EYV 2011 - VOLUNTEERING MATTERS

Impact of Youth Volunteering
in India

April - October 2011

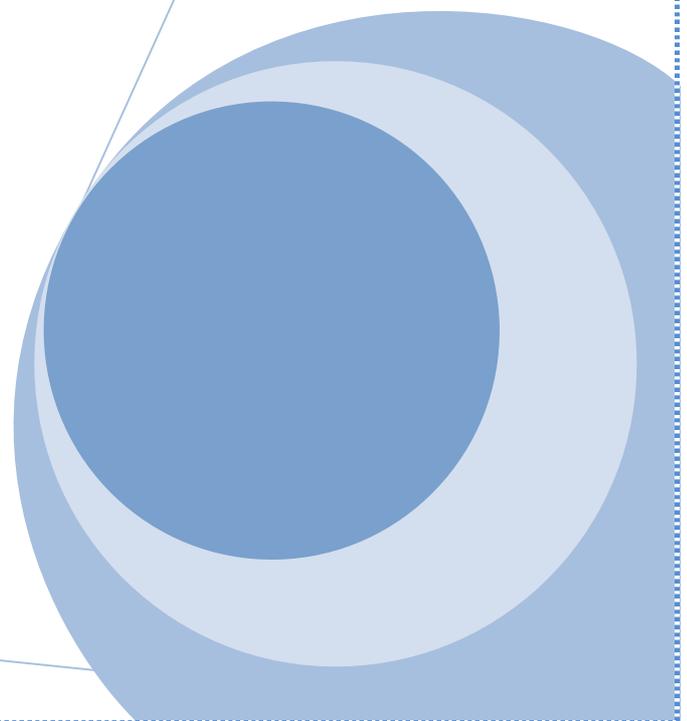## By Emelie Lin,
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1 Introduction

Volunteering is a powerful resource that creates bonds of trust and creates the opportunity for different people to contribute to positive change regardless of their nationalities, gender, age, beliefs or socio-economic background. Through volunteering people can gain skills and knowledge 'Learning by serving' and is a great experience for the personal development.

The project **EYV 2011- Volunteering Matters**, on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering 2011, aims to take stock, raise awareness and promote the benefits of volunteering programs and practices. The attempt of this report is to define volunteerism in **India** and answer the project's title for why volunteering actually do matters.

2 Overview of volunteering in India

History of volunteering

Volunteerism in India has been shaped by traditions and value systems rooted in religion and culture throughout its history already dating back to 1500 BC. The sacred text of *Rig Veda* exemplifies the concept of *Daana (giving), Seva (serving)* and *Bhakti* (service and devotion to God) and recommends that to evolve individuals must do different forms of religious deeds and help the poor in society. Religious influences have always remained strong in pre-colonial India. Cultural and religious values from contemporary rulers brought new ways of helping, for example, the service *Zakat* (percentage of your income is to be given to charity) during the *Mughal dynasty*. During the British rule organizations without profit-making objectives worked on improving social welfare and literacy in the country, and during the second half of the 19th century nationalist consciousness spread across India and "self-help" emerged as a primary focus of socio-political movements. Christian missionaries were active in improving the country's living standard and directed their efforts toward reducing poverty, building hospitals, school institutions, roads and other infrastructure whilst other non profit initiatives focused their efforts on education, health and social welfare. A firm foundation for secular voluntary action in the country wasn't laid out until *Servants of India*, a secular NGO that was established in 1905.

During late 19th and early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi with his so-called *Swadeshi movement* played a significant role in the country's independence. The movement advocated economic self-sufficiency through small-scale local production. Gandhi identified the root of India's problem as the poverty of the rural masses and that the country's prosperity could be improved by uplifting and developing villages and accounting for social responsibility in order to make them self reliance by using locally available recourses. The Central Social Welfare Board was established in 1953 to help promote social welfare activities and support people's participation through NGOs. The state government decentralized activities in development throughout the 1950s. There was an increasing concern for poverty and marginalisation in the country and India witnessed the diversification of NGOs, a reflection of the political scenario. Emerging welfare and empowerment-oriented organizations and the focus of attention were directed in the fields of civil liberties, education, environment and health.[1] The *Association for Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD)* was founded as a consortium for major voluntary agencies, and NGOs finally started to receive formal recognition as a development partner of the state.

Networking of NGOs and relation with government

Today there are about 1.5 million NGOs working in India at the local, national and international level, and this includes temples, churches, mosques, gurudwaras,[2] sport associations, hospitals, educational institution and temporary workshop places for events. According to a survey made by PRIA,[3] 73.4% of the NGOs have one or no paid staff and the survey also reveals that 26.5% of the NGOs are engaged

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[1] Ibid.
[2] Worship place for Sikhs
[3] Society for Participatory Research in Asia

in religious activities, 21.3% in service or community service, about 20% in education and 17.9% are active in fields of sports and culture and 6.6% work in health sector.[4]

There are no specific laws that regulate volunteerism in India. Formal forms of volunteerism are undertaken within the framework of the NGO that the volunteer is working with. The Societies Registration Act (SRA) was approved in 1860 to confirm the legal status of the growing body of NGOs and even today the SRA continues to be the legislation for NGOs in India. The Government of India recognizes that NGOs and the voluntary sector have contributed significantly to finding innovative solutions to poverty, deprivation, discrimination and exclusion through raising awareness, social mobilization, service delivery, training, research and advocacy. Finally in May 2007, the ministers of the Indian government adopted *The National Policy on the Voluntary Sector*[5] and thereby took the first step in the process of developing a new working relationship between the government and NGOs.

Today, NGOs are not required to register with the government, but registration allows the organization to deduct expenses such as income and/or tax, receive foreign contributions and possibly be included in government grant-in-aid schemes. And it also facilitates domestic fundraising as the income tax act permits donors to deduct contributions made to support NGOs.[6] Through the policy, the Central Government encourages state governments to simplify, liberalize and rationalize laws and rules on registration of volunteer organizations.[7]

Volunteering agencies in India

There are a number of volunteering and volunteer-based organisations in India. However, I present below the main platform and network of volunteer organisations in India, as well as its aims and objectives.

VANI- Voluntary Action Network India
Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) was found in 1988 has played a significant role in the Voluntary sector in India. VANI has been using advocacy as its principle instrument working at a state, national and global level, working as a catalyst between the voluntary sector and the central and state government. Currently VANI is represented by direct membership of 372 organizations and indirect membership of over 4000 organizations. VANI is an apex network of Voluntary organizations, which works on thematic issues concerning good governance, strengthening networks, research, and advocacy of policies and laws affecting the voluntary sector. At the state level, VANI discusses specifically the challenges faced by organizations and supports them by sharing knowledge about capacity building and how important it is to build relationships with all stakeholders especially the government, media and the private sector.

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[4] Asian Development Bank
[5] Government of India, 2007. *National Policy on the Voluntary Sector* 2007. New Delhi.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid. UN Volunteers, A quick Scan of Volunteerism in India

3 Action Research

3.1 Method and materials

Data of the survey

To understand the recognition, facilitation and impact of volunteering in India, I decided to see how volunteering is practiced in reality, therefore I decided to conduct project visits in both urban and rural areas to be more representative. The host projects conducted in this report work in the fields of social and environmental development such as orphanages, schools, people with disabilities and environmental sustainability. The host projects situated in the urban areas were located in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore, and projects located in the rural villages were all located in the states Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in southern India.

For collecting information about people's opinion and experience about volunteering, I requested the concerned people to fill out questionnaires, after or before which I interviewed them to get a better understanding and explanation on their answers. The people that I interviewed are international volunteers, project staffs, host families, local volunteers, and people of the local communities and also volunteers that finished their service and returned to their home country.[8] In this report I have chosen to present host families, local volunteers and people from local communities all under the category *"local community",* partly because of the insufficient numbers of interviews carried out for each category and to make it representative but also because after analysing the questionnaires I noticed that the answers received from the host families and other members of the local community were rather similar.

Additional information

Some additional information worth mentioning is that around 75% of the international volunteers interviewed are from Germany and this is mainly because of the Weltwärts programme sponsored by the German government. If not, the spread of nationalities would be more equal.

This report is most likely not representative of the country as whole since the diversity in India is great and there are always contradictions. The number of interviews carried out in this report has been limited and it would be more representative if a larger number of respondents in a wider variety of fields had participated in the survey.

Research questions

These are the research question that I have based my analysis of the report on, but the actual questions that I asked during the interview or questionnaires differ depending on whether I was asking international volunteers, host projects or people from the local community.

3.2 Research questions

1. **What is a volunteer?**
2. **Why do people volunteer?**

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[8] The definition of 'Local community' in this report includes all Indians that I met who come from all different backgrounds. I was fortunate to be able to discuss volunteering and the India's development.

3. **What impact does volunteering have?**
4. **What could be changed to improve future practices/ experiences of volunteering?**

1) Questions asked to the International Volunteers

1. **What is your definition of being a volunteer?**
2. **What was your main reason for volunteering?**
3. **How have you benefited from your volunteering experience?**
4. **What could be improved to make future experiences/ practices of volunteering more rewarding?**

2) Questions asked to the Host Projects

1. **What is your definition of being a volunteer?**
2. **Why did your project decide to receive international volunteers and for what reason do you think people volunteer?**
3. **What impact does volunteering have on the Host project?**
4. **What could be improved for future practices of volunteering?**

3) Questions asked to the Local Community

1. **What is your definition of being a volunteer?**
2. **For what reason do you think people volunteer?**
3. **What impact does volunteering have on the local community?**

3.3 *Findings of the Research*

The results given below have been taken from the responses to questionnaires and the interviews and present the overall view of the research questions. The research questions differed from the actual questionnaire, as mentioned before, depending on the target group questioned.

The number of people participating in this survey:
International volunteers: 25
Host Projects: 12
Local community: 18
Returned Volunteers: 6
Total: 61

3.3.1 Question 1: What is a volunteer?

The question asked in the questionnaires / interviews for all group categories.
 "What is your definition of being a volunteer?"

International volunteers - Definition of a volunteer

Helping people	8
New learning and experiences for life	2
Cultural exchange	2
Contributing with skills and expertise	4
Work for free	7
Giving free time	1
Giving back to a community	1

Host Projects

Helping people	4
Contributing with skills and expertise	1
Work for free	6

Giving back to a community	1

Host Family and people in the local community

Work for free	9
Helping people	2
Being part of a good cause	1
Contributing with skills and expertise	5
Giving back to a community	2

Returned volunteers

Contributing with skills and expertise	1
Work for free	2
Cultural exchange	1
Helping people	2

Overall - Definition of Volunteering
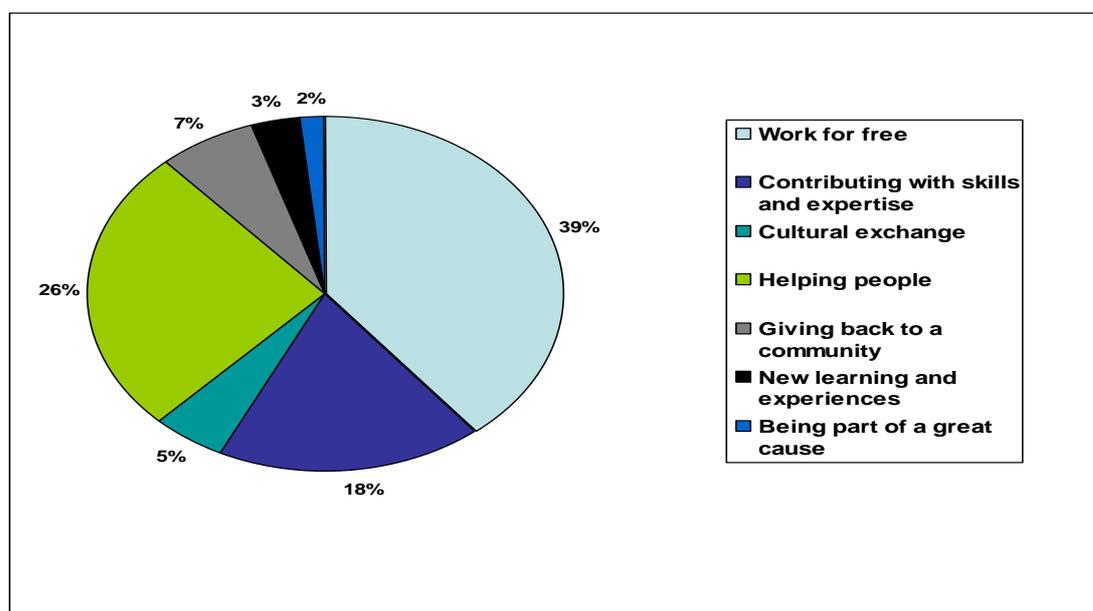
Work for free	24
Contributing with skills and expertise	11
Cultural exchange	3
Helping people	16
Giving back to a community	4
New learning and experiences	2
Being part of a good cause	1

The diagram above shows that the majority of people think that volunteering means a person working for free and helping people using their skills and expertise. Many of the volunteers felt that their personal gain was much greater than their total contribution to the people that they were helping.

Returned volunteers were asked in the interviews whether their definition of volunteering changed after their voluntary service in India: The majority stated that the definition stayed the same for them. Those who said that their definition of volunteering changed, explained that they thought they would have a bigger impact on the project and the people that they were working with. Some also said that the definition of what a volunteer is differs for the projects, host families and the volunteers and in some cases caused problems about the role of the volunteer.

Quotes from some interviews & questionnaires:
- *Being a volunteer means to get involved in a project and do the best we can to help in achieving the projects ambitions* **-** International Volunteers
- *Somebody giving time and energy for no personal gain"*- Host Project
- *A volunteer is a person who gives his/her service to people in need without expecting any kind of reward/ payment.* **-** Host Family
- *Accept to work for free and help a community.* - Local volunteer
- *A volunteer wants to utilize his/her skill to support the project and gain some new skills or knowledge. And if the practice is done abroad also for the cultural exchange.* - Returned volunteer

3.3.2 Question 2: Why do people volunteer?

The question asked in the questionnaires/ interviews:
What was your main reason for volunteering?

International volunteers

Giving time and energy for a great cause	3
Wanted to do something different	9
Cultural exchange	6
Gaining new experiences	5
Learn more about yourself	1
Giving back to a community	1

Host Projects
Why did your project decide to receive international volunteers ad for what reason do you think people volunteer?

Cultural exchange	2
Giving time and energy for a great cause	3
Putting skill into practice	5
Giving back to the community	2

Host families and people from the local community
For what reason do you believe people chose to do voluntary work?

Putting skills into practice	9
Giving back to a community	4
Learn more about yourself	1
Giving time and energy for a great cause	2
Do not know or it is not important	2

Overall reason for volunteering:
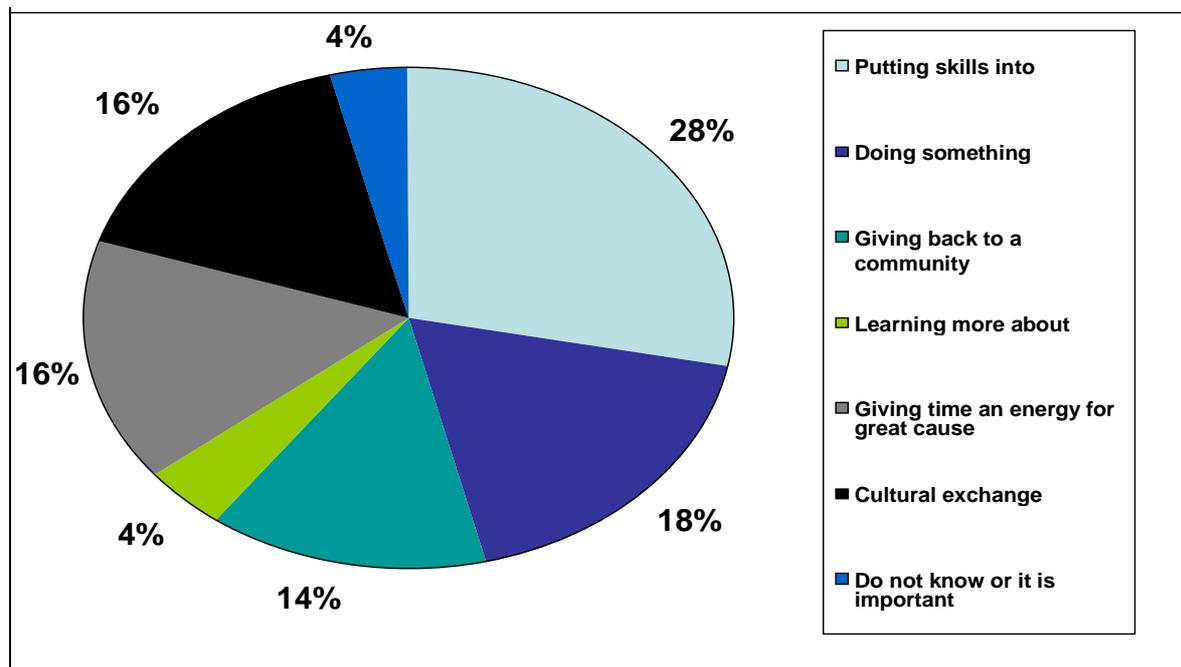
Putting skill into practice	14
Doing something different	9
Giving back to a community	7
Learn more about yourself	2
Giving time and energy for a great cause	8
Cultural exchange	8
Do not know or it is not important	2

International volunteers state that the main reason for voluntary work was that they wanted to do something different, and by working for a longer period of time in a country very different from your own you learn about the culture and gain new experiences. Besides all the 'adventure', they want to be useful by helping for a good cause.

People from both the host projects and the local community thought the main reason that people volunteer is because they want to utilize their skills by putting them into practice. The main reason why host projects host internationally volunteers is the cultural exchange and the new inputs and ideas given by the volunteer.

Some of the host families felt that hosting volunteers within their community was like participating in community development themselves.

Quotes from some interviews & questionnaires:
- *I wanted to come to India and live in a country that is totally different from were I come from and work with underprivileged children and get new experiences in social work.*- International volunteer
- *The volunteer upgrade his/ her skill by putting it in to practice and we as a project want new ideas/ inputs to improve and adapt great techniques.*- Host project
- *They have passion in serving the mentally challenged children and we want to be part of the Development Program in the community.*- Host Family

3.3.3 Question 3: What impact does volunteering have?

International and returned volunteers:
How have you benefited from you volunteering experience?

	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased
Self confidence in their own abilities	*28 (90.3%)*	*3 (9.7%)*	-
Willingness to try out new experiences	*31 (100%)*	-	-
Initiative and creativity	*26 (83.9%)*	*5 (16.1%)*	-

Almost all volunteers stated that the personal gain is much greater rather than the actual impact they have on the project and the people concerned. The majority of the volunteers felt that their self-confidence, ability and creativity to handle different situations are much better and the willingness to try out new experiences has also increased.

Volunteers also said that they have a better understanding of Indian culture and gained more knowledge and skills through the work they were carrying out. Among the best aspects of volunteering are the bonds and relationships with the children that they were taking care of, being a part of their lives and bringing them happiness. Even if the impact on the project as a whole or at the local community level is very little, they felt the impact they had on each child is significant.

Host Project
Benefits of hosting international volunteers:

	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
Int. volunteers provide skills not found in local staff	6	4	2
Opportunity for local people to learn more about other nations and cultures	7	2	3
Services could have been more effectively provide by a full- time staff member	1	3	8
Provide a new viewpoint or perspective to our work	6	4	2
We appreciate the work done by the volunteer	11	1	-

The projects appreciate and value the work done by volunteers and the greatest impact the international volunteer has on the project are the new inputs and ideas, cultural exchange, and the sharing of different working styles. Some of the projects were highly dependent on volunteers since the volunteers' services are for free, and in some cases volunteers carry out the job better than a paid local staff member, e.g. English teaching in rural areas. In addition, sometimes the volunteer donated materials and financial support to the project.

Local community

The volunteers are appreciated and bring cultural exchange and broader the local people's perspectives and perceptions about the world and foreigners/ 'white people' by communicating and working with them. The impact the volunteers have on a community is very little but if the volunteers stopped coming things would change or be different and not as good as it is having them there. Volunteers spend money locally while being there and contribute to the local economy.

Quotes from some interviews & questionnaires:
- *Definitely, I believe much more in my skills now and India has also changed my presumption of developing countries. I have a better understanding for their culture and understand that everything has its deep roots.-* International Volunteer
- *My greatest happiness is serving the children and being a part of their life.-* International Volunteer
- *All the experiences have been great learning for me and I have learnt to take things more easily and appreciate my privileged life.-* International Volunteer
- *Volunteers provide valuable help for the Indian staff and the school in general, it broadens the outlook on the children giving them the opportunity to socialize with people from other countries"-* Host Project
- *The volunteers are motivated and committed to the work they are doing, letting local people (specially in villages) get in contact with foreigners to see their costume and way of working changes their perception of "white people" and the world.* - Host community

3.3.4 Question 4: What could be changed to improve future practices/ experiences of volunteering?

International volunteers
What could be improved to make future experiences/ practices of volunteering more rewarding?

Most common statements by the volunteers:
- Projects and host families should be chosen more carefully.
- Better communication with all concerned parts.

Most common statement by the host projects:
- Hard for the volunteer to understand/accept the culture and the different ways of working.

4 Conclusion and analysis

Now that the research questions and responses have been presented, section presents a summarized report and analysis in order to develop a representative answer for each individual group in the study.

Question 1: What is a volunteer?

The majority of respondents stated that they define a volunteer as a person working for free and that the voluntary activity must be undertaken on the individual's own free will. The practice is primarily without expecting a reward although it is recognized that voluntary work brings significant benefits to the volunteers such as new experiences through the work that they undertake. Thus, based on the answers given from the questionnaires and interviews, it is possible to develop a definition what a volunteer is:

A volunteer is someone who gives their time and energy, contributing with their skills and expertise without expecting to get paid or rewarded. Volunteers gain in life experiences through the work they do.

Question 2: Why do people volunteer?

There are a wide variety of reasons why people do voluntary work since understandings of being a volunteer are different just each individual is different. One of the main reasons for doing voluntary work is seen as putting skills in to practice, which is especially believed by host projects and people of the local community. The host families feel that when a person volunteers, it is a great opportunity for him/her to put his/her skills into practice, so-called 'learning by serving'. The *Overall diagram* shows that the reason why people volunteer is to put their skills into practice, but the actual reason for volunteering is because they wanted to do something different and gain new experiences through the new work they are exposed to. The reasons for why people volunteer seem somehow to be "misunderstood". Although there are no direct consequences, yet having this knowledge could help projects and people working in the voluntary sector to consider including ways of encouraging volunteerism.

Other reasons for volunteering include helping others, and if the service is done in another country with a very different culture, the volunteer gains a cultural exchange experience along with personal development. Some said that they somehow want to give back to a community and help people less fortunate than themselves and learn how to appreciate what they have in life.

Question 3: What impact does volunteering have?

- The greatest benefit of international volunteers to the host projects and the local community is the cultural exchange. Volunteers share ideas, skills and knowledge, which gives the project staff, the people they help and the local community the opportunity to learn more about other cultures and countries and broaden their perceptions and perspectives.
- The biggest impact of volunteering from the perspective of volunteers is the personal gain in voluntary work. Volunteers feel more confident and have much more trust in their own abilities. When international volunteers return to their home country they learn to appreciate things that they had always taken for granted and the cultural exchange gains them a better understanding of other cultures and different ways of thinking.
- Volunteers contribute by donating financial support, material resources and fundraising for the project.

Question 4: What could be changed to improve future practices and volunteering experiences?

The biggest areas for improvement, as stated by the international volunteers, are communication and knowledge and cultural understanding between volunteers and host projects and host families. The suggestions below could provide solutions to some of the problems faced by the volunteers and host projects.

Communication
- Many of the host projects receive volunteers regularly throughout the year and therefore it is somehow essential to have a clear "structure" for what tasks and what role the volunteers have in the projects. A 'volunteer- coordinator', a person specially working to support volunteers in the project is needed, who is the link between projects and volunteers. I believe this would make it possible for everything to be far more organised within the project, and the project might even utilise volunteers more efficiently.

Knowledge and (cultural) understanding between host projects/ families and volunteers
- The volunteer organisation, that is the volunteers' support in their host country, makes visits to the projects and families at least once every six months while the volunteer is working in the project and the host family if the volunteers lives with a host family. For the volunteer/ family/ project these short visits might not be enough time actually raise issues when they arise. Volunteers might feel that there is no enough communication and feel that the host organisation doesn't knows specific details about the project and/or family. This can be solved if the volunteers have contact with the host organization on a more regular basis through the

telephone or email since time and budget is limited. However, if possible the person making the visit should stay a night to really see how 'everyday life' is, particularly for volunteers that are placed in rural areas since communication facilities (internet/ phone) and transportation options to personally meet the contact person of the host organisation are limited.

- When volunteers newly arrive in their host country they are given an "on-arrival camp" and this is the time when the volunteers are given an introduction to the host country. Apart from the very basic facts about the country, it may be good to talk more about issues that are more related to the work they will carrying out, what is expected of them from the project, prepare volunteers more about the "national psyche" and explain how to 'deal' with different situations that may occur. This will give them a better understanding of how people work in the country and their thoughts and values. Also, projects and host family should receive some kind of training from the host organisation to explain how to receive a volunteer and someone coming from another country with a very different culture and set of values.