her happy Nepali guide. I really like that I have many things to do these last weeks that I don't have so much time to worry or stress about the leaving here and going back to Finland. Kids have been counting daily when my day to leave will come, making sad faces and asking when I will come back. That doesn't really make the last days in Nepal easier to face. I feel so excited about going back to Finland, to see my family and friends and how I will see all the Finnish things and habits after being away for so long. But I am also sad to leave the people here. It has been such a long time living in Nepal that I have got really attached to many people and the country.

**Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania Deineta "Young Generation for a new Europe"** was established in 1988 as a union of several student clubs. The main aim of Deineta's activities is to promote international co-operation and understanding between young people from different countries and different cultures.



I make a blog for Deineta to up-date volunteers' activities at different projects and give in-coming volunteers a reliable webpage where information on volunteers' lives is uploaded so that they can imagine the life of a volunteer in Lithuania. <http://deineta.blogspot.com>. I am also making a project portfolio in which all our feelings, thoughts, difficulties and tips when carrying out voluntary service at different projects in Lithuania are mentioned. The purpose of making this portfolio is to shorten the period of time that in-coming volunteers need to integrate in the new culture. Besides I also help coordinating volunteer administrative activities and other events. The last few weeks at the office, I have had more tasks to do than ever. Food and bus invoice figures, final report, Deineta's new webpage, welcoming new volunteers, and some other stuff.

**Ly in one of her roles for Deineta** Sometime I feel a bit tired but it was nice anyway. My friends, other volunteers, are starting to leave and return to their country, which causes me to feel lonely and sad. It reminds me that I also will leave here soon, and my service is coming to an end, and that I will return to my own country and my normal life.

**Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China** The Hainan Foreign Languages College is a well-reputed Higher Education Institution providing foreign language education to around 3500 students from Hainan and Mainland China. The College also runs a kindergarten for about 50 children of the college staff and the surrounding community. By way of the EVS volunteers, the College would like to add an intercultural European dimension to its varied activities.

Wenchang, 16th May 2008 32 °C again, real temperature 43 °C. Can I stand one more month of such crazy heat? Hmm, why not? I have already battled with huge cockroaches, got used to my ankles permanently bitten by mosquitoes, accepted rats visiting my house every night. Who knows, maybe after a few more weeks I will learn how to deal with mould covering everything from clothes through shoes to my pillow. The paradise described above is in Hainan, a tropical island in the very south of China,



where I have lived for over 7 months. My experiences of this period are not only about adjusting to the conditions, but also completely new tasks. I, a student

Sylwia, Selina and others in the classroom

of chemistry who preferred a quiet laboratory than presentations before colleagues, suddenly had to perform in a class of 30 or 40 people. In the first few lessons, I was sweating with stress but with passing time even several classes a week were not a problem anymore. During the project, the number and kind of lessons have changed a few times, but the general idea remained the same - make young people speak English. Beside these conversational classes for college and middle school students, I have also several classes a week at nursery schools, which turned out to be unexpectedly funny and pleasant.

Our intercultural classes do not finish with a bell. Living in a campus means constant contact with the students - common meals and shopping, taking part in their everyday life with performances, sports and free time activities as well as going out to loud karaoke bars or taking trips together. The question "How is it in your country?" could be one of the candidates for the most frequently heard sentences of the project. Another one would be "I'd like to make friends with you and practice my oral English," which makes us just tools for learning the language, but there are always two sides to every coin. How to give an oral English class without any knowledge of

teaching? That is a question I am still working on.



Sylwia teaching at the nursery school

Following the advice of a superior we could base our classes on a course book or simply play word games, but we take a chance to enlarge the students' knowledge of Europe and other cultures and make them aware of global problems. The school helps to arrange facilities needed, but it is a volunteer who must take the initiative and find a way to make lessons interesting or to organise classes at all. Learning from a culture based on "guanxi" - connections, we use our relationships with the teachers,

students and school clubs to get to the people willing to take part in activities different from their regular lessons. Any shortcomings of the supervision at the college fade away when compared with the care from our coordinator, Chenzhu. Whenever her help is needed, she will find time to meet us and cope with problems. Any problems, mostly caused by the lack of

experience with voluntary projects, were eclipsed with Chinese hospitality and friendliness. Regular life, no rush, no problems with work or accommodation, palm trees and sun for the better part of the year. Is it the atmosphere of the tropical island which makes English teachers stay here long? Or is it the fact of being a respected and privileged foreigner in a small Chinese town?

No matter what the reason is, being a volunteer here is a very appealing idea. Daily routine with preparation of lessons, seeking interesting topics and exciting activities gives space for creativity, but is also a bit of a challenge. Among relaxed Hainanese people it is not possible to overwork oneself, and a lot of free time gives an opportunity to explore local customs and surroundings. Who will believe that I, known as a long sleeper, get up at dawn to do tai chi with Chinese women or do not scream on seeing a huge spider or cockroach although at home I panic seeing just a tiny one? Of course, not all of the things look so bright and this short summary of my project in Wenchang may be affected by the joy of my forthcoming return to Poland.

All the problems with arranging classes, lack of vegetarian food, nosy neighbours and boredom of the town have lost significance. Unconsciously, I choose only good memories to take home together with local coconut specialties instead of weird chicken feet and other local "delicacies". I make the most of the remaining time and enjoy the most pleasant aspects of my stay here. Will I ever have a chance to do tai chi under the setting sun again? Generally speaking, I wanted to complete all the things I had been doing here like lessons, courses and other activities, say goodbye to all the people I am close to. Two weeks before departure I realised there were still pictures to take and places that I wanted to visit once again but always put these trips off. On the other hand, I started arranging meetings with my Polish friends, looking for music and photographic events which I missed so much in Wenchang. I will miss the people who I met at my project but I am really happy about returning home and to my regular life.

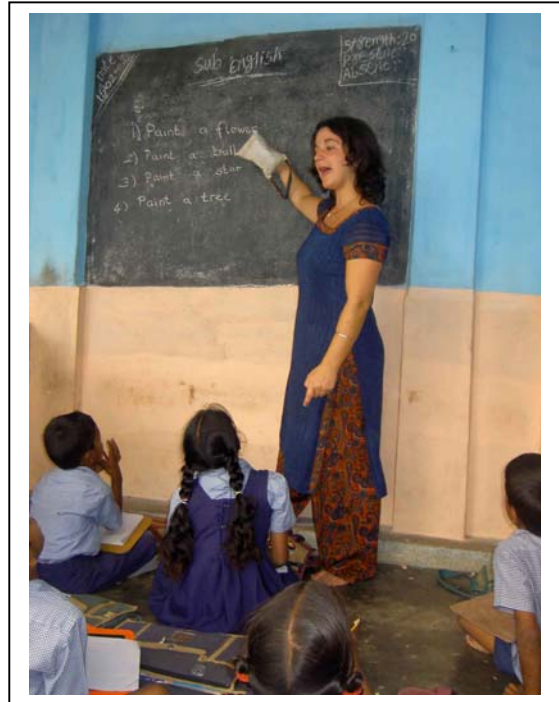
**Shashikala Mariswamy, Indian volunteer in Italy Rifugio Carlo Alberto**, run by the Valdese church through volunteers and staff members, is made up of two structures: The main one, which hosts 80 non-self sufficient elders and also some disabled adults and the daily centre for people affected by Alzheimer. In the morning and afternoon I serve drinks to the guests at my working place. Before lunch (and if I work in the afternoon also before dinner) I have to prepare the tables. Then I feed them, after which I tidy up and clean the room. These tasks structure everyday, and in between I take part in the activities organised by the social workers at the Rifugio - like going to the market, music therapy, playing tombola, reading the newspaper, dancing. During the day there is also the possibility to organise other activities like drawing, going to the garden or for a walk with the guests, reading, talking, manicure, playing games or other things I would like to do... yes am very happy here.



Shashikala with residents of the project Shashikala with colleagues

**Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India Helping Hands for the Under Privileged** supports education for the children whose parents cannot afford their children's education and lack motivation. This school is the only one in this village and is situated in a remote area which lacks facilities.

My project is located in a small village in Andhra Pradesh. The Modern English Medium School has about 250 children, aged between 2 and 13. I work as a spoken English teacher, that means, I take lessons where I try to teach the kids some basic English vocabulary, expressions etc. This was not easy, especially in the beginning because even if it is supposed to be an "English medium" school most of the kids could not say (or understand) more than 3-4 sentences, but with a lot of drawings on the board, talking with hands and feet, patience and a bit of play acting... it worked! Better and better! Sometimes (because of lack of staff) I have to take other classes as well. In addition, I do some office work from time to time, such as writing tuition bills etc. There are some things I do not like at the school. The two most important of them are slapping the children and in my eyes not a sensible way of teaching (like having a „modern English medium school“, without English speaking staff). I have talked about both with the headmistress and she was very understanding and sees the problems herself.



Franziska during the English lessons

The reaction of the headmistress was: „but how shall we take control of them then?“ And in a way the children are so used to it that I think it is not easy to find a way to save the school from chaos without changing the whole building situation, the size of the classes etc. To the second point, it must also be mentioned that in these areas it is really very hard to find proper teachers. All in all, I love my work, the children, the headmistress and my host family! My last few weeks have been wonderful because I was so close to my host family and the children at the school. On the other hand, I started to become sad and moody because I didn't want to leave, yet. Furthermore, we had a staff problem because three teachers quit their job so I couldn't teach spoken.

**Brihaspati Sapkota, Nepali volunteer in Italy Associazione Volontarius "Solidarity and Assistance for minors and refugees"** is active in the social re-insertion of people who live outside the local community, it runs several different activities for homeless people, minors and refugees where the volunteer is involved, in particular at the Centre for younger foreigner not accompanied and the Social Emergency Centre for refugees and for people asking for refuge.

I work at a refugee centre. There are more Asians from close to my country. I organise activities with the people and the small children. Now I have a good relationship with my colleagues. I am happy with my project.

**Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal District Aids Coordination Committee Chitwan** works in the field of Aids to encourage the victimised. The EVS volunteer participates in community activities such as working with people suffering from HIV/AIDS and sharing the individual views with the local energetic youth. Eva-Maria subsequently worked in a project within the network of the District Aids Coordination Committee, an orphanage and conservatory in the village of Mangalpur.

My project is an orphanage with 27 children, 18 boys and 11 girls. Next to the orphanage is the conservatory where we grow all kinds of plants and vegetables for the orphanage and as well for the inhabitants of the village. They can come and have vegetables and small plants for free. I work by turns in the orphanage and in the conservation. My work in the orphanage starts at 7.00 a.m. I teach the kids or help them with their homework. Then I help cooking the lunch and from 10.00 a.m. until 4.00 p.m. is a break because the children are in school. After break we play with them or help them with their homework. At 6.00 p.m. we go home for dinner. My work at the conservation starts at 10.00 a.m. I do weeding, planting, watering and every work which belongs to gardening. At 1.00 pm. I have a one hour break and then we continue until 5.00 p.m. It felt very hard to say goodbye to my host family especially to my little host brother who I really liked. I also had to say goodbye to the kids in the orphanage and the other volunteers who worked with me. My last week in the orphanage was very busy because we were helping with the preparation of the third anniversary of the orphanage. We cleaned the kitchen and painted the walls of the kitchen and the fences. Leaving for me was not as bad because I left Nepal after five months. My grandmother got really sick so I had to decide very quickly. I left within two days. It felt very strange and I was sad but at the same time I knew I would leave Nepal not forever. I definitely want to come back.



**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland Lehtimäen opisto** is a school for the disabled and the task of the volunteers is to interact with the disabled during their lessons and leisure time and to help - along with the staff - them in their in the daily routines.



My project is going well. I take pleasure in working here. Although my given project is simple, I try to develop its content and make it more attractive. I find it specially meaningful to help disabled students. People who I contacted in my project as well as in Finland are very nice and enthusiastic about helping me. The biggest difficulty is my Finnish language. And sometime I am bored living in the countryside for a long time, especially in

dark and cold winter. So it's really great with participating in some camps.

#### Diep with 2 children from the school

It's a good chance for me to understand how the other volunteer projects are going, make friends and get to know more about Finland as well as other European countries. My colleagues are nice, and my mentor and flatmate are also my colleagues. But some of my colleagues can't speak English so some times we are silent and bored. I have written one text for my project place on

<http://koti.mbnet.fi/opisto/joulunasta07.pdf>, you can see at page 16 & 25. My last few weeks in Finland were going so quick and I had a full calendar: preparation for goodbyes to the students, farewell party with friends and, and, and..

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India Cherish Foundation** is a centre for the elderly as well as for the disabled. While some of them are residents, there are quite a few people who visit the project on a daily basis and spend their time, trying to relive their past and good times. My main work is to look after the patients and help them with whatever support they need.



#### Babaji, a resident of Karin's project

Sneha, my host mother who is also the owner of the old age home, told me that I am now the commander here. Commander what?! It's not just that I don't like telling people what they should do, I'm even really bad at it. Oh, what a commander I am!

here is this elderly man called Babaji at the old age home, and I think you can call what has happened between him and me a conflict. Babaji is a man who likes to talk a lot, and that was what we were doing for months. And he started to tell these funny stories, which for me (used to western-girlish-giggling -about-boys-girls) were harmless. But Babaji probably took my friendly laugh as an invitation, and the stories became more and more intimate and he started to always call me his "sweet little girl" and I said stop it, but now I know I said it too politely. One day he went too far and touched me in a way that I really found disgusting, and I made it very clear to him. And since that day he is more decent, and not at all as talkative with me. But the irritating thing is that he is backbiting on me, and even tells lies about me to my host mother and the people working here. I have tried to talk to him, but he just ignores me. And now, I'm traveling, so I'm curious what will happen when I return.

I think the last weeks have been more like the previous ones than I had expected. Of course, the routines have all been the same, but also my thoughts and feelings have been quite unchanged. Because I neglect the thought of the fact that I am really going to leave, I guess it is some kind of mental self-protection. But I feel both happy (to meet all my friends and family back home) and sad (to leave the things I like and love here).

**Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany Fürst Donnersmark Haus** is a rehabilitation centre for physically disabled young people and adults. The project supports its residents in living an independent life. Thus, they live together in communities where they get psychological, medical, social, pedagogical, practical support in their daily life and therapies to make their life more independent.

I work in a project with disabled people and manage the disabled, painting, drawing group. Earlier I was in another group where I had to bathe and change diapers of the people at the project. As I was uncomfortable with the idea, so I spoke with my supervisor and requested a change of group. My current group comprises 6 workers. I also work in the cafeteria. As I speak only the very basic German, for about a week, I had problems with my colleagues. They didn't say hello or smile or it was a stifled smile and I kept feeling that they were talking behind my back. I was confused and wondered if I had done something wrong. I spoke to the head of my group and asked if for some reason they were upset with me. The problem according to her is my German

or rather the lack of it. The team head said that people can't understand me but I haven't had problems with or complaints from anyone. After this conversation, everything was back to normal.

My last week at my project was really good because everybody seems to be happy. I think it is because of the summer. It is really good everyday and it makes me more comfortable. I feel that I am one of them. At same time, I feel I am going to miss them. Every day we have fun and creative activities that make me more excited about being in the project. We did many creative things: flower work, painting parts and T-shirt, tree, woods with fun talks. We had an Art Exhibition that I worked on with the creative group. It was a wonderful moment for me to be part of the project.

**Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam Vietnamese Volunteers Club** organises intercultural exchange and voluntary activities for local and international volunteers. All these activities are interconnected with the theme of intercultural dialogue. The EVS volunteer helps organising training session for local volunteers, cultural talks and discussions, as well as communicating with local volunteers and improving their communication skills.

Originally our project was to work with a club of Vietnamese students who volunteer in their free time. Their idea was to set up a new club for other students to meet and discuss cultural topics in English. Francesca and I would be the discussion leaders. It took us more than one month to start the club. In the meantime, we had a lot of free time and wanted to do something productive. We started teaching, joined a work camp and I started going to an orphanage.

What I consider a problem is the fact that we had no real work for quite a long time. The project-description that we got before said that our work would be mainly office work. The only plan was to help the Vietnamese students to set up an English-Cultural exchange Club. The Club was only meeting once a week and we could do what we wanted the rest of our time. I had the feeling that I needed something to do otherwise I would get bored and homesick. I started teaching English at Peacehouse, but it was not enough for 9 months. It was then that we came up with the idea of working in an orphanage for some hours a week. It was a very small orphanage with about 20 children and 10 babies which made it easy for me to get to know most of them very well. I learned that it was up to me what I did there and that if I wanted to help I should just do it and not wait for them to ask me for help because they would never ever do that. As the children are at school during the day I spend most of my time with the babies and the nurses. They got familiar with me and I got more and more responsibilities and tasks. My work at the orphanage was also one of the reasons why I tried



Julia and her students with their certificates



Julia at the orphanage

responsibilities and tasks. My work at the orphanage was also one of the reasons why I tried

hard to study Vietnamese. I wanted to be able to communicate with the children (only some of them speak English) and with the people working there. My last few weeks were great, actually like the other weeks too. I spent as much time as possible in the orphanage playing with the children. They were already on holiday so they were always at home and happy to do something with me. I collected some books from my friends in Vietnam and bought a bookshelf with the support of my organisation. The children in the orphanage love reading and so they had a lot of fun discovering all the new books and starting to read them. My classes also were a lot of fun. One class, which I have been teaching for 9 months, was still consisting of the same students as at the beginning. Their English really improved and they lost their shyness of giving their opinion in another language. My project with the Indigo club, the Culture-English Club for Vietnamese students, was also very successful. It started very disappointing and annoying but in the end it turned out to be a really good idea and of course manageable. On our last meeting we talked about what foreigners think about Vietnam and how they feel when coming to this country. It was very interesting to find out what they think that we think about their land.

**Selina Keranin, Finnish volunteer in China**

**The Hainan Foreign Languages College** is a well-reputed Higher Education Institution providing foreign language education to around 3500 students from Hainan and Mainland China. The College also runs a kindergarten for about 50 children of the college staff and the surrounding community. My project is a little different than I thought it would be, because the college is not able to offer us any lessons. We (Sylwia and I) have therefore started an English-speaking conversation club, which gets together in the mornings. So far we haven't been able to attract very many students, though, I guess we'll have to think of more appealing topics.



The Kindergarten where Selina also worked

We've also talked about having a radio show to reach a wider range of students. On Thursday evenings we often take part in the English corner, a meeting place for students who want to improve their English. In the afternoons I work at the kindergarten as planned. The general level of the students' English is also not very good but there are some with whom we can have more difficult conversations and make a deeper connection. In the classroom the topics have to often be simpler, although we've tried to be ambitious with our ideas. Now we've noticed that we should pick easier topics. Oh, and when I say we, I mean Sylwia and I, the Polish volunteer who has been here since September. We are not only colleagues but also roommates, so it's good that we share the same sense of humour and get along. The best thing about this project is the people. Most of them have been just wonderful, extremely helpful and nice and genuinely concerned about our well being - to the point that I feel a little guilty accepting their help.

**Francesca Fedele, Italian volunteer in Vietnam Action for the City (ACCD):** The work for volunteers in Action for the City will be connected with environment theme. Volunteers will be working closely with local staff in project development, implementation and promotion.

Our initial project consisted of setting up an intercultural club together with local volunteers to promote intercultural dialogue and voluntary work among youth in Vietnam. It took a long time to arrange meetings, gather ideas and it all happened only once a week. Above all, I wasn't happy with the project itself, 'cause it didn't respond to the description we were given. I was supposed to work on project management in a local NGO and instead I ended up teaching English.



I heard of a local NGO working on environmental issues widely, and a few days later a meeting with the NGO director was arranged. I've been working there happily for 4 months now. I've been doing bibliographical researches on urban poverty issues in Vietnam and especially in Hanoi; drafting project proposals, fundraising and photo exhibition installations. I've been learning a lot and the atmosphere in the office is lively and friendly. The director, a 35 Vietnamese woman, is a very smart and



determined person, with a great sense of humour and understanding and is passionate about her work. She strongly believes in the contribution our work can give to the well-being and development of the communities in Hanoi and surroundings and she's committed to the involvement of youth in our activities.

Francesca at the ACCD regional encounter

## D) Differing Cultural Encounters

### Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal

It's easy to tell some of the positive experiences. In the beginning they were so obvious. And now I mean the people. It was good to see how family centred the Nepalese are. Also in the beginning the people felt really friendly and positive. My host-family took me as part of their family right away, which felt great. People seem to be very



curious, helpful and willing to show you places or invite you to their homes. People are easy-going and don't worry too much about anything, letting the life bring whatever it will. The negative experiences in the first months in Nepal were lack of free time. Sometimes I felt that I was experiencing such a different life than what I have been used to that I would need brakes and some time just for myself to think it all through. In my host-family and in Bharatpur where I lived for the first 3 months, there weren't really any places to go alone. There were almost no tourists and if I was outside the house people stared at me constantly and many kept coming to speak to me. That sometimes felt stressful, making me feel really odd, like a stranger. Some Nepalese traditions felt inconceivable. Like the arranged marriages or why the family's daughters have to leave home when they get their first periods. Sometimes it seems to me that people do something because its part of their culture, not because they think its right or wrong.

### Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania

On the one hand, living among a lot of people from different cultures such as German, French, Spanish, Lithuanian, little by little I became more open-minded and it also gave me the chance to evaluate my own social and cultural value in comparison with Lithuania culture in particular and European in general. I also enhanced my language and communication skills for I nearly always used English as the main language to communicate with many German and French volunteers. I learnt to live alone and take care of myself when living in a new culture. On the other hand, I experienced moments when I felt lonely when I am so different from the others, no one can share the same value and belief. Scared somehow when guys annoyed me when I went outside.



Ly with a friend

### Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China

The Chinese are the most hospitable and warm people I have ever met, who love sharing with others. It is nothing unusual to find a bag of fruit hanging on your door or get a gift without occasion. In case of any problems, they will help you without hesitation or expecting anything in return. What's more, it is not difficult to offend them by trying to repay them for their

kindness. Chinese collectivism and Western individualism clash everyday. You do not get your own dish but share several with others, you do not pay for your drink but for all - next time another person will do the same, you do not refuse help with shopping just because you are tired or busy. Others' feelings and hospitality are the priorities for a Chinese person, which makes partnership with foreigners hardly possible. Even finding out ideas or intentions of your friend are different from yours, you are unlikely to persuade them to compromise - you are more important.



Sylwia at a bar with friends

### **Shashikala Mariswamy, Indian volunteer in Italy**

For me everything is a positive experience here, because I don't think it is a totally different culture, only some parts are different - religion, food, and the lifestyle of the people. For me, it is not difficult to adjust. I am learning all these new things. Before I came here, I expected a very big culture shock but now I feel it's not totally different from what I thought it would be!

### **Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India**



Fransizka in a sari with ladies in the neighbourhood

All in all, it is so much that I could never write it all down. But to start with some positive experiences: I have never experienced such hospitality, things are more spontaneous and not so fixed, lots of people have been incredibly friendly and helpful, I learned not to judge too fast (e.g. arranged marriages are not the worst thing in the world). Negative experience I have made with certain forms of sexual harassment („eve teasing“), the IST (Indian standard time), sometimes I waited for a really long time, but on the other hand it

helped me to become more patient, corruption (it took me quite a long time and quarrels with a policeman, who insisted on a new leather jacket, till I got my police registration) and than lots of small things like dirt everywhere, the necessity to bargain for almost everything and people trying to fool me, etc.

### **Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal**

To name one of the positive experiences; for example all the girls go to school like the boys. Nepal is the poorest country in Asia but there is one big middle class so most of the people have enough food. My negative experiences are not really negative, more strange and uncomfortable. For example here they eat twice a day, and every day the same food. It does not really vary. The society in Nepal is very influenced by their religions - Buddhism and Hinduism, and especially by the caste system. A woman is under the control of the husband, the father or brother. Men can have more than one woman and if his wife does not give birth within three years he can have another one. But women are allowed to have only one husband in their lives, and most of the marriages are still arranged. The age when women marry is between 14 and 22. It is also totally normal that a man has love affairs.

**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland**

What has been so positive for me is my work with disabled students, finding Finnish people are nice, enthusiastic about helping me. But the most important thing is the good Finnish community, having more friends from many countries, seeing real snow falling, learning how to save money and so on. However, everything in Finland is very expensive. Also living in the countryside for a long time is difficult (but sometimes this is also a positive experience).



Diep encounters Santa.

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**

One reason I came to India is that I wanted to see and experience another culture. The positive thing about living in a new culture is that I've become more aware of my own culture and its plusses and minuses. I have realised that culture is so much more and wider than about how people celebrate their birthdays and with whom you speak in the bus; it includes something I really don't know what it is. The first positive thing about coming to a culture different from your own is the experience itself: to see, to hear and to participate. There is also something irritating, tiring and hard about coming to a new culture. It is hard not to understand cultural hints, which I just don't understand, I just get that I've broken a rule. It is irritating to never be able to just be an anonymous part of the culture because no matter how much I try to act like everybody else, there is always some reminder that I am not the real stuff (if not my own mistakes, my skin colour is always there to make people ask, "How do you do this in Swedland?"). And I don't think I am the only one who has thought, "But this is wrong", about something in the society which is said to be connected with the culture (like the cast system or the gender roles or that whoever wants can look into your bag just because he or she is curious).

**Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany**

Living in Germany has made me strong and taught me to take care of myself. I have also learnt how care for and to teach and work with the mentally disabled. The importance given to them is sharply contrasting to India. However, it makes me uncomfortable to see people standing beside me in the train and kissing. Also, at our accommodation, other volunteers have a lot of parties in the kitchen and drink and smoke, which I don't like. In the beginning, there were 3 to 4 loud parties. After one such party, we received a letter of complaint from the project administration. I wasn't even at the parties but my name was in the letter. As they didn't want to single out one volunteer, they had included all our names.



Angel in the painting class

**Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam**

I remember that in my opinion the biggest cultural difference was the way of living and dealing with Vietnamese time. It was still very hot when I arrived and we spent hours of the day sitting around and not working. I had 3 hours of lunch break which would never happen to me in Austria. On the one hand, I liked this as it was really good to lie down and relax, but on the other hand, I had the feeling that they were wasting so much time and they would work so slow and be really lazy. It was a wrong thought! I know that now and I think this is a positive aspect. I learned that it is not only rushing and working a lot that makes you a hard-working and successful person. People here take it easier. They do not worry too much about the same things as we do. There are many cultural differences that had a positive effect on me. Just by experiencing something else besides how I grew up and what I've learned and thought is the right and only way of living, I found out a lot about my culture and myself. There are a lot of things I took for granted before and I didn't even think about, but now I started to put them in question. I am used to telling my opinion, to criticize and especially to be criticised. When I didn't like something I said it and if someone told me he/ she didn't like my idea, I would discuss it with him/her. Here they all say yes, good idea but then in the end they change the plans, schedules decisions and so on behind my back. For me this was the worst part of cultural difference in the field of working.



Julia, vietnamese style

**Selina Keranin, Finnish volunteer in China**

The noise and the rudeness of men are sometimes difficult to stand. People talk loudly at the same time: Men scolding wives, people pushing you in the overcrowded buses, no respect for the old ones from the well-off youngsters. People have been turning greedier since the Government opened to the market, and tourists are seen mainly as money providers more than resources for a future sustainable development. On the other hand, though, people who are very friendly, even though it is hard to make close friendships with them. Unless they were somehow exposed to foreigners before, whether for studying abroad or for attending foreign schools here, their mind is still trapped in the communist education system and it is difficult to let them go beyond certain barriers.



Kids at the nursery school

## E) Cultural Adaptation Process

### **Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal**

Of course my feelings changed after spending some weeks in Nepal. Everything is not new anymore and you start to understand a little bit about how the country works and see the good and the bad things in there. There were lots of waiting moments, misunderstandings, excitements, frustrations, happiness, curiosity and joy. So many times I felt that nothing is really happening or changing. The first months were full of big feelings and I had to think so many times again and again, why I am even doing this? But I didn't even once think of going back home. This trip is something really different from what I expected and not always easy, but definitely challenging and interesting.

### **Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania**

In the beginning, I had quite a culture shock. Not many people live in the city, it made me feel as if I were in the middle of nowhere. It was also very hard for me to see broken bottles of wine and beer around my flat and also near the Deineta office. I was so scared to go outside as I thought that many alcoholics live around and it reminded me of drunken guys fighting. I was really obsessed with this image. Nerijus, my mentor explained to me that it is just drinking and then being drunk and dropping the bottle. Nothing is related to fighting. Maybe it's true but I am scared of it actually. Moreover, the people here are not so friendly and open-hearted. I hardly see anyone smiling, laughing on the bus, on the street or at the supermarket. They all look sad and depressed. Furthermore, people look at me as if they had never seen an Asian before. For a young girl like me from a tropical country, it was really, really depressing when winter started. The grey sky, which is typical of the winter, the grey of the buildings from the Soviet time over the city and the grey reflected on the faces of the people here. Meanwhile I didn't have so many things to do at the office, trouble with food. I couldn't find the food I was used to in Vietnam and although the food looks the same, it tastes different. It took time for me to get used to it. Anyway it passed. It was my first week in the service. But I was happy to make friends with other volunteers and discover a new culture, which was very strange to me. There is also so much touching and kissing in comparison with my culture. Kissing when meeting each other, kissing on the streets, which one rarely sees in Vietnam. An important part of my volunteer life in Lithuanian is the parties, which are accompanied by drinking. It is very strange for Europeans to see me as a nonsmoker and non-drinker. They sometimes tried to ask me to drink. It didn't disturb me but gave me the feeling that I am really different from the people here not only in terms of appearance but also in the way of life and social values. People stare me, some try to talk to me even though I tell them that I don't understand. So suddenly I became really not important but special person in the world of Lithuania.

I think I have integrated in the local life here. I feel more comfortable when going outside, talking with the local people. When summer came, they also became friendlier, open-minded. Colourful clothes, smiling face are seen everywhere in the streets instead of the colour of grey that cover all the ground, the sky and surface during winter. Little by little, I enjoy the nature in Lithuania which changes day by day; actually it cheers me up. I used to be afraid of seeing broken bottles of wine or beer in the streets. I am even obsessed deeply by this image. But now I am getting used with seeing them and I am not scared of them as before. I have nice Lithuanian friends, who share their feelings with me, help me to get to know more about their



Ly celebrating christmas

own culture.

### **Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China**

In the beginning there was quite a lot of excitement about the place and fascination with exoticism - having coconuts on the beach, trying Chinese massage and even looking for veggie food seemed to be funny. After finding out how little entertainment Wenchang had to offer, we had to find ways to spend our free time. There were no bigger problems with getting used to the living conditions, not least the huge cockroaches and rats visiting us every night. A flat with a small yard encouraging meetings and common meals quickly became our home; also our kind and caring neighbours helped us feel very comfortable here. However, it took a lot of time to lose the feeling of oddity every time outside the campus. I am pretty sure I have gone through all the stages (of culture shock).

In the beginning, in spite of the problems with work, I was excited about the place and people's lifestyle, I wanted to contribute to student life and get to know new places. When the things here did not seem new and interesting anymore neither were the people willing to spend time with me, I went through a short crisis. A big change for me was the departure of other volunteers. All of a sudden I had to adjust to a completely new situation and try to integrate with people whose interests were completely different from mine.

The turning point was Christmas with several parties and events when I finally met foreigners teaching at the college. Seeing how they settled down and coped with life here helped me to overcome my difficulties and a long tour in the mainland China, which I made soon afterwards, brought the fascination with the country and culture back. For the last 2 months I have been enjoying the good points of my stay here instead of paying too much attention to the bad things. However, the arrival of 3 new volunteers, sharing the place, work and most of all experiences with them was an important factor in changing my attitude.

The first thought was there were no similarities. I do not feel excited about the place any more, I like it, though. I have the feeling

I am familiar with everything and everyone here, fruit sellers know I always buy 2 pineapples and use my own plastic bags and half of the children in Wenchang recognise me in the street. There is no more fear and anxiety both about the life and work, which I felt in the beginning of the project. Again I have a strong need to take pictures, but instead of recording oddities I want to preserve faces and places which were part of my life in China. However, the second thought was there is a similar mixture of curiosity and fright about my "new" life in Poland although I left the country only for 9 months.



Sylwia at the beach with friends

**Shashikala Mariswamy, Indian volunteer in Italy**

Italy - what an amazing country, for me it's indescribable. I am having so many good days. After the first week, I never felt homesick again. I started to be busy and I'm very happy with the old people, my colleagues are also soooooo nice, and now I am able to understand Italian. This is so exciting; hopefully very soon I can speak this language. I learned so much about the culture, traditions, language and people. My image of Italy changed from the one I had before. I like it very much now.

Shashikala with Marcelo, director of her project, and a friend

**Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India**

I felt surprisingly fast at home and I could not have wished for a warmer welcome. So all my concerns regarding homesickness etc. had just vanished after the first weeks. In the first two weeks it was not easy, but still I have often been surprised at how much I feel like having a home away from home. Furthermore my fear of making mistakes vanished. Then in January I had a period when I was a bit annoyed. Because of small things, like the relationship between me and my host family changed a bit, since the second volunteer arrived, no privacy, bargains, useless lessons and exams at school, but neither at this point of time nor later, was it a real problem.

On the other hand, in the beginning, my work at the school was stressful and a bit frustrating until I found out how I could help best and realised that it is not my task to change the complete school (or all the things which I did (or do) not like). Except for some „cultural differences“ (like the fact that there is almost no privacy etc), there was at no time a real problem.

I experienced that I can live alone without being homesick or sad or lonely. What made it all very easy for me is that I had such a warm welcome here and that my host family really became a family for me. Furthermore, of course I have learned and (absorbed) a lot of the Indian culture. I feel so integrated here, so much so that I have sometimes even had the feeling that I kind of "hang between two worlds". Of course the first weeks have been exiting as I expected them to be whereas after the first three weeks, I was not excited anymore and I felt at home. India didn't feel exotic anymore. And at the end when I had to leave I was as sad as I had been when I left my home in Germany.

**Brihaspati Sapkota, Nepali volunteer in Italy**

My initial problem was that the operators did not give me more responsibility like my other friends. I am a volunteer from a very different part of the world with a different face, different religion. So I felt that they did not believe me more. I speak a little Italian now. I have copied the behaviour of the people. After the first three months, I started to become happy with friends. We are able to communicate more. I get satisfaction from the Italian food. I understand all my functions at the work project.



### Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal

I first had a little culture shock, but then I really started liking Nepal. The Nepalese are very friendly people and the country is very beautiful. At first, I had problems with some of their habits. The city was dirty, noisy and crowded. But after a while you see the beautiful side of the city. I started to ignore all the dirt and it does not matter that it is loud at night, now I can sleep. My project is in a small village and life here is different from life in Katmandu. It is very peaceful and quiet here. The life in the family, their traditions and religion was more exciting than shocking. You also get very easily used to the lower standard of living. Some things like washing your clothes by hand or shower under a pump do not bother you anymore. I liked this experience and the easy-going country life.

"Bistaaraari, bistaaraari" - means slowly, slowly and our guide used to say it a lot during the trekking tour and I also heard it from other Nepali people. It describes the way Nepali life goes. Everything goes very slowly and they do not really care about time. You worry about totally different things like, "is it really necessary to go to the Internet because that will include a twenty minute walk or shall I help my family with the work in the fields." But when I came to Nepal the electricity breaks were three hours a day and now it is six hours a day. It really gets on your nerves after while and most of the electricity breaks are in the afternoon and in the evening. So no Internet and no TV, and here it gets dark after six o'clock. You start to orient your life on whether there is electricity or not. You have to live your life in a way which is completely different from the way at home. In my opinion I adopted the culture of Nepal well. I eat with my hands, I watch Bollywood movies, I work in the fields, and I eat rice with lentil soup everyday. I shower under a pump and I drive on the top of the bus. I cannot adopt all of their tradition but I can try to understand them. I do miss my family but I think that is normal and it is not too much. I miss simple things like hot indoor showers, having clean feet, having clean clothes, going out, and a washing machine. But I know that I will have that all back in four months and at home I will never have the opportunity to live such a life.



Above and below:  
Eva-Maria travelling on top of a bus

### Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland



Diep goes riding

During the first week, I thought I could make friends with many people because I found the people here so nice. But other volunteers had the same experience - we find that it's not easy to make friends with Finnish people. I lack friends, so I feel lonelier. Finnish people are nice, kindly as well as shy like the Vietnamese. So I mostly have to be active and ask them. Once I helped students go swimming and at that time I also helped them take their clothes off, but I was scared of their nudity and then stopped immediately. A saying I often heard is that "Finland is lung of the world". There is a forest and lake almost everywhere in Finland

which provide the world's nature healthy and pure air.

I enjoyed the Finnish Christmas because of their closed community and the warm way they celebrate, so I stayed with my mentor's family over the holidays and kept track of this attractive event. I miss home so much, specially my niece, nephews, parents, boyfriend and food (maybe I don't know what I miss most). Because of the language, I'm not really integrated in everything. But I don't feel very different from the others and feel part of the school. My living place is beautiful and I'm flexible and independent. Also my living place is not silent or boring like at the beginning.

#### **Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**



Of course my anxieties and excitement changed after some time, and moreover, new feelings settled in. My fear that I wouldn't know what to do at my work disappeared after some time, even if I didn't have my hands full all the time, I still didn't feel useless. My fear of missing my friends and my family became a reality, I started missing them and in some way that was easier to handle cause I knew they would still be there after nine months. But new anxieties came, things I had never thought I would think about like: will I have some free time, will I meet people my own age? And even these things kind of disappeared, and even if I haven't been 110% happy with exactly everything, I have learnt to live with these things too. I had thought that I was quite open-minded and didn't have many expectations or that many fears. What I am hopefully starting to realise is that this is

**Karin travelling in the north of India** a culture with good sides and bad sides, just like the culture in Sweden. All these things I have asked about, what do people really think about gender equality or the situation of the Dalits; and people don't even seem to understand my question or just "this is the way it is, good side bad side". Just like I would say about women's liberalisation that transformed to Britney Spears slave-for-you-dancing or I would say about the Swedish obsession with the clock.

#### **Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany**

My feelings in the first week were very different. I was a little home sick. I felt very lonely and had difficulties adjusting in the first week. I was scared and was not excited or anxious. I arrived in winter and was very scared of the dark. I didn't feel like eating, rather I felt like going back home. I always thought I would get lost, as I had never used a map in my life. The family of one of my charges invited me over for Christmas. It was a nice experience. During the Christmas holidays, my friends at the project were travelling, so I was alone and scared. I used to make food, eat fast and go to my room. It made me strong to be alone. Initially I had difficulty adjusting to my new life, and the language is still a problem. I always need help from my friends for office work (passport, ICJA office) because I have difficulties travelling alone. Slowly I started using the map, the weather also changed and I am not so scared anymore. I started to go for language course. Raul would pick me up twice from school and I started to go alone. I started to go out alone with a map, sometimes with friends, and it made me strong. Berlin is a beautiful place and has great history. I am very interested in seeing



**Angel during the art class**

more. Now I am really excited about everyday in Berlin. I adapted really well to some things in this country. I feel like staying here longer. Here I have become confident. I think for myself and here I feel I can plan my own future. I have learnt to be independent, live alone, make my own decisions and to be brave, and I would like to carry on this way in the future.

### **Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam**

When I came I had the feeling that the Vietnamese were like us. They worked, ate, drank,



Julia on helmet day

moved from one point to another (we would go by car, they take a motorbike), meet friends... I didn't have the feeling that I experienced a shock. When someone asked me, whether I had experienced culture shock I said "Hm yeah, traffic is really different here..." or I talked about my 3 hours lunch break but nothing else. Now I think that I experienced culture shock but that it was among other things also the hidden process of finding out differences in mentality and the way of living between the Vietnamese and the Austrians (or

rather the Europeans). Of course people here do the same as we do, but it's the question of how and why they

do something. Also, in the beginning I was quite afraid of whether I would be able to stay away from home for such a long time and whether I would miss my family and friends too much. As time passed and I found friends and found work to do, I realised that nine months are a short time and that I had nothing to worry about.

Of course sometimes it was difficult and I wished I would be able to go home but all in all I was very happy and I wanted to experience as much as possible, to learn the Vietnamese language, to find friends here, to do a good job, and many other things. In my daily life here I feel integrated and accepted by the Vietnamese. Now as I know the prices on the market I enjoy going there and bargain and chat with the shopkeeper. I like riding my bicycle and exploring the town or going to meetings or yoga. I feel that it's my second home here. I'm very excited!!! I wonder how it will be to come home again, to meet my family and friends and of course to live in my oh-sowell-known hometown again. The two countries, Vietnam and Austria, are completely different. It took me quite some time to find out what is different and to understand what people think here. I will never be able to understand it completely, but I can say that now, as I've been living here for 9 months.

I know much more about the Vietnamese culture and way of thinking and living. There are many things which I don't like at all, I hate them, and I can't wait to get back home and get rid of them, but there are many things as well which I really appreciate and which I will miss a lot. I thought about this a lot in my last weeks here, what I will miss and surprisingly a lot of things came to my mind. Before I came to Vietnam I had no idea what was awaiting me. I came here without many expectations but with a lot of hope for a good, exciting and interesting 9 months. Now I must say that I can be happy and glad, because I had a great time here and I would definitely come again. It's somehow a feeling of being eased.

### **Selina Keranin, Finnish volunteer in China**

I haven't really been homesick but of course there have been periods when things didn't look so rosy

- for example when I got sick and had to go to the hospital. In general, I do enjoy life here but my biggest problems are with the weather - it's so hot and humid and barely bearable. However, I do realise that weather is one of those things you just have to learn to live with, so there's no point in complaining about it.

### Francesca Fedele, Italian volunteer in Vietnam

The first three months weren't difficult from the point of view of adaptability to a new environment but because of the lack of organisation and care of the host organisation and of the dormitory dirtiness. As it wasn't my first time in Asia I didn't experience a culture shock as it was almost as I expected it to be. Busy, dirty, noisy roads with lots of people involved in so many different activities. The hot dumpy weather but sunny at least, the pollution, but also the fascinating lakes and pagodas and the looks of the children playing with whatever they can find on the ground. I'm not a homesick character by nature, I usually adapt well to new environments, and I get in touch easily with new people. Of course there are moments like when I'm very happy that I'd like to share my feelings with close friends, but I'm lucky, I know they support me in this experience and that once home it'd be as I'd never left. I do think I have integrated myself pretty well in this country even if the way they ride on the street makes me crazy sometimes!

## F) Things To Take Home

### Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal

Analyzing 9 months volunteering time in Nepal is not so easy. It has been such a long time and many things have happened. It is like asking, what did you learn in the last year? Maybe I can say that I gained to face this whole experience, and in a good way. I faced the good and unpleasant moments, culture differences and problems and tried my best to handle the situations, work and learn. I did learn a lot of the Nepalese culture, people and the way of life. I think handling any kind of new, weird and also hard situations and my problem-solving capacity has improved. My English has improved and I have learnt some Nepali too. I am sure that my ability to work, co-operate and understand different people is easier now. I also understand better the way people think and behave depends on their backgrounds. And that no matter where we live or what religious or culture we belongs, we are, in the end, really similar. It was such a good opportunity to have a deep connection in a totally different culture and country and that, I think, has given me lots of tools to understand other cultures as I understand my own culture better too. Sometimes we need to go far to see more clear the things that are close. Nepal is a lot poorer than Finland and I have seen and heard so many sad stories. People working like slaves, child trafficking, street kids, orphans, corruption, poverty and what else. And being a woman, and really seeing what kind of rights (or better to say, not having so many rights) many women suffer. I realise better how much I have and



Child at Karita's project



Kid in the streets of Kathmandu

respect it more. I think seeing such a poverty and bad things are somehow good for people. To make us more aware and appreciate the things that we have.

I think the interesting thing is: the information that people get through the media, those so-called "poor" countries, is always bad news. Showing that the world outside is very dangerous, full of wars, torture, suffering and pain. Giving the feeling that people, especially those who look

different or belong to a different religion than you do are bad people. I am not surprised that people are so scared, when the media doesn't really give the space to think anything else and feed our minds with dread. That makes me wonder whether that is the only thing that people want to see?

#### **Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania**

I can say that I have learnt how to live alone, be more confident, self-confident, more open-minded, and sociable. I become freer to express myself, my feelings. Now I realise the values that I hold from my own culture, I also find out what I want to do in the coming time and in the future. To be honest it is a big change in my life.

#### **Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China**

It seems, at least I hope that my project will help me with life choices such as further education or work. So far I have not had a clear idea what to do in future as the choice of my studies was my biggest mistake and the chemical industry is not an area I would like to find a job in. My voluntary service at the college assured me that I really like working with youth and revealed some teaching abilities. I have mixed feelings about this time. I miss my boyfriend, friends and family a lot but on the other hand I got so used to the slow pace of life and its easiness that I am a bit afraid of going back to the rush and problems of my everyday life in Poland. I already miss tai chi lessons at sunset, tandem lessons full of chatting and ending with a meal, and even my little monsters at the kindergarten.



#### **Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India**

Personally I have developed a lot. I gained the love of the children and my host family. I learned to live and be happy without my family, modern comfort, etc. Also, most of all my view of „volunteering“ has changed. I started with the naive wish „to make the world a better place“ and even if this is possible (in a limited way) it is 90% a cultural learning experiences, which can maybe help to „learn how to help“! It is not enough. I want to see more off this wonderful country... And most of all I don't want to leave my family, my children, my school, but on the other hand (of course) I can't wait to see my family and my friends in Germany.

Franziska's favourite child at the school

#### **Brihaspati Sapkota, Nepali volunteer in Italy**

If I could, I would want to stay another six months.

#### **Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal**

I have learnt much about Asian culture, not only about Nepali culture. I lived in a Buddhist and in a Hindu family where I learnt much about both religions which was very interesting. I learnt to be more independent, to come along with my pocket money and to be more open-minded and outgoing. It was really interesting to meet so many young people from different countries and to learn something from their ways of life and their cultures. I made many friends from around the world with whom I still have contact. I did a trekking tour through the Himalayas which was amazing. We walked for 10 days and got up to 4100m. It was one of the highlights of the whole trip.

**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland**

EVS project is really amazing chance to help youngsters gain a different and diversified experience. Now I have more knowledge and experience of working in an intercultural environment and taking care disabled people, that make me or my job better.



Diep at a volunteer seminar

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**

Oh, this is such a question...

I have gained and learnt a lot. Really a lot.

I have got to know (a part of) a new and different country and culture. I have been alone with my situation, being from another culture. I have been in a place where I don't have my well-known friends and families. I have learnt about my own culture. I have got to know myself better, my strengths and weaknesses. I have become more independent and self-confident. I have learnt more about what I want to do with my life, and what I don't want to do.

And I have learnt to make chapattis. I feel very positive about my remaining time in India. Right now I am traveling, and I am really happy to do it and that I travel at the end of my stay, now, when I have been here and adopted some of the culture. Now I see the local differences and a lot of temples and religious rituals and I see and I learn. And when I come back to my project, I guess it will be mostly like a long, final goodbye and that will definitely be sad and strange. But I don't want to think about that now! 10

**Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany**

I had a good experience in Germany and since childhood, it has been my dream to go on a programme like the European Volunteer Service. Here in Germany, I gained and learned many things about culture and about working and taking care of the disabled and elderly in a different and special way. I work with the disabled in India and now I have a new perspective on my work. This I would like to take with me to my country. I have also learnt to be independent, and German culture has influenced me in a way that I now feel able to plan my future. I also feel more self-confident. I feel happy that I was in another part of the world, culture, language, food, etc. It has brought big changes in my life and I have gained many things which I will carry in the future.

**Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam**

A farewell cake for Julia

I learned a lot about my own culture, what I've never realized before. I became much more independent. I think it will take time for me to realise that it's over and that I'm not in Vietnam but that I've actually been there. There are many things that changed my life, for example that I had to decide many things by myself and that I got so much love of children without doing a lot for them.

It makes me sad that I have to say goodbye to all those nice people here and especially to the children at the orphanage and my closest friends. I hope I'll be able to meet them again but I know it won't be possible for many of them. Even to get a visa is a big problem. I have lots of plans for these last two months. I want to make the best of it! That's also the reason why I put more effort in the Indigo Club now. We spent so much time on

planning and it was supposed to be my main project, so I want it to be a success and that in the end we all can be proud of it and I can go home and know that this Indigo Club will become bigger and bigger and they will do a great job! I was planning to give something to my children at the orphanage too, and as they love reading I'm collecting books from all my Vietnamese friends and I'll ask VPV to help me set up a small library for them. Until now it was a great time and I do not regret my decision to go to Vietnam!!

## 5. Final Meeting in Berlin

The focus of the final meeting in Berlin was to examine the intercultural and voluntary service experiences of the volunteers. Thereby, the meeting made it possible for them to reflect on the intercultural learning process they had and what they take back with them. Furthermore, the meeting enabled the ICYE International Office to assess the rate of satisfaction and fulfillment with regard to the host country and project, as well as the evaluation of the entire EVS EU-Asia Project, "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue". Another important focus of the meeting was to address the anxieties and expectations of the volunteers with regard to their impending return and their re-integration to their respective home countries. Discussing future possibilities of offering support or being involved in work related to intercultural dialogue, youth projects or supporting future in-coming volunteers was also one of the focal points of the meeting.

Berlin appeared to be a retreat for the volunteers, a place in-between their host countries and their home countries, where they had the chance to meet the EVS EU-Asia volunteer group again and share their similar yet dissimilar experiences, as well as their anxieties for the future before they made their final journeys home. Most volunteers expressed that, before their arrival in Berlin, they wished either to stay on in their host country or fly home directly, and were not keen on a halt in Berlin. During the final round of evaluations however, many admitted that the meeting helped them achieve a sense of closure and mentally prepare themselves for their homecoming. It gave them the opportunity to look back at the past 9 months, reflect on and assess their experiences and learning, something they may or may not take time for once they return home.

### Highlights of the final meeting

#### **Project Presentations**

Volunteers were requested to describe their host project, its philosophy, aims and activities, its main target groups, the structure of the project, their own chief tasks and activities, as well as their main achievements at their project.

#### **Poncho - My time in my host country**

This self-reflective exercise enabled both a sharing of the intercultural problems and difficulties the volunteers faced in their host countries and how they deal with them, as well as a sharing of the interesting, amusing moments during their voluntary exchange, which enabled an enriching experience for them all.

#### **Overall Evaluation of my EVS project & experience**

This exercise was a step-by-step through their pre-departure training, on-arrival training, language tutoring and mid-term evaluation, assessing the role and work of the sending organisation, the host project (project supervisor), the host co-ordinating organisation, the international co-ordinator, as well as their own personal participation.

#### **The European Voluntary Service programme as a whole**

Here the volunteers were asked to evaluate and make recommendations for the EVS programme. That is the goals set out by the programme and the reality on ground.

#### **Returning home**

This session enabled participants to discuss their fears and expectations vis-à-vis returning



home and reintegration in the family, network of friends, work or educational environment. It also provided suggestions for dealing the different perspectives and expectations - their own as against those at home - and with the reverse cultural adaptation process.

**Referring to anxieties of returning home, Karita Blom (Finnish volunteer in Nepal) wrote the following:**

Like my last weeks in Finland, also now I have been coming and going, doing many things and trying to enjoy and get out of every moment. I am really waiting to go back (like I was also to go to Nepal) but also a little worried how I am going to adjust again to the different lifestyle and culture (even though now it is my own country and culture). How I will feel about the Finnish way of living and how it will go to face all the people again? Have my friends and family changed a lot and more than that, have I changed? And if yes, in what way? I think when I finally return to my home country, I will realise what these 9 months of volunteering in Nepal have done to me. Arriving in Nepal was a big jump into the unknown. Now I know where I am going and what kind of country, people and culture awaits me there so I mostly know what to look forward to there.

### Evaluation and Feedback

A flashlight round of feedback from the volunteers concluded the final meeting in Berlin.



Karita presenting her project Participants displaying their farewell paperplates



Sylwia and Julia during the poncho exercise Karita and Shashikala enacting their homecoming

## 6. Relevance of "Youth And Intercultural Dialogue" to the EVS project and experience

What does living in today's world mean in our relationship to others in our daily life? Each of us has at least one member of our family, a friend, a teacher or a boss from another cultural background. Each of us is the product of a mixture of cultures from which we create a hybrid identity; visible in the music we listen to, in the way we dress or talk or even feel. And there is a «magic» word to define this reality: intercultural. Add the «dialogue» ingredient to it, and you have much more than a concept: you have a way of life! The intercultural Europe that we want for the future is based on a respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds, on an equal basis.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the aim of the EVS EU-Asia Project, "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" has been to promote intercultural dialogue among young people at a time when they are as yet developing their own vision of the world and acquiring skills and competences for their future. Contact and interaction with cultures other than their own stimulates their curiosity and the desire to connect with peers from around the world. Intercultural dialogue also generates new ideas and fosters an understanding of society. It allows them to discover the richness of cultural diversity for their own development as well as for society.

Here's a look at the relevance of "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" for the volunteers during their voluntary service period:

### **Karita Blom, Finnish volunteer in Nepal**

I have been working in the orphanage with English and Finnish volunteers but also with Nepali people. It is not only the different culture that makes work challenging, I have to also cooperate, live and work together with new, different people no matter how different they are or how differently they think. No matter what the culture or national background, we need to collaborate and find solutions, in such a way that everyone is happy and work goes on. Children in the orphanage (as many other places too) have been interested in hearing about my culture and like, how children behave in Finland. I think for people who come to a new country and a different culture it happens all the time that you compare your own and the new country's culture and try to find a balance of how to behave and feel. Around you Karita presenting her project every other person can act really strangely and you realise the different backgrounds you have. Like in Finland, Finnish people are much more quieter than Nepalese and don't touch others as in Nepal, loud conversations and body contact are as normal as everyday eating. Intercultural dialogue is very interesting but also challenging, how to tolerate, work and not be misunderstood. In daily life, I have been in contact with many people of different cultures and nationalities. Many of them have also been doing some kind of -short or long term- voluntary work, which seems to be popular in Nepal. We have shared our work experiences and how we see this new culture. Misunderstandings and problems have been good to share with other volunteers as good experiences too, but when you share the difficult things and realise that others can suffer them too, it makes them easier to face.

### **Ly Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Lithuania**

The topic "Youth and intercultural Dialogue" is closely related to what I have done here mostly in daily life. I introduced Vietnamese culture to the children at the Children Caring House and at the Kaunas University. Besides, we have many discussions about cultural differences in European and Asian in general, Vietnamese, German, and French in particular when spending time together.

To my surprise, we are so different in terms of social value, belief, habit and so on. In addition, political matters such as religious freedom, socialism, and democracy in Vietnam draw a lot of attraction. My attendance in the project motivates local volunteers to speak English, an international language, creates multiple cultural environments on which all the discussions among young people about the culture, politics, society in different cultures between Europe and Asia are based. Volunteers at the office, just like me, are sent to other volunteers' projects such as Rukla Immigrant Centre, Atzalynas Children Caring House, Centre for Disabled People, etc. so it is all related to youth activities.

Monica Urian de Sousa, « Institutional Perspective on ICD: European Commission », The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Can be downloaded at <http://www.salto-youth.net/interculturaldialogue/>

**Sylwia Jedra, Polish volunteer in China**

A major part of my project concerns "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue". Thanks to free choice of subjects for college classes my colleagues and I can introduce topics such as similarities and differences between Western and Chinese culture, stereotypes, habits and customs etc. Whereas this is a mutual exchange between young people from opposite parts of the globe, there is also an after-lesson aspect of my stay here. In our free time we meet with the students or neighbours, which gives them opportunities to get to know more about our lifestyles and points of view, often different from theirs.

**Franziska Merle Williams, German volunteer in India**

Through personal experiences like that I became aware of how much I am influenced by European culture and how different the life for Indian youth is (especially in the villages).

**Eva-Maria David, German volunteer in Nepal**

At my first project in the District Aids Coordination Committee Chitwan I met some students from different colleges. With them I definitely had a dialogue about the differences in our cultures. In my second project, I did not really have any contact with the topic because the children were too small to talk with me about such a topic. I found out most of the differences of our cultures in conversations with my host father which were really open-minded and we discussed the pros and cons of both cultures. We compared our different lives and I learned much about Nepali culture and their traditions. For example, the role of women in Nepali society is still a little bit like it was in Europe more than a hundred years ago. The parents arrange the marriage. I men women who married at the age of sixteen. They get children and they are really housewives. Women are worth less in this society and I noticed that white women are worth a little bit more because of their skin colour but still under the power of men. Youth in Nepal has a very different life than we have in Europe.

**Diep Nguyen, Vietnamese volunteer in Finland**

I communicate not only with colleagues in the school, but also make friends with youngsters in Youth club in Lehtimäki, as well as travel to some meetings, conference with youngsters, volunteers, and friends.

**Karin Eriksson, Swedish volunteer in India**

I have not thought much about that. I am a youth here, and I don't think my situation would have been very different if I had been older. And the intercultural part of it is... Isn't this what it is basically about? That I am here, coming from a culture different from the Indians, so I learn a lot about the Indian culture, and about the Swedish, and the people I meet do hopefully get to know a small part of the Swedish culture by talking to me and get to know me.

**Angel Prasanna, Indian volunteer in Germany**

We talk about youth and intercultural dialogue at work and in daily life with other volunteers. At the host project, we discuss a lot of topics dealing with youth, culture, food, language, family, marriage, education, freedom, society, work, and living style, that is day-to-day life in my country and in my host country.

**Julia Kurtze, Austrian volunteer in Vietnam**

I worked in an English-culture Club. Every second week we had a meeting between foreigners and students from university or high school or even people working already. We talked about one topic, played games, watched slideshows and did many other things. Once a week I met with some of the students to prepare the content of the next workshop. I think this was youth and intercultural dialogue. It was very interesting to listen to others and hear what they had to say and their opinions about common and not so common topics. It was also very interesting to see how they expressed their feelings and in which way they were discussing and making decisions. They were also very happy to get the chance to talk to foreigners and to find out more about something they were not familiar with. I think sometimes they were quite surprised or even shocked at how directly I, and at the beginning Francesca, talked about what we liked and not and that we immediately told them if we were against something. They and I learned to be patient and to accept other ways of deciding, discussing, talking...

## 7. Conclusion

Today's world can be described as a "global village". Despite the growing potential for contacts between people of different origins and backgrounds, the level of understanding amongst the different cultures in the world remains insufficient and provokes conflict.<sup>1</sup> This is why projects like the EVS EU-Asia, "Youth and Intercultural dialogue" are extremely relevant, particularly so for young adults, who can disseminate the knowledge and experiences acquired, functioning as multipliers and further contributing to the promotion of the intercultural dialogue and peace.

Voluntary service projects can be seen as microcosms of a multicultural society seeking to foster dialogue among people from different cultures and countries, cultivating a climate of respect and mutual understanding. Thus, what this EVS project made possible was dialogue and exchange: An exchange between individuals, communities and partner associations who had the opportunity to examine their own thoughts, cultural influences and working styles in the light of what others brought to them. The project did not only have an immediate effect with regard to the projects where the volunteers worked but also an "after effect" as it influenced the vision and attitudes of the volunteers and all other actors involved, creating a sense of solidarity. Value education and intercultural learning thus formed the cornerstones of this project. Intercultural learning is the deep understanding in practice (while interacting with others) of cultural diversity<sup>2</sup>.

We can take pride in the fact that the project achieved its central purpose. The personal texts and narrations of the volunteers that you have been reading in this documentation indicate an exciting and yet not always an easy cultural adaptation process. However, the reports of their final weeks in their host countries, as well as their own reflection on their entire experience and the learning process they underwent are a sign of precisely that, a deeper understanding and respect for their host country and culture. Although, for the most part, the learning curve for all volunteers was similar, individual differences can be seen depending on the differing capacity, skills, motivations, influences and needs of each volunteer. For example, texts of two different volunteers working in the same project or country show two levels of perceptions and thereby differing experiences.

Another aspect to be aware of, particularly when talking about intercultural dialogue and therefore communication and is the choice of words used in our interaction, whether in a training or in daily life. Over the years many words and terms have been publicly criticized and often changed. Some for being obviously belittling like "the poor", "the handicapped" or "not normal people" are redundant for being insensitive and incorrect. Whatever terms we use, we should realise that words are powerful and complex, and they shape the way we think and respond. These "labels" are counter-productive, especially to our work in the social arena, and it is thus imperative that we are at all times aware of the dignity of people.

We hope that this document serves as a means of further reflection for volunteers of the EU-Asia EVS project "Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" on their own experience and that of the others in the project, as also a useful tool for future projects, for sending and host organisations and projects, as well as volunteers setting forth on a volunteering journey abroad.

Rubaica Jaliwala

1 See CCIVS on Cultural Diversity: <http://www.unesco.org/ccivs/New-SiteCCSVI/CcivsOther/culturaldiversity/cultdivpresentation.htm> 2 "No Size Can Fit All. How to seize the chance for intercultural learning in international voluntary service projects?" CCIVS Module on Cultural Diversity. See <http://www.unesco.org/ccivs/New-SiteCCSVI/CcivsOther/culturaldiversity/nosizecanfitall/chpregb.html>

## 8. "New Nepal"

By Karita Blom, 14.6.2008

I am a 22-year-old Finnish girl who came to Nepal in September 2007 for 9 months to do the European Voluntary Service (EVS). I have only a few weeks left to go before I return to Finland. This time has given to me a great opportunity to see totally different culture, country, and way of living and to understand more about differences, as well as being involved in volunteering work. Here come some of my experiences and thoughts on how I see and feel about Nepal.

### Nepalese way

Nepal is a small developing country in the middle of Asia struggling between massive and economically fast growing India and China. YK has listed Nepal as number 10 of the world's poorest countries. But besides all the poverty, the Nepalese keep surprising me by their way of thinking and their enormous hospitality. I am not the first person to say that it is easy to fall in love with Nepal. So many tourists who I have met here keep telling me almost the same stories: Nepalese friendliness, politeness and simple happiness, the country's beauty and thoughts of coming back again.

For the first 3 months I lived and worked in Bharatpur, a non-touristy area in Chitwan, South Nepal. I lived with a Nepali family, which includes parents and two teenage children. On my day of arrival at the home of host family, the whole family warmly welcomed me to become part of their family and reminded me that I should take their house as my home too. We visited many of my host parents' relatives and neighbours who were all very curious to meet me, as many of them hadn't ever meet foreigner before. They chat loudly in Nepali, laughing, all staring at me as we sit on the living room floor drinking chai, the Nepali very sugary milk tea that all seems to drink at least once in the morning and every time they meet people (which means often) as they have strong communities, never letting people spending time alone. (It is normal also to get offered tea when out shopping.) Of course I didn't understand most of the conversations but the atmosphere was still relaxing.

People here seem to have time for each other to just sit and chat much more than what I have been used to in Finland. I needed to slow my walking style because otherwise I would leave my company far behind. Even if people are stuck in bad traffic jams or stand for many hours in long petrol station queues (which is normal) there does not seem to be any kind of frustration or anger. Once I got stuck in 8 hours of traffic jam but it didn't seem to bother the Nepalese. They started to sing, talk and drink tea together, even though they were strangers to each other. People simply just accept the situation.

It has been a big surprise to me to notice how well most people can speak English. The younger generation studies a lot of English in government schools, and in boarding schools all lessons are taught in English. Many students come often to talk or out of curiosity to ask a few questions when I walk on the streets. Apart from the very old people, all seem to know enough English to make simple conversation.

But there is big difference between big cities and rural areas. Still the majority of Nepalese, 26 million people, lives in small villages and like the influence of the English language everything changes there really slowly. Those places stay mostly untouched by outsiders because of the hilly landscape and bad infrastructure (also because of instable security) and many villages don't have any kind of roads to drive on.

I once met a 17-year-old boy in Pokhara, the starting point of Nepal's most popular Annapurna trek. He left his home village at the age of 12 to come to this town to work and since then he has been working at a horse farm. He goes rather rarely to visit his family because it takes first 50 minutes on the bus and then 2 days by foot to reach his village.

The Nepalese are mostly hard working people. They don't have many helping machines so most of

the really hard physical work is done by manpower or by children. And they work from morning to night. A few days ago I talked to a very polite and smiling waiter while we were having a good dinner with my friend.

He told us that he works 6 days a week, starting at 9 o' clock in the morning with a 3- hour break in the day and finishes work when the restaurant closes at around ten or eleven. This is a normal story. And still the salary is very low.

There are many people who don't get paid at all. Some, mostly women, work in houses washing, cooking and cleaning. They can live at the house free and get food from the owners but don't get any kind of salary.

In Bharatpur I worked at the Family Planning Association of Chitwan Branch (FPAN) and also at a HIV organisation, as well as one week in a boarding school. The week in the school was really challenging in many ways: a) because I didn't really get a warning that I have to work in a school, as my FPAN boss just dropped and left me there one day, b) the headmaster and other teachers thought that I am trained teacher, and c) because the students also expected me to be able to teach every subject. Many locals have the idea that every foreigner is a doctor, teacher or good at just any level. But the children were really nice and curious and wanted that I visit everyone's classes. And every time I entered a new class, the lesson started in almost the same way. First I introduced myself, then the children sang for me and then they said it is my turn now, so I tried my best, sang some Finnish songs as 40 children stared at me and wondered: who is this strange looking girl and what's that language?

Working at FPAN and the HIV organisation was difficult because I am not trained in that field and I can't speak fluent Nepali, as many people who needs the organisations' help are poor and untrained. Those places also haven't ever had foreign volunteers and I think there were different expectancies on both sides didn't meet as to what I am able to do and what I should do.

Poverty is usual here and many women depend on their husband's income. That is the one reason why polygamy is still takes place. The first wife often knows that her husband has other women but she has to accept it because if they divorce (which is not normal here and is abject) she won't have food or a place to survive.

I also read an article in one of the Nepalese newspapers about poverty, for me, in an unprecedented way. It was about women in rural areas who want to be seen as HIV positive. The reason was that when people are HIV positive, they could get help from the health organisations that can provide support via shelter and food.

It is surprising how many tourists do some kind of volunteer work in Nepal. The most common places for them to work are in schools (or teaching, mostly English, other places like monasteries), orphanages, and conservatories or in the building field. Many volunteers have told me stories about how they have found it difficult to work because no one haven't really told them what they should do. Often giving money is the only way they feel that they are helping. It seems that during a short-term voluntary work it is really hard to help (it takes time to adjust to such places where people, work, language, culture and almost everything is new): it gives more to the foreigner than the project can get out of it. The idea of "coming and helping" easily turns to be only "coming and learning". Also my working time in my first project, FPAN was exactly like that.

### **Old) Hindu Kingdom**

You can find temples everywhere in Nepal: from the smallest village to the corner of a busy street. Many people (everyone who I visited) also have a small praying corner or place in a bookshelf where they have God's pictures or a statue, incenses and small offerings -flowers and food- to God inside their houses.

Most Nepalese, around 81%, are Hindu. They take their religion very seriously but many are still open to other religions. From small to big, their religious habits are strongly part of their daily

life. While passing a temple (some of them can be really tiny) they make prayer signs from the forehead to chest. It is usual that when shopkeepers have their first customer, after getting the money done, they do the same ritual. Mornings can also be "hard to breathe" time to shop because they burn so many incense sticks inside to wake up the Gods through the good smell and by "refreshing" the air. They have thousands of Gods and many strong beliefs about why good and bad things happen.

Tika, red powder on the forehead is for good luck. I have been taking Salsa dance classes in Nepal and we start every lesson with a prayer ritual to the dance God.

Hindus have many festivals to celebrate. The biggest ones are Dasain and Tihar (from September to October) when the front yard of every house (and hotel) seems to be covered with red because all the blood comes from sacrificing animals to the Gods. These two festivals happen to be really close to each other and last around 15 days.

Aishwarya Children's Home, where I have been living and working since December, has a daily routine for children to pray in the mornings at 8 and in the evenings, always before eating their daily twice served rice food, daal path.

### **Freedom to speak**

People can only know the news that has been written! Everything else fades away and is just a few people's rumor. Here, the freedom of the media hasn't let the journalists do their work without fear. There has been news about gangs vandalizing newspaper vehicles, beating, kidnapping and even killing journalists. The last kidnapping happened in November 2007 when Maoists kidnapped and killed one journalist and admitted it many days later after the journalist disappeared. That makes me wonder about the number of stories journalists keep without publishing or they change the facts out of fear? And in Nepal, even the richest minority can be axes in the news.

The common person's freedom to speak can also not be taken for granted. Many marriages are arranged marriages. I asked one 23-year-old female social worker in Chitwan what would happen if she didn't like her husband. "I have to like him!" was her simple answer. She told me that her time to marriage was coming soon.

### **Orphans and other vulnerable children**

I have been working at the Aishwarya Children's Home since December 2007. It is one of the country's many orphanages. Alone Katmandu has a few hundred orphanages. There are many reasons as to why there are so many children in orphanages in Nepal!

All the children who live in orphanages are not orphans. My working place now has 35 children, but there were only 25 when I started to work and stories of those children tell -I think- a lot about the situation of the whole country. Some of the kids don't have a mother or a father but there are many other stories too.

One of our boys has just his mother but as she got work as a house maid, she has to live in that house and she doesn't get a salary and the house owners told her that she is not allowed to bring any kids with her.

Some parents from the rural areas send their children to work in big cities like Katmandu. Arun was only 8 when he met with that faith. He was abused and he ran away from his employer.

Grace's father was killed by Maoists and her mother died when giving birth to her second child. Grace is only 3 years old.



Brothers, Yogesh and Bibin have a mother, but she has a heart disease and is too weak to work and look after her sons. Their father was an alcoholic who used to beat the boys and their mother until he disappeared a few years ago.

Some of the children have been found wandering in the streets and they can know/tell very little about their backgrounds.

So some of the children are orphans, some of them have one parent who is unable to take care of the child. In our house, for the most part, the father is either dead, in prison or has disappeared. Mothers have died in childbirth; they work as housemaids or are too sick to take care of the children.

Other reasons include huge poverty, alcoholism and a problem of attitude as one of the girl's mother died and her father remarried but her stepmother didn't want to raise stepchildren.

There are many orphanages in Nepal, around 400 only in Katmandu. Some of them are good but many of them have huge problems. Some of those do business with the kids. Corruption, child trafficking, money disappearing and violence are the new challenges the children may have to face.

### **Nepal decides**

10th of April 2008 was a historical day for Nepal. The Constituent Assembly was finally held. It was canceled twice before that, in November 2007 and the same year in spring, and people were skeptical about it happening this time as well. But it happened. From the 7 major parties, the Maoists got the highest votes. It was big surprise for many. It was the Maoists and the government who fought for 10 years of civil war from 1996-2006. The war cost 15 000 people's lives. Tens of thousands were orphaned, widowed and bereaved; millions were forced to abandon their homes and farms. How will the people be able to see the Maoists ruling the country now, after they have killed and sabotaged so many?

Before voting day, the Maoists organised huge rallies around Katmandu almost daily (in many other towns too) and they had written big slogans like "New Nepal" on many walls around the capital (despite all the prohibitions), and party's flag was seen everywhere. The Maoists were the only party that went to the rural areas to gain the people's alliance. Other parties were mostly scared to go. The Maoists made huge efforts to show up and their campaign was affective. Sadly they didn't stay only in legal ways but also threatened and beat up and even killed some people. Some have said that people voted for the Maoists because they were too scared to see what would happen if they didn't win (maybe go back to civil war?). Also every other party had chances to make changes but little has happened and as this is the first time that the Maoists are part of the government, people see them as their last hope and wanted to give them a try.

The election system was very difficult for many. People had to go to the village where they were born to cast their vote and as in Katmandu, almost everyone has come from some part of Nepal in hopes of work and a better life. For that reason, some shops closed for many days before election, but still some people couldn't vote (even though they wanted to) because they couldn't leave their work for so many days.

Before Election Day on April 10, there were many riots and curfew around the country. Also bandh/ strike (all shops and offices are closed and there is no one is allowed to drive vehicles on the streets) took place for almost two weeks in Terai area in southern Nepal. The Terai bandh also made life in Katmandu more difficult, peaking food prices and resulting in rising gas and petrol prices. Indian products come through Terai to other parts of Nepal and during the bandh,

the Indian border was closed and food trucks were not allowed to come through the area. But it hasn't been only during the election time that prices have gone up.

Rising prices has become a big problem for the poorest people in Nepal. Alone the price of rice has gone up three times in a few years time, and in a country where the people's main food is rice, it is a big problem. Petrol and gas have gone up too but are not even always available. At the time when I came to Nepal, Petrol used to cost 68 rupees and now it costs 100 rupees (1 euro is about 100 rupees), and it is said that in few days it will go up by another 20 rupees. It is more than normal to see never-ending vehicle lines patiently waiting for hours and hours to fill they tanks.

Petrol prices have gone up so many times during past months that once when the government raised it again the whole country protested. All the shops and offices closed and there weren't any vehicles on the roads. Riots took place around the country. I saw many places on roads in Katmandu where people had put burning car tires and other things that made the air even dirtier than usual. People said they will keep continue the bandh until the government lowers the price. It worked and next day the price went back down.

Even finally if people have filled their cars, there is no hope of travelling successfully. Traffic is daily in Katmandu. Street accidents are very common in Nepal because people drive at a high speed on hilly, potholed roads, driving drunk and not caring about traffic rules (if they even have any)! It is really common to read in newspapers about bus accidents, and because they are fully packed (so much more than the bus' normal capacity), the death toll and number of injured are often high.

Once when I was traveling from Chitwan, South Nepal, to Katmandu our bus waited in a traffic jam for 8 hours without moving at all. There were hundreds and hundreds of vehicles (plenty of other buses) as the road is the main highway from the big city of Narayanghar to the capital. The reason was that a local child was hit by a bus and all the villagers blocked the road, not letting anyone go through, and demanding that the bus driver give money for hospital expenses. This is the way it goes here. It is quite understandable, hospital bills are high and many people don't have the money to pay it. But it is horrible to think that in some cases, it is cheaper to kill the person than "only" injure them.

But back the election, which has already made a huge difference in Nepal. The country became a Republic end of May, ending the 240-year-old monarchy. A few days ago, on June 11, I watched along with my Nepali family on TV, King Gyanendra giving his last speech to the press and leaving the palace. After some time, the building will be changed to a museum. Nepal is facing huge changes and only time will show what will happen and how the changes will affect people's lives.

Corruption has surrounded politics long and tidily. People think that the money seems to disappear in politicians' pockets more than on the country's well being. Everything seems to go forward slowly and people are frustrated at the bad situation of the country. Most often, when talking about problems, the most common words one hears are -and these work here so many situations- "Ge karne?" which means: what to do?

## 9. Tail of the Dragons

By Sylwia Jedra

Summaries of the articles were published in the bulletin of "Partnership in the Valley of Three Rivers" which unites several towns and communes in the fork of the rivers Wisla, Narew and Wkra. The partnership has been established to activate the community of the area, create and improve employment opportunities and develop tourism in the region. The original articles in Polish can be found in the annex.

**Title of the series: Tail of the Dragon**  
**Category: tourism and voluntary service**

Issue 6

### Wenchang Chicken

The first dinner and culture lesson at the same time overwhelms with Chinese generosity and lack of understanding for vegetarianism. Wenchang chicken proudly presents its comb and liver and stares at us struggling with chopsticks. Several next days of problems with arranging work bring a lot of confusion and anxiety. Does a youth centre, where I was supposed to work with another volunteer, Jennie, exist or was it only a way to attract foreigners to the school? Seeing a bunch of students surrounding us every time we go out, the latter seems to be needed. Despite the worries, there is still a lot of excitement about discovering a world of new flavours, smells and sounds known only from books and TV programmes.

"Youth and Intercultural Dialogue" is an intercontinental EVS projects enabling exchange of European and Asian volunteers. No matter the country of origin, volunteers have tens of questions about cultural differences. The answers as well as practical information and plenty of advice on problem solution are given on the training in Berlin before departure to host countries. EVS is an opportunity to experience a new culture, travel and make international friends. It must be said, though, that such a project often affects volunteer's future life with the choice of studies and work at the first place. Are you ready to have a go?

Volunteer's glossary: **European Voluntary Service EVS** - Action 2 of the Programme "Youth in Action". EVS projects give young people opportunities to volunteer in countries taking part in the programme and their partners also from other continents. EVS offers projects in the social, cultural, environmental and sports sector. **International Cultural Youth Exchange ICYE** - an international non-profit youth exchange organisation, which offers short and long-term voluntary projects, school exchanges and various special activities. **Hainan** - the smallest and most southern province in China. For years known as "the tail of the dragon" and "the gates of hell" as it was a place of exile for criminals. Nowadays, the island with miles of palm trees and new hotels coming up everyday is one of the main tourist destinations called Chinese Hawaii.

Issue 7

### Welcome to Wenchang

Everyday torrents and winds breaking trees is not what I expected of this tropical island. No fancy drinks, no bars and entertainment, no flowered clothes at this place called Chinese Hawaii, but the smell of chicken and life concentrated on food and shopping instead. A few walks around the town and you know all the tiny shops with sellers taking naps at 1 o'clock and dentists working almost in the street. You easily find the way to the only park with gymnastic equipment or temples hidden in the labyrinth of modern blocks and old, shabby houses. A little disappointing is

the sleepy atmosphere of the town, which does not have anything to do with a noisy and congested image of Chinese cities. But... this is Wenchang during the afternoon break when all the locals hide from the sun at home. Early in the morning, at lunch or dinner time deserted streets get flooded with vehicles, inhabitants and students of several schools. What is their life like here, their studies and free time? That is a theme for another issue. Meanwhile, it is time to go to bed, this is the time for cockroaches, geckos and rats.

## Issue 8

### Let's have a party!

Coke up, ganbei! A student party without alcohol but with games and sweets that differs from European ones, ways of spending spare time as well. Student life at the college stops only at night. Beside classes there are various activities organised, such as afternoon dancing lessons or evening competitions. There is not even a need to go out of the campus as food and basic goods can be bought here. Classes start before 8 am and end after 9 pm, which makes the students seem really hard-working. However, this time includes long breaks for meals, naps and hobbies, preparation for numerous speeches or singing contests, activities which rather distract than help improving their skills. This is the daily life of students who dream about well-paid jobs for international companies from Chinese metropolises. Admiration for Westerners is easily noticeable from luxurious dinners organised by the officials to gifts from the students and "hellos" heard wherever you go. Foreign teachers enjoy privileges, higher salaries and easiness of life, which encourages them to spend a few years in China. Finally, a piece of advice for anyone considering work in the Middle Kingdom - a huge dose of humour may be helpful to face cultural misunderstandings of everyday life.

## Issue 9

### Jennie disappears

Empty wardrobe and drawers, no messages nor emails saying that Jennie, my English colleague and flatmate, is fine. Why has she taken all her things on just a short trip to Shanghai? It is time to face the fact Jennie has left the project. Unconsidered tasks, lack of work and living conditions are the main volunteers' problems. However, such troubles occur mostly in newly organised projects whereas cooperation with experienced host organisations satisfies both the volunteers and hosts from the beginning. It does not mean new projects are not worth taking part but they are likely to require more effort from a volunteer. Not enough work for him or her? Is there any kindergarten or orphanage nearby? Children will fall in love with an active and always smiling young teacher. In addition to the organisational problems, there is culture shock awaiting foreigners. One day you cannot stand rice with this green something anymore neither your nosy neighbour hugging you. This is the crisis that comes after the phase of fascination with an exotic place. Being aware of the phenomenon you know you will probably overcome difficulties and begin a phase of adjustment soon. And your warm-hearted neighbour cooking super spicy noodles will make you feel at home.

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## 10. An Ordinary Day

By Karin Eriksson

Today was just an ordinary day. Nothing thrilling, nothing exotic anymore. Just a day. So, now I'm going to write exactly how this very ordinary day, or any other day looks like.

I wake up in the morning and Roseamma comes to make the first cup of tea for the day. It's really become a habit of mine. And after the tea, the daily routines at the old-age-home get started. And I help the patients with whatever they need help in the mornings: Washing faces, brushing teeth, taking medicine, sitting up in a chair, making the beds. And this keeps me busy until it is time for breakfast. Today we ate dosa with coconut and sugar (I don't want to think what my dentist will say after nine month tea-drinking and sugar-eating) And of course, another cup of tea.

And the routines continues; some of the elderly people take bath, others needs help to walk, keep their things tidy and clean, and some of them just need somebody to talk with.

Today my host mother Sneha came by to see how everything was going and she made tea (jackpot, this tea is out of the ordinary schedule). And suddenly, it was time for lunch. Of course, like for every lunch we had rice with sambar and chutney and salad. I thought I would become sick of rice after some months, but I really haven't. After I've washed the plates, the whole old-age-home takes rest for an hour or so. During that time, I read or write or listen to music until it is teatime. And after the tea I have some spare time when I can go out. And then, it is dinner and I help somebody to eat and wash up. And then... The day is over and time has flown.

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## 11. My most beautiful experience at my project

by Angel Prasanna

### ZAS-NEWS, ICJA

Made by Exchangees from all over the world

1. Everyday I have a beautiful experience in my project because working with disabled is wonderful because they don't care where I come from BLACK OR WHITE. When they see me they say you are my Angel. That encourages me to serve them better.
2. New friends. I learnt to live by myself in my project. I have the opportunity to visit other countries.
3. I can now speak with my hands.
4. I met the German Minister of development at a conference and we had a chat.
5. One hundred kinder know my name!

I have a strong relationship with the children.

My English is getting better everyday.

Now I can speak better German and communicate better. Thanks to ICJA!

## 13. Contact and Copyrights

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