

Volunteers' Testimonials
August 2010 – May 2011

**EVS Project: “Young Volunteers
Contributing to Combating Poverty and
Social Exclusion”**

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Introduction

This publication documents some of the outcomes of the EVS Project “*Young Volunteers Contributing to Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion*” from August 2010 to May 2011. Supported by the Youth in Action programme of the European Commission, the project was implemented by the ICYE International Office in cooperation with its members and partners in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The project aimed at stimulating a mutual non-formal learning process, an exchange of ideas and strengthening of relationships between people in the participating countries, more importantly between the volunteers and their hosts whilst they strived to address marginalisation and foster inclusive growth in the ‘global village’. This publication thus portrays some aspects of the intercultural journey undertaken by seventeen young volunteers over nine months during which they were exposed to the multidimensional task of challenging poverty and exclusion in a country and socio-cultural and political context different from their own.

Their testimonials depict the multiple, often conflicting, local realities they were confronted with, the exciting and not always easy cultural adaptation process they underwent. Ultimately these experiences provided the volunteers and their hosts a deeper understanding and appreciation of differences and similarities between people and cultures, and equipped volunteers with a range of interpersonal, communication and task-related skills. In the end, we observe the extent of their motivation and commitment to challenging social exclusion and poverty, as well as the impact of their efforts at the local level.

We are delighted to say that this project has created a sense of solidarity and positively influenced the vision and attitudes of the volunteers and all actors involved. We hope that this publication will serve as a means of further reflection for the volunteers and their hosts on their individual experiences, as well as assisting volunteers who are only just setting off on their EVS journeys.

We would like to thank the volunteers and partner organisations of this project not just for their contributions to this publication but also for the enthusiasm and open-mindedness that has led to such promising results. Importantly, we would like thank the European Commission for the funds received within the framework of the Action 2 Youth in Action programme that enabled us to make this project a reality.

Rubaica Jaliwala

ICYE International Office

Jorge Luis Fentanes Colin

Mexico – Austria



Sportweek in Schilletein

My project

My project is called "*St. Martin*". It is a centre for people with all kinds of disabilities: deaf, dumb, Down syndrome, partial or full paralysis, bipolarity, etc. The project is located in *Klosterneuburg*, Austria.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

The activities start at 7:15. We help the residents to get ready for school, which is in the same building. I wake them up, give them their clothes, put on their shoes, the deodorant, comb their hair, brush their teeth. Then I take them to the kitchen for breakfast; for some of them I prepare coffee, put butter and marmalade on the bread, check that they take their pills, but I also look after them and avoid any kind of conflict, fight or misunderstanding. At 8:30 I take them to the school, and wish them a good day.

We get together again at 16:00 when they are done with school to eat a snack. After that and depending on the weather (I always cross my fingers for a sunny day) we go out for a walk; again I have the task of giving them the right clothes. Doing this I feel like my parents when they used to tell me what to wear before going out. We walk around this small town and they buy chocolates, soda, magazines. If there is bad weather, we play "UNO" together, paint, draw or do something else indoors.

Experiences like mine open your eyes and make you ask yourself what and who is normal. The residents may have some disabilities, but the ones who do not, we complain more than them - sometimes the former are happier than the latter. They don't care about how much money you have or the color of your skin.

Coffee break in Klosterneuburg



Around 18:00 we cook dinner, which I love! But it has made me realize how much I miss the food from my country. I like some of the food here, but it is nothing compared to the Mexican spicy taste. Here we eat together and I help again those who have to take their pills and who need help eating.

Sometimes after dinner I take one resident for a walk, if not then it is time to prepare them for bed, and finish the day wishing them good night - "Bis morgen, Schlaf gut".

My experience

When I arrived here, I had no idea about how to work with disabled people; this is my first experience. My previous studies were in a completely different direction; the German language was a big challenge for my patience because they don't speak clearly and it is still difficult for me to understand some of them. Also I understand now more about the work of psychologists.

I brought with me my skills to work (even though it is my first time with this kind of work). At the beginning I learned by watching and asking how to do things; later as the time went by, I started to know how, when and where to do what. All these patients are like everyone on the streets, with strengths and weaknesses. They also know how/when to take advantage and play the "part" of a disabled person when they don't want to do something or they just don't understand.

Another thing that I have learned from people from different parts of the world is the different points of view and different ideas in circumstances that are sometimes not the nicest ones, but now I know that somehow the best life experiences are not only the sweetest ones. One of the most amazing lessons that I have learned through my voluntary service in St. Martin is that I am blessed with the ability to make my own choices, to wake up every day and decide what to wear, what to eat, of my own free will... Some of my patients do not have those options.



Kristy waiting for the Carnaval

Me and people I work with at the Leopoldfest in Klosterneuburg, 2010



Aprilia Kurniawati

Indonesia – Finland



The real reason I am doing the European Voluntary Service is to give, and now I would do anything to give back even more!



What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I am an EVS volunteer from Indonesia and work at the Kiipula Foundation, Finland. Kiipula Foundation provides services such as vocational special education, adult education, rehabilitation, and work life development. The most important mission of the Kiipula Foundation is to create new possibilities and solutions so that the clients can improve their working and functional capacity, well-being and success during the different phases of life.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

During my stay at the Kiipula Foundation, I have worked for most of the time in vocational special education. My very basic role is to be with the students and give them some insight on another world besides Finland, giving them a chance to work with a foreigner and assisting them when needed.

Working here everyday has been interesting. It started at 8.00 am in the morning when the classes begin and finish at 4.00pm.

Every two weeks I had the opportunity to be in a different part of the project. In 2010, I was in the Electronics school, Business and Administration school, Logistics School, and Gardening school. I also had the opportunity to work in the vocational therapies, which are a lot fun.

During my project I also work for the community in a day care centre. This is the picture we took after we had a Christmas lunch at the Turenki Day Care Centre.

During the autumn holidays, I had wonderful experiences working in Kiipula's garden. Picking up 300kgs of cucumber in a day, hundreds of Gerbera flowers and the decaying leaves of thousands of Christmas Star flowers.

That was an amazing work week for me. Just before the Christmas holidays began, I also worked for the community in a day care center. You require only one week to get to know the children there, but it will take forever for me to forget all the sweet memories with them; they are just lovely.

Once, I worked with some students with special needs. They are taught skills they might need in society after school, which will really help them later on to get a job out there. So they are not just people with special needs, but in my opinion they could be good in doing some kind of work.

My experience

When I decided to do my EVS in Finland, all I had in my mind was to give, but it turned out to be so very different. Now that I am here in Finland, I feel like I am in a completely different and amazing world. The people, the habits, the weather, the food, there are so many different things to experience. The feeling of walking on the wrong side of the road is somehow weird but that's how it goes. In fact, now I feel like I am learning much more than what I am giving because I have learned so many new things.

The real reason I am doing the European Voluntary Service is to give, and now I would do anything to give back even more!



I spend most of the evenings with other students playing some games and Karaoke in the "Free Time-House"

Me and one of the teacher assistants preparing the material for making hand gloves together with the students as an extra activity



Andrea Catalina Marin Moreno

Colombia – Hungary



I took part in an exhibition called „Words instead of walls” organized by Artemisszió. The idea behind the exhibition was to show the final product of a project on Social Inclusion and Identity of youngsters in Budapest

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

The Artemisszió Foundation has been operating since 1998 as a non-profit organization of public interest and it aims to achieve its objectives through research, promotion and the use of the theory and practice of intercultural communication.

The mission of the Foundation is to provide an opportunity for the widest possible section of society to take part in activities that develop competencies and strengthen relations among people, improve communication and conflict-resolution skills, and contribute to the development of mutual understanding and cooperation.

For Artemisszió, it is a priority to include socially disadvantaged groups -the unemployed, people living in rural areas, the Roma and immigrants- to fight for equal opportunities and against social exclusion.

I assisted in organizing cultural programs and other logistical tasks for a Leonardo Da Vinci Group that arrived to Budapest from France.



My main tasks in the project are:

- Organizing programs for Hungarian and foreign young people, including intercultural evenings, club evenings and/or workshops on topics of my interest;
- Organizing a film club on related global issues;
- Participating in the Foundation's training courses as animator and/or co-facilitator;
- Participating in public events and fairs where the Foundation is present with a stand;
- Monitoring and reporting news and actualities in European policies and programs, with special attention to the topics of poverty reduction;
- Participating in global education projects about poverty reduction, the inequities of the trade of agricultural products, North-South relations, etc.
- Collaborating with other Hungarian NGOs on topics related to poverty reduction, especially with HAND platform (of which the Artemisszió Foundation is a member).

What does a typical day at the project look like?

I have not had a daily routine. As my host organization is so dynamic, my tasks depend on what is going on with our projects. Almost every week is different.

Normally, I go to the office from Mondays to Fridays at different times. However, there are activities during the weekends as exhibitions, workshops and others, related to social inclusion, interculturality, young people and international mobility. I go to the office in order to prepare the activities I am involved in. For instance, I am doing research on educational issues, preparing Spanish lessons for young Hungarian people, planning activities for trainings such as icebreakers, making photocopies, helping with logistics for some events and exhibitions at the organization and others.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

By participating in this EVS project, I can offer my point of view on the projects of the foundation as a young Latin-American girl. So far, I have developed my communication skills as well as getting to know a new perspective of life. It has become a very good personal experience for me. I am more confident, and I have the inspiration to do things as soon as I come back to my home country.

Do you see a link between your volunteer work and the theme of the project: “Young volunteers contributing to combating poverty and social exclusion”?

Definitely! Artemisszió Foundation carries out projects related to intercultural communication, which means fostering dialogue between cultures for better understanding between cultures, and it somehow helped me know that a more equal society does not mean we are all different but have the same rights and opportunities. Accordingly, in the context of my EVS experience, I can see that it is possible to break the gap between rich and poor, educated and non-educated, excluded and included through activities that integrate people.



Sharing experiences on a trip to Nagyoroszi and Drégelypálank in Hungary.



Participating as co-animator in the Leonardo Da Vinci Programme.



The language lessons helped me to better understand the culture and to communicate with the locals.

For me, giving Spanish lessons to young Hungarians represents a way to help them to be included in the country they are going to, not because they are officially considered as disadvantaged here in Hungary (which is a word I do not like because I have shared some time with them and I think they are so brilliant and capable of doing so many things as any other person) but because now I understand there are so many ways to be excluded and one of those is the language barrier (I have also experienced this here in my host country!). I also got the same feeling working with the Roma community.

Dealing with cultural differences

I have to say that my experience did not start when I arrived in Hungary. Fortunately, I participated in a pre-departure training where I had the chance to reflect on this experience and gained skills in order to face the cultural-shock and the difficulties that could come up during these 9 months. It helped me a lot.



Participating as co-animator in the Leonardo Da Vinci Programme.

Colombia and Hungary are very different. The adaptation process is not always successful and easy. It depends on each person.

Living abroad is a matter of getting used to small things and a sequence of new facts. It is about continuing to live your life but in a different context –geographical, socio-economic and cultural. That is why you start learning new things because you keep your own identity and you get new elements to enrich this identity.

At this point, I am well integrated with most of the staff, but there are some I still find different and do not even like, although I understand them. For instance, eye contact is something I still do not get. Hungarians do not look at you, or they look at you so directly that it could be uncomfortable; there is no middle point when looking at you in the street.

I do not have a special strategy to deal with this new culture but try not to judge. Observing is good advice before stating what is good or bad. It is after watching people and behaviors that you realize that the world is not black or white but several kinds of grey.

Sarah Jean Panol

Philippines – Iceland



Preparing sandwiches for our guests

I always feel that I am privileged to be part of an EVS program, and I'm excited to learn more. I believe that through this program, I will not only be able to lend a hand to those in need but this will also be a great experience to learn more ideas and solutions in addressing poverty that could be useful when I'm back home since two of the biggest problems in my country are also poverty and social exclusion.

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I am an EVS volunteer from the Philippines currently volunteering in Iceland at the Salvation Army's Day Shelter. The Salvation Army's Day Shelter strives to help those who seek aid without discriminating them. Taking immediate care of the basic human needs of food, shelter, clothing, physical care, safety and social welfare is an important first step for a more positive and permanent change in the lives of the people the shelter helps.

Most of the guests who come are homeless, poor, jobless and lonely; some are drug addicts and most are alcoholics. Most of them are also foreigners who have been staying in Iceland for a long time; they lost their jobs and had difficulties in finding new ones.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

A typical day at work starts at 10:30am and ends at 5pm. I initially prepare the takeout food for the guests, and then assist in cooking the lunch, and from time to time my boss lets me do the cooking for the guests by myself. When I'm done in the kitchen, I help in cleaning in the day shelter. When the guests come in, we serve lunch and eat with them as well, and then we clean the dishes. We also assist the guests and help with tasks like doing the laundry or changing bed linens. We also try to interact with them and engage them with recreational activities such as watching movies, playing games and have a friendly conversation and be their companion, if needed.



Doing laundry for our guests

Sometimes me, my co-volunteers and my boss sit around the puzzle table and have a tea or coffee together and try to finish a big puzzle which is also a good way to bond and get to know each other more. On some afternoons, I sort out clothes or organize items on display in the Salvation Army's second-hand shop. And before the day ends, we clean the kitchen and make sure that things are put in order around the shelter before we leave work.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

As a volunteer, I think the best thing I could contribute to this project aside from my time, is my commitment, experience and ideas as well as my positive energy and happiness.

I believe I have learned and gained a lot, I have met new people and built friendships with them, and in some ways this project helps me develop my social and communication skills as well as my personality. I have gained more insight and a better understanding of Icelandic culture and other cultures as well; it has helped me become more socially aware about the kind of experiences less fortunate people have. This has helped me become more empathetic and compassionate towards others.

A friend once asked me if my work was safe as I am with alcoholics and addicts because they tend to be violent; well, I don't fear them. Instead, I feel for them because they are vulnerable, and so far I haven't seen them being violent. There were few instances in which some guests have had arguments, but not the kind that result in big fights. While some of them want to be alone and not be bothered, some want company, to play a game or have a small chat. There are few who are rude, but I don't let them affect me; I just think that it is the alcohol talking and maybe when they're sober they'll be nicer. At least a greater number of them are appreciative and they don't forget to say thank you!

What we could do and should continuously do is to be their support system, a helping hand to somehow ease their burden and for them to live a more dignified life, and to guide them and make them feel that they belong and make them realize their worth. Maybe in time, they themselves will realize that they want to overcome their situation and that they are ready to seek and accept help and take the big step to do something about it. And most importantly, we should never lose hope for them.



Dining out with other EVS and ICYE volunteers

Having a taste of Icelandic traditional food - fermented shark



Dealing with cultural differences

Living in Iceland and living in the Philippines is a really great difference. One example is the weather: the first two weeks was a little hard for me as there is no snow in the Philippines and it's always sunny and hot; fortunately, I have adapted to it already. What is so great about Iceland is that it's clean, the environment is not polluted; you can even drink water from the tap and it's not even treated with chlorine. Life here is far less stressful as there are no traffic jams, honking vehicles, and very crowded city streets. I also admire the courteousness of the drivers here in Iceland. They always stop to let pedestrian cross the street, even on highways. I also admire how they try to preserve their language; Filipinos on the other hand are very creative, they love to play with words and create new words. I've also noticed that when you're invited to a party or some meetings, it's okay to arrive late – my classmate in the Icelandic language class once joked "it's polite to be late as long as it's no later than 2 hours". This has some resemblance to what we call in the Philippines - "Filipino Time". Icelanders are trusting; once we went to a poetry reading, and my co-volunteer wanted to buy the book but didn't have cash with her, the lady just handed the book to my co-volunteer and gave her bank account so that my co-volunteer could pay through that – well I guess in the Philippines you cannot just do that to a complete stranger.

Co-volunteers and training facilitator during the EVS On-Arrival Training



**Cooking with my boss
Rannva for the guests' lunch**

Being in another country, there are definitely some values or beliefs that I find different from where I am, but for me, for as long as you respect them and be open-minded it isn't be difficult to adjust.

I always feel that I am privileged to be part of an EVS program, and I'm excited to learn more. I believe that through this program, I will not only be able to lend a hand to those in need but this will also be a great experience to set more ideas and solutions to addressing poverty that could be useful when I'm back home since two of the biggest problems in my country are also poverty and social exclusion.

Olajide Alaba

Nigeria – Iceland



Working at the
Salvation Army's
Shelter

Any poverty eradication program or project should meet these basic needs and that's exactly what the day shelter does

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I am an EVS volunteer from Nigeria working at the Salvation Army's Day Shelter (Dagsetur) in Iceland. The mission of the organization as a whole is to meet the needs of less privileged people without any discrimination whatsoever. They have several projects among which is the home for the mentally ill, the day shelter for the homeless and people with drug addiction problems, the second hand shop and the Guesthouse.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

My project is at the day shelter. What I feel to be the three basic needs of mankind are food, clothing and shelter. Also emphasizing the fact that people need company, someone to talk with and share his or her pains and troubles to kill boredom. Any poverty eradication program or project should meet these basic needs and that's exactly what the day shelter does. The day shelter is an international environment (my presence also adds the flavor of an international environment), where both Icelanders and foreigners that have problems can turn to and have a good time during the day from 12.00pm to 5.00pm. They leave afterwards to the night shelter provided by the Icelandic government. My regular tasks at the day shelter are to keep it clean and pleasant, serve food to the clients, make coffee, do their laundry, play games with them, talk with them and share thoughts, making them feel loved. These activities helped me gain their trust and friendship and I can practice my Icelandic with them.



Working at the Salvation
Army's Shelter



The AUS group with Mr. President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson

I found out from this encounter that even this little help goes a long way to make the people feel better. I have three friends here who have made something good out of their lives by choosing to either go back to school or live a better life. I can therefore compare the day shelter to a rehabilitation centre. These changes make me feel proud to be a member of the army, contributing some value to their lives, which meets also the aims of the theme "youth combating poverty and social exclusion".

My experience

My first three months were a bit challenging, the weather and the food were kind of weird for me. I could not get my normal spicy food. Though it would be sunny outside, the temperature would read about 3 degrees, and it also gets dark around 5.00pm and it is still dark around 10.30am in the morning when I resume work. This makes me feel so lazy as I feel sleepy.

I witnessed my first snow in December and then had a beautiful white Christmas. There was also a special meal at Christmas, some disgusting rotten shark which I was brave enough to try.

I was used to complementing people in Nigeria then I got to know that most Icelanders don't like compliments. Most of them have a closed mind and won't give you a hug until they know you properly and feel safe with you, after which they see you as family.

The bus system is also a bit complicated. I missed my bus a couple of times then I had to learn to be early for it and this really helped my time management as I'm very poor at this. Icelanders might not invite you to their homes but they always have their doors open to you, but you always have to take off your shoes before going in. My visit to the President of Iceland, Herra Olafur Ragnar Grímsson, with the rest of the volunteers is something I'll always hold on to. He was such a simple man, he had no security guards and the white house where he stays was just like any other home in Iceland. This speaks more about the simplicity of Icelanders, the peace you can feel and the safety of the environment. I have never had the chance to meet any Governor in my country, let alone the president.

Me and President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson



Eunice Ntim

Ghana – Poland



Me at the host project

The staff of Helenow centre creates an environment full of fun, which makes the children and me very happy.

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

The mission of Helenow centre, my local host project, is to provide education, treatment and welfare for children and youth with central nervous system dysfunctions and cerebral palsy. In addition, the centre provides support and rehabilitation for the clients, as well as training for specialists to work with disabled and socially excluded people.

My role as a volunteer is to support assistants, educators and therapists. I help the children do their homework, help the pupils of the boarding school with self-study activities and accompany them from one place to another. Besides, I take part in simple therapies such as art therapy, where we draw, do decorations or earrings.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

My typical day in the project is very motivating and happy, especially concerning work with the children and staff. The staff creates an environment full of fun, which makes the children and me very happy. I work in the boarding school and in The Graduate Club. In the boarding school we do something different. After the children come back from school, I help them eat lunch, help them with their homework and then we perform other tasks such as doing bangles, painting or cutting cards in any shape that we want, coloring them just for fun. Also, some of the pupils express their interest in learning English as their second language, which really impresses me. I am helping them because at times in the evening some of the pupils greet you "good morning".



Me and Arman, EVS volunteer from Turkey

Work at the Graduate Club is also very interactive and fun. Every Wednesday we do something new, for example, today we designed and painted wall flames; after drying, we fixed them onto the wall. In fact, the job is challenging because each person is supposed to complete his or her work. I really enjoy working with both the staff and the pupils. Afterwards we go to the swimming pool to have some fun.

I was once asked to do intercultural presentations about my country which was so nice. I also help them to organize regular activities such as excursions, shopping and other cultural workshops.

My relationship with the staff and the pupils is very good, that is one of the reasons why I enjoy my stay with them so much. Each passing moment is happy with them. They always include me in excursions and outings. I am very motivated and happy when I am with them.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

My contribution to this project is to help the children learn more about other languages and handicraft. For example, some of the children are really willing to learn English as their second language, I am glad to be there and assist them. Again, since some of them are disabled, I do help them to learn handicraft, for example, making earrings, invitation cards, amongst others. In fact, I have really learned a lot too, which will also help me in the future in relating to all types of people anywhere I go, and in organizing and also doing creative work for myself.

Do you see a link between your volunteer work and the theme of the project: "Young volunteers contributing to combating poverty and social exclusion"?

Yes. Because I can see that the children and youth are learning from me. For example, I motivate them to do whatever that can help them to relate more to the external world. I assist in activities helping them get to know the world outside Helenow centre. I also present my country, history and culture because they have no possibilities to travel and get to know my country.



My presentation about Ghana in the Graduate Club



My presentation about Ghana in the Graduate Club



**My presentation at the Carnival ball
"Closer to Africa"**

Dealing with cultural differences

There are different aspects of culture, which are important for me. Some of them are the notion of leadership, social interactions, attitudes towards elders and cooperation. In fact, I have learnt a lot from the Poles because they are really active in the above-mentioned areas. It will help me when I go back to my country or wherever else I go.

The cultural differences that are most visible to me are how they handle partners' emotions, their way of courtship practices, non-verbal communication and their concept of time. For example, in Poland they are prompt about their time. I have a friend who usually visits me and she always tells me she will pick me up by 8:30, for example, and she will be there at 8:30, unlike in my country where we are usually delayed with our time.

Some cultural differences are difficult for me. For example, in my country it's not all that visible to see people going to the coffee bar or the pub during the weekend and also partners going to watch a film at the end of the week. But in Poland it's very common which makes it very difficult to cope with. In Ghana, people spend weekends at home with their families and friends, which I miss a lot.

Another example is their personal space, which is also very difficult for me to cope with. At times in the bus, you just wish someone will come and sit by you, but the person comes and rather stands and keeps a distance from you.



The Carnival ball "Closer to Africa"



Mayra Ruth Moncada Gomez

Honduras – Slovakia



Me and the children I work with

What is your local host project and how does a typical day at the project look like?

I volunteer within the organization KERIC, which is located in Slovakia, where they perform various recreational activities with the children and youth of the city Cadaca.

My activities are different every day. I have Mondays and Tuesdays free from work, but on Monday afternoons I have English and Capoeira lessons, and on Tuesdays Slovak classes. As I work with school children, on Tuesdays I prepare what I will do with them over the next days.

I go to the Rasuzova School on Wednesdays where I work with the children of the pre-school level, mostly playing games. After school, I go with one of KERIC's mentors to a dancing group.

On Thursdays I go to another school in Jarek; my task is to come up with simple choreographies for 6-7 year old students to learn. I have also organized some art and crafts with them, for example, during Christmas. On Fridays, I go to one more school called Comeskeho to organize games and art and crafts.

The other volunteers also take English classes at KERIC and visit school in the mornings. In my free time, I learn English and Slovak.

I am very happy because this project has allowed me to see places, which I never imagined seeing in my life. For my family and me and for my career and life it has been an extraordinary experience

My presentation about Honduras at the host project



My experience

I participate in other activities with KERIC. On April 27th, 29th, and May 2nd, we had an ecological project in schools. I am part of the coordinating team together with other two co-workers.

I also presented Honduras' traditions, music, folklore and food. There was an activity with the children: it was a themed sleepover in KERIC and we were supposed to dress up as characters from a fairytale.

The truth is that this experience has made me reflect on my ideas, thoughts and what I want to study. I have learned more English and Slovak (its pronunciation is very difficult, but I don't give up!) I have also learned how to share my ideas and abilities with others.

I am very happy because this project has allowed me to see places, which I never imagined seeing in my life. For my family and me and for my career and life it has been an extraordinary experience. I have made a lot of friends even with my difficulties with English, but that has given me strength to continue. At the beginning I felt alone, not being able to speak either of the languages used in the project.

With regard to my family back home, I feel that I can appreciate them much more than before. This time that I have lived without them; I have been able to do things by myself. In all, it has been one of the best experiences of my life, an extraordinary experience!

Dealing with cultural differences

The cultures are very different, but I have been able to deal with this better than before.

For example, in Honduras it is not normal for a woman to order beer in a restaurant, but here on my first day that is what happened.

Another aspect is the security in the streets: in Honduras you cannot walk so calmly at all times, but here you can do it no matter the time or day. It is very safe; that is one of the things I like about Slovakia.



Me and the children I work with



Children during games

Bharathi Krishna

India – Spain



Dancing with children at the local festival in Castuera

What is your local host project' mission and what is your role?

I am an EVS volunteer from India and I am 27 years old. In India, I was worked for 6 years with the disabled as a part of the Association of People with Disabilities, where I gained experience working in a group with disabled people. With help of another non-governmental organization called ICDE-India, I had the opportunity to participate in the EVS program in Spain.

I live and work in a small beautiful village called Castuera. ADISER HORIZONTE is the hosting organization where I work with people with disabilities. I am enjoying my work. It has given me great satisfaction and even though I did not understand the language at the beginning of the project, I appreciated getting to work with people. I have encountered people of all ages and genders with all kinds of disabilities. I had to learn how to work with all of them teaching them English, handicrafts, and I have even been able to teach Indian dancing.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

Every Tuesday and Friday from 11.30 to 12.30 we take students to the gymnasium for exercise. Many times we prepare activities to break the monotony of routine and the students appreciate the new activities. Many times we pick-up and drop off students at their houses. We have recently begun a program with information about computers for an hour per day and we have weekly English lessons.

Voluntary work at the host project



This EVS opportunity has made such big changes in my life. Before my EVS, I didn't know where my life was going and I was not fully satisfied with it. Life in India and especially in my city can be difficult because of gender struggles. It is difficult for a woman like me to have the opportunity to travel and work like I'm doing now, much less pursue higher education, as I would like to do. In India, I always depend on my family for assistance and have very little freedom in my choices.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

I contribute in the project by teaching some basic English, as well as organizing activities like painting, handicrafts, dancing, doing computer work and singing.

I have learnt to be more patient, and have been working on my Spanish. I have been encouraged to exercise my independence.

Dealing with cultural differences

The first two months were very hard for me to adjust to people, because in our country men and women don't mingle. Girls are especially shy. For example, the first day I met a man who wanted to say hello, but in Spanish culture, saying hello entails "Hola" and a kiss on each cheek. The kisses on the cheek made me very nervous and I didn't like to go outside because of this difference in culture.

But gradually I learned, and after the on-arrival camp, I opened up a little and adjusted to the differences. Now I am more confident and can go outside to restaurants and bars, walk alone during the night, participate in many activities and talk to people.



Indian presentation

Presentation on Indian women rights and religion during the World Women's Day in Zalamea de la Serena, Spain



Olorunsola Falana

United Kingdom – Nigeria



Celebrating with the family of my friends

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I am currently volunteering at Heart of Gold Children Hospice (HOG). HOG is a children's hospice that delivers quality service to special children providing expert palliative care in a serene, relaxing environment. It looks after children with autism, dyslexia, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental and retarded and other associated disability.

My role was to assist the nurses and the teachers taking care of all the babies who are using the service of the home; to assist the children with different types of activities and keep them occupied at all times; to provide particular moral support to children before and after they have undergone corrective surgeries and to assist with various office work when needed.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

I worked from Monday to Friday and possibly some weekends when there is an urgent need for a volunteer to be on the premises. There are over 40 children at the home, some of which have major disabilities and others who are more able to get around by themselves. A typical day starts by helping to feed the children during breakfast at 9am. After breakfast they take a nap for an hour and then I take them to a nursery/play room. Some of the older children can be taught basic skills, numbers and alphabets. With the help of other volunteers, we teach and help the children to learn how to hold pencils and to write well.

One of the fundamental things I learned was how to deal with cultural changes in the country. Although I am originally from Nigeria, coming back here felt a bit strange. I had to adopt a new way of doing things and a unique way of approaching issues.

By 12 noon they take a break, so I prepare their snacks, feed them and help the nurses feed other children who are bedridden and have major disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy or some with micro-cephalous.

By 12:30pm, depending on their timetable, the children participate in an activity such as singing rhymes, playing an instrument or others. These activities bring the children together and enable them to work well and enjoy each others company. By 2pm the children get ready for lunch and are served their prepared meal. After eating they take a nap and by 4pm they take their bath. Although sometimes my role changes depending on the day, other times I also attend meetings outside my work to represent the organization.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

On my first day in Nigeria, I looked around and saw the level of poverty in the economy, not just within the local community, but across the national boundaries of the country and it broke my heart to see the rate at which these have grown rapidly. I was very excited when going to my project; however, I was nervous about the children I would be working with. I was not given a specific role, so I decided to open up the nursery/playroom and got some writing material and toys, and started by organizing different activities and drew out a timetable for the period of time I would be working at the organization. Along with other volunteers, I started teaching the children numbers, reading and writing, and reading out to them. With the range of disabilities - Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder, Autism - teaching was a challenge at the beginning. How to communicate with the blind children? After initial difficulties, we became more creative together with the children and developed ways of communicating.

One of the fundamental things I learned was how to deal with cultural changes in the country. Although I am originally from Nigeria, coming back here felt a bit strange. I had to adopt a new way of doing things and a unique way of approaching issues. I have learned how to deal with children with different cultural backgrounds than my own; it was not easy at first but it finally got better. I also learned some attributes about myself which have helped me develop and grow as an individual, and more particularly the ability to understand different levels of communications.



Me and Miguel, the second volunteer while working at Heart of Gold Children Hospice

Me and one of the babies at Heart of Gold Children Hospice





Teaching children how to hold a pencil and write in my host project

Dealing with cultural differences

One of the major things I have gained from this experience is my personal development, especially in a new environment. The experience was hard and I faced a few challenges such as having to cope with working and living in a new society and environment, learn a new culture and new languages. Since I had lived in Nigeria a few years ago, I was aware of some of the cultural differences I was going to experience in comparison to the United Kingdom. Still Nigeria has a lot of languages and many cities have their own cultural beliefs, I had to adapt to some of the cultures by learning how to greet, speak and respect the elderly, which is one of the fundamentals of the Nigerian culture.

I am able to achieve a lot of work at HOG; I have developed an insight into the level of poverty the citizens of Nigeria face that causes them to abandon their children with different types of disability. If adequate free health care services are provided, more parents, especially mothers, will be able take proper care of their children with the help of the state services. I have learned to look at situations from a broader point of view; I have learned to interact with different people in a polite and respectful manner. I was able to make friends and socialize in the environment I was in. Volunteering has allowed me to experience new things that have affected my life positively, and my awareness about Nigeria has increased a lot because I was able to experience more about what the country has to offer, and its challenges, especially in respect of economic and political issues.

Working with the children at the host project



Katrin Arnadottir

Iceland – South Africa



Me and one of our clients at the train station.

What is your local host project's mission?

My local project is a non-profit public welfare organisation called The Haven Night Shelter. It provides temporary shelter, physical care, social welfare and family re-unification services to homeless adults. It was established in 1978 in Cape Town, South Africa, and currently has 14 shelters across the Western Cape. The shelter where I do most of my work is situated in an area called Wynberg, a southern suburb of Cape Town, but since all 14 shelters belong to the same organization, their mission and structure are the same.

The Haven has the vision that no one should have to live in the streets. Its mission is therefore to get the homeless to a home. It does this by providing homeless people with temporary shelter while constantly working with them to get them back on their feet and reintegrated into society.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

My days are never exactly the same. Some days there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done, so I'll spend most of my day doing that. Other days I'm needed to answer the phone. On an average day, I would say I do a little bit of everything. I get to work and do some paperwork and filing. After that I might interview a new client or spend time on the phone making doctor's appointments. Every day, I spend some time simply talking to the clients, checking how they are doing. When needed I'll take clients that are not capable of going by themselves (because of mental or physical disability) to a doctor's appointment or home affairs. When that happens, I'll usually spend the whole day there.

What is your role at the host project?

My role as a volunteer at the Haven is to function as an extension of the staff. This means that I will basically do whatever needs to be done, whether that's answering phones, doing paperwork, interviewing clients or simply listening to the clients and talking to them about their lives and issues. I'm not simply an extension of the staff however. I also use my own background and the skills that I have gained in my studies of psychology and in my previous volunteer jobs. Once a week I do a group session with the shelter's clients where I cover certain issues and life skills that I think are important for them to learn about and discuss.

I also do a weekly life skills group session on Thursday nights with the clients, and on average I spend about 1-2 days each week preparing for that. In these sessions, I talk to the clients about important issues such as HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, personal hygiene, alcohol/drug abuse or mental health issues such as depression and schizophrenia. I prepare a lecture for each session, teaching them about each issue. For example, in the HIV/aids session, I talked to them about what the disease does to the body, prevention, how exactly you can contract the disease, and how you can't (myths). I also talked about how to live with the disease and why it's so important to lead a healthy lifestyle if you are. This is also important as many of the clients have the disease. The following week, I showed the clients how to put on a condom and gave them an opportunity to try it, after realizing that some of them didn't even know what a condom was. The clients are always encouraged to ask questions in the session or share their experience. I try not to just lecture and teach but to have an open discussion where everyone can share and learn.

My work hours are pretty flexible. On most days I work from 9am to 3pm like the job description says, but my group sessions I do in the evening, so that the clients who are working can also attend. When needed I also work late, for example to attend a staff meeting or an event with the clients. The latest event I attended was a Christmas dinner with the clients, where I helped serve the food and then enjoyed the meal with them.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

I think one of my biggest contributions to the project is the weekly group session I wrote about above. I started these sessions, and they wouldn't be held if I wasn't here. I think they are very important since I discuss important issues that many of the clients know from personal experience, like HIV/aids, alcohol/drug abuse or tuberculosis.

I know for a fact that the clients have learnt a lot from these sessions, and that they enjoy them. I contribute to the everyday running of the shelter, lending a hand wherever it's needed. The clients also seem grateful to have me here, to have someone they trust to talk to and who is willing to spend her time listening to them.

There is a lot to gain and learn from this project. I have done a lot of volunteer work in the past, but mostly with kids, and definitely never this kind of work with homeless adults.



Staff meeting at the host project

Me and my host family on my 23rd birthday.



The clients here at the shelter might all be in a similar situation today, being at the shelter, but they often come from very different backgrounds and have very different reasons for having ended up here. Some are well educated individuals that somewhere along the way lost their jobs and were unable to find new ones while others are drug and alcohol abusers who may have spent most of their lives on the streets. New clients come in to the shelter every week and as a volunteer at the shelter I have to figure out the best way to communicate with and help each one. I also think that I've gained a lot of experience from my weekly group session. I always read a lot about each topic before the session and make sure that I'm prepared for whatever questions the clients might have. I feel that I have been able to put my psychology education to good use (I have finished 2 out of 3 years of a BSc degree). Having knowledge of psychology helps when dealing with the clients in general, but also my education enabled me to do group sessions where I focused on mental health, on issues such as depression and schizophrenia. Both are relatively common at the shelter. I have also learnt first-hand how an organization like the Haven works and operates, and exactly how it helps the community. As someone who is very interested in social work and volunteering in general, I consider that is a very valuable experience.

Do you see a link between your volunteer work and the theme of the project: "Young volunteers contributing to combating poverty and social exclusion"?

I am working with poor, homeless adults, and once homeless, social exclusion is pretty much bound to follow. It's important to understand that the project I work in, the Haven Night Shelter, does not simply provide a bed and a warm meal to people who have been on the street. That wouldn't solve any problems, or help anyone in the long run. Instead, the Haven is committed to helping the people improve their lives and get out of their situation - getting the homeless to a home. So, by being a part of this organization, you can definitely say I'm doing my part in combating poverty and social exclusion, however small that part may be.

Dealing with cultural differences

To be honest cultural differences haven't really been an issue for me. I have lived and volunteered pretty much all over, in places such as Vietnam, India, Peru. This is actually my 2nd time living and volunteering in Cape Town, so I had a pretty good idea what to expect, and I knew that the place might give a foreigner a bit of a culture shock, at first. I already knew about Cape Town's relatively high crime rate, and the need to be careful; about how the public taxis drive, that can be a bit scary at times; about the racial tension you run into on a regular basis; I even knew where to go if I wanted to try eating sheep brains. You could therefore say I was pretty well prepared, but that's not to say that it has always been easy. Moving to a new country is always a challenge, especially if the culture is very different from what you're used to. I have definitely had my share of difficulties but what I'm saying is that I've learned to expect that, and to simply do my best to adjust. Difficulties will always arise. Things go a lot smoother once you accept that. You just have to deal with them and learn from them. The real problem is when people aren't prepared to do that. Despite the occasional difficulty or shock, however, I must say that I've had a very good experience here in Cape Town. I love the culture and the people, and I've really enjoyed my placement at the Haven Night Shelter.

Heidi-Elina Saarinen

Finland – Uganda



Me and the children from Sunrise primary school

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I'm a Finish EVS volunteer working for 9 months in the capital of Uganda, Kampala. My project is in Africa Mentoring Institute (AMI). The project's mission is to help people of the local community to get better income and consider wider development options. AMI offers courses on how to start your own business from scratch with little or no money. There is personal mentoring to explore how to have better living conditions for the family. AMI provides people with information and courses about HIV-counseling and parenting. People with no knowledge can come and learn computer skills as well. So, the projects focus on teaching, mentoring and supporting people. These people come from challenging backgrounds, for example HIV-positive, domestic violence, poverty, too many children, depression, etc. My role has been to support people, teach and help write proposals. Also, I have been helping as a teacher in the nearby Sunrise primary school once a week. The school is for children who don't have a real opportunity for education, who are orphans or whose parents have mental illnesses, are HIV positive or unemployed.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

My typical day usually starts in the office around 9am where I meet my mentor and other co-workers. After the morning meeting, I start with my day activities, which vary every day. Some days I do supportive home visits to meet ladies who are single-parents, because it is difficult for them to meet me at AMI as they have small children to take care of. Other days I meet people at the office or plan my lessons.

This project is about fighting against social exclusion and poverty. I try to help people to see their situation from a different perspective. For example, I supported a lady who stays at home with her children. I suggested that she start a small business from home, so that she can earn some money and feel that she is doing something on her own. She is now starting it little by little.

Picture taken at my first host family



I have been teaching English to two Sudanese girls who can only speak Arabic. I also have meetings together with my boss, Paul, telling people of the local community about AML and continuing to mentor them to start their own business. Among the visits I have done are the orphanage, youth prison and a local mental hospital. Usually my day ends around 2 or 3 pm. I enjoy that I can do different things and I feel lucky because my mentor and I are both psychologists, so we share the same view of life and I can turn to him when I am troubled.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

People here are always asking me for money because they think that the answer to everything is money. I think I am giving them something more valuable than money; I can support them and present them with new ways of thinking. When I give options and encourage them, it is the most rewarding thing for me. When I communicate with them, I really understand and see what it means when you have no money for food and other necessities. Locals, especially women, don't have proper information about HIV, condoms and parenting. We have been talking a lot about children's development and needs. These discussions with the women have influenced me deeply, and I think the feeling is shared.

Do you see a link between your volunteer work and the theme of the project: "Young volunteers contributing to combating poverty and social exclusion"?

This project is about fighting against social exclusion and poverty. I try to help people to see their situation from a different perspective. For example, I supported a lady who stays at home with her children. I suggested that she start a small business from home, so that she can earn some money and feel that she is doing something on her own. She is now starting it little by little.

HIV is a very big problem; especially in the villages HIV-positive people suffer from exclusion. In Kampala people with HIV-positive suffer from anxiety and depression.

There is not enough medication for everybody. Through HIV-counselling, we can help people live a full life despite all their problems. HIV is not a death penalty anymore if you take care of your health and diet. HIV-counselling is a very good way to change attitudes and prevent exclusion.

Dealing with cultural differences

Adjusting to this new culture has taken time, and I think it's still an ongoing process for me. I face negative attitudes because of my skin colour everyday. Locals assume that I have money because I am white.

Also the time concept here is very different. If it's raining or the power is off nothing happens and you cannot meet people.

It is sometimes frustrating but somehow I have learnt to live with the fact that Ugandans cannot keep the time. I feel that cultural challenges are real for both sides because we learn from each other. I always try to break attitudes about 'white' people and show with my own behavior that we are all people, no matter the skin colour and that we have to respect one another.

Ella Saarinen

Finland – India



Eating and cooking chapatis with my host family

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

My project is Modern English Medium School, a small school situated in Ramasamudram, in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India. In the school there are about 120 children all together, from nursery to 5th grade (aged from 4 to 12 years old). As village life is very simple and rural, and most people are poor, the main goal of our school is to give them the possibility of a higher education and way out of poverty by providing basic education to the most underprivileged children. About one third of the children in our school get financial support from the charity organization Helping Hands because their families cannot pay school fees of around 2€ per month. In addition to the five real teachers, we are three European volunteers working in the school. We teach a subject called 'general knowledge'. Pretty much anything under the sun can be included in this subject, because we have all the freedom to decide how to manage our lessons. Our headmistress appreciates everything that we do with the kids, so it is a motivating atmosphere to plan new activities. Besides the everyday lessons, the volunteers are expected to arrange some special events; for example, recently we had a great Christmas party with songs, drama and, of course, tons of decorations.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

Every day at first we have morning prayers and sing the national anthem. About half of the kids are Muslims and the other half Hindus, so depending of the day the prayer is Muslim, Hindu or Christian.

As village life is very simple and rural, and most people are poor, the main goal of our school is to give them the possibility of a higher education and way out of poverty by providing basic education to the most underprivileged children.

Working at the host project



Our headmistress wants to show that every religion is equal, so everyone prays irrespective of the religion he or she belongs to. After singing the national anthem (that the kids shout out incredibly loud), my work really begins. I have three lessons before lunch and three after, from which some I coordinate together with Pia or Hanna, my German volunteer co-workers. With the younger kids, I work to improve their writing skills, draw, play, and other more creative things. With the older children we learn about geography, how to read maps, about European culture. Among my tasks are office work one hour per day and assisting the teacher in the nursery another hour. On Wednesdays and Fridays we play in a field nearby. Until now the children have loved all the European games though their favourite is still cricket, the most popular sport in India.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

The biggest problem at the school is definitely the language barrier – you just can't avoid it. It sets limits for everything, and makes you feel so frustrated sometimes! When you have tried to teach all kinds of things about desert life and camels for two weeks, have made a poster with camel caravan and real sand on it, and in the end realize that some of the children still don't know what "sand" means, everything what you have done feels pointless. And still, it is not their fault that they don't understand. Maybe I also have too high expectations and should accept the limits and also consider that some kids come from backgrounds where they aren't really encouraged to learn, and even the parents are just barely able to write their own names. I know that it has not always been easy to get even those children to school in the first place, and now when they are there, it is already a small victory on the way to getting them more integrated into society. Anyway, I believe that my most important task is not really to teach loads of things very seriously, but also simply to be around, interact and communicate with the children in English and also wordlessly.

I think we volunteers are something a bit special for the children regardless of what we do. Usually the children are very cute yelling "Good morning, miss!" every time they see you, and asking enthusiastically if I'd have the next hour with their class.

Our lessons are also "something else" compared to their regular lessons, freer and more creative, and sometimes you see them being really be delighted to have learnt some new things, which gives me the feeling that I have succeeded.

Making decoration for the school functions with third graders





Children and the headmistress at the school where I work

Dealing with cultural differences

In the village the life is traditional; the codes of conduct are mostly based on the facts that I'm a woman and a teacher. In my case, it is important that I'm a foreigner, which gives me a lot more freedom compared to a normal Indian girl in the village. Many girls my age would already have been arranged a marriage and have children. However, in the village I would only wear traditional Indian clothes, salwar kameez (a tunic-trouser-scarf-combination) or sari on special events, because any western-style clothes are not proper for a teacher. I cannot act however I want because I'm responsible for the reputation of the school and my Indian host family. There are so many invisible but strong rules that you need to think about, which is quite tiring or annoying sometimes, since in Finland I used to be free to decide myself about my life, and no one would mind. The other aspect that makes intercultural communication a little difficult is that Indians won't directly say to you that something is wrong but through someone else, and you then get the message later. When trying to fix the problem, it has already grown much bigger and involves many people calling each other and telling what the others said – and usually where it all started was only a misunderstanding. Luckily both the project and our host family have had volunteers many years before, so they know us "Europeans" and are not that sensitive to small mistakes, but still their communication style has driven us volunteers crazy a couple of times.

The physical and very practical things are very different as well, compared to those in Finland, but I feel it is easier to adjust to them, since they do not affect me from "inside".

For instance, everybody has very little furniture, so usually we just sit on the floor, cut vegetables on the floor, eat on the floor, sleep on the floor... also in school the only furniture is plastic chairs for teachers. And the food, up to three times a day is rice and always lots of spices which took some time to get used to, but now I have totally became a fan for eating with (the right!) hand.

Mentally this voluntary service has also been quite interesting but tough sometimes. At home I never realized how a big part of my personality is stored in the relations with my friends, family and in everything that I do. I feel I have learned a lot both about the world and myself. I have also got the chance to see the other sides of India and meet other Indians who come from bigger cities

A year ago I would never have imagined that I would be living here in India, but I am really happy to have got this opportunity to learn and of course to try to make this world a little better place!

Signe Stevnhuved Rasmussen

Denmark – Indonesia



Me and the children from SDLB school



What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

I am a 20-year old girl volunteering at a SDLB Ungaran, a school for mentally disabled children in Indonesia. The school is located on the outskirts of an "urban-village" right in front of the Ungaran Mountain. There are around 120 students in the age group of 4-17 years in the school. The children have various disabilities such as Autism, Down syndrome, blindness and deafness and are divided into small classes based on their disability and IQ; or at least that's how it's supposed to be. In all the classes I have taught, I have experienced a great gap between the smartest and the slowest student (the deaf classes being an exception). Planning the lectures for one class always means planning for 6-8 individuals instead of one collected class, keeping the children's abilities in mind. That is the great challenge for me as a volunteer with no previous experience.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

In the beginning, I imagined myself being an English teacher, but that soon changed into a more unspecified role as a game-making, creative arts teacher. In my opinion it is more important to teach them life-skills, social abilities, try to make them more confident and grow their individual skills than teaching them a language they'll most likely never use. The kids are amazing; they have a lot of positive and impressive level of energy, and unexpected ideas. I have definitely become a more patient person during my time at SDLB Ungaran.

When I walk in the village you could compare me to a talking elephant taking a stroll: people are happy to see an elephant, a bit afraid of it, amazed that it can speak (Indonesian) and want to know what it is doing in their village

Mid – Term Evaluation Training



Do you see a link between your volunteer work and the theme of the project: “Young volunteers contributing to combating poverty and social exclusion”?

According to the title of the project “Young Volunteers Contributing to Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion”, I think my mere presence at the school might help in the case of social exclusion since many Indonesians think a connection with “bule” (white people) equals prestige. But people with disabilities will always experience some kind of social exclusion, mainly because they can't participate in activities or conversations in the same way as other people. That's why I believe it is so important to develop their social skills.

Dealing with cultural differences

I think my own social skills have developed during my time at the project. Indonesians are in general very open and love talking to anyone about anything. “White people” are, as mentioned above, a rare sight which makes people's attention towards me somewhat overwhelming – when I walk in the village you could compare me to a talking elephant taking a stroll: people are happy to see an elephant, a bit afraid of it, amazed that it can speak (Indonesian) and want to know what it is doing in their village; they point it out to the children, have a lot of fun describing it's long nose and might even want to touch it. I've tried to turn the immense attention into a positive way of getting in contact with people even though in Danish culture it is considered rude behaviour pointing at people and calling them names based on their race (bule, londo). I have made a lot of good close friends here and the “elephant-effect” soon wears off once you get to know the people.



Children from the SDLB school

Me and other volunteers from Dejavato – the host – coordinating organization



Sara Askesjö

Sweden – Philippines



Me and the children at my host project

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

Living for Christ Foundation (LFCF) works with the neighbourhood society through different programs: seminars for couples, singles and youths, pre-school, scholarships, library and learning centre, livelihood, wellness centre and basic computer training. Through the work not only with children but also youths and adults, they include the society as a whole and enhance development. The mission is to help people to help themselves in a poor society with all its difficulties. The people involved in the different programmes, participants and beneficiaries also assist and contribute by helping in the programmes. About 350 families are part of the project. My role here is to teach English to the children in the library/learning centre, arrange art workshops, assist the librarian and read with the children. I also assist the staff during the seminars and in the wellness centre.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

A typical day for me starts at around 9am in the office. I talk to the staff and go through their schedules for the day, some are working with seminars and some are teaching in the pre-school. After that, I start my English tutorial in the library. Right now I teach students in grade 5-6. We read, write, spell difficult words, practice pronunciation, grammar and conversation. I try to have an easy and playful way to teach them and focus mostly on grammar and conversation, which I find are the most limited areas. In the afternoon, I continue with another English tutorial with a new group of students. I have each group for about two months. Before going home at around 5 or 6pm, I prepare for the coming tutorials.

Everyday life is for many of the people here about surviving the day, which is far different from the reality in my country. There are many other differences and challenges to adapt to, and of course many of them are positive – people being more open, easy to hang out with and caring. When I return to Sweden, I will have a lot of new experiences to take with me. I will absolutely visit the Philippines again.

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

I have learnt and gained a lot through this volunteer work. I learnt about another culture and another kind of society. I get to work with and meet different kinds of people. I see many new things during both my volunteer work and my spare time. I live in a host family and get to see and be a part of their everyday life. I learned a lot about myself and how to act in difficult situations.

Dealing with cultural differences

Cultural differences are many, some harder to adapt than others. I think that to see street children is one of the things I never will get used to, even though I see it almost every day. "Filipino time" is a thing I still haven't adjusted to. Being 2-3 hours late is normal and to be patient is important. Everyday life is for many of the people here about surviving the day, which is far different from the reality in my country. There are many other differences and challenges to adapt to, and of course many of them are positive – people being more open, easy to hang out with and caring. When I return to Sweden, I will have a lot of new experiences to take with me. I will absolutely visit the Philippines again.



Girls from the Living for Christ Foundation

Our Christmas Party organized in the host project



Michael Franc

Austria – Colombia



English class,
Altos del Pino,
Cauca

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

Colombia is a very interesting country and can be a very intense and extreme experience. Everything seems to be out of balance here; cultures clash when there are many European and even more Northern American influences in fashion, music and lifestyle, on the one hand, and patriotism, and the wish to preserve their Spanish roots and more recently also a stronger demand for preserving and rediscovering older indigenous cultures, on the other. The guerrillas, paramilitaries and the Colombian army and police forces clash constantly - the people are caught in the middle of the conflict.

The biggest dirty and chaotic cities are framed by a paradisiacal natural scenery. Bogotá is surrounded by cold mountains. Hot plains, a desert and giant natural parks are all reachable in few hours by bus, after two hours on the plane you can get off in the middle of the Amazon rain forest or at the Caribbean sea or Pacific ocean.

The rich and the upper-middle class live in their ivory towers guarded by barbed wire and cameras - and security guards that earn minimum wages by working 24-hour shifts three to four times a week. Basic services like waste management don't always work properly but this is to the advantage of the poorest who carry their carts like mules and collect garbage to resell. The foundation I have been working for half a year now is dedicated to the basic needs of these people.

I think I've gained a lot of experience working here: teamwork, being dedicated to a cause, working with children and with persons very different from myself. The experience has also helped me to see more clearly; at first a lot of aspects may be invisible - inequalities, that poverty and an unjust distribution of means give to those at the bottom of society, and also it helped me to see where that can lead to.

Un Techo Para Mi Pais is a non-profit organisation from Chile that is working in a lot of different countries in Latin America. The long-term goal is to play an active role in the eradication of extreme poverty in these countries by helping build self-sustainable working communities. In order to reach that goal, they have developed several projects. The first stage of working together with the people of impoverished communities is building transitional houses made of wood. They are far from perfect but better than the shacks and houses many people in the poor neighbourhoods live in. As Colombia has a bigger problem with displaced persons due to the violence than any other Latin American country, the organisation's work is concentrated in this part. Other parts of the program include legal and health advice that are working fine here, micro crediting, and also educational programs that are still in the beginning phase.

What does a typical day at the project look like?

During the week, I usually help in the office typing into Excel lists, copying documents, helping translating texts from Spanish into English, and maintaining, counting and sorting the tools that we need for our constructions. There are eight people who work here constantly at the moment managing the organisation. Volunteers do the rest of the work.

A short time ago, another European volunteer arrived, and together we are working on English courses for children, which we offer during the week in two communities.

During the weekends, we build houses. There are a lot of Colombian volunteers dedicated to the foundation and many of them are mostly interested in constructing, so it is always a good way to meet new people. The houses are prefabricated. What we have to do is dig 15 posts into the ground. After that, the floor, the walls and the roof (the "techo") are assembled. We work together with the family we are building for and they help as much as they can. We also usually bring something to eat, and one family member (usually the mother) prepares for all of the volunteers and the family. It is a great way to get to know the people and, contrary to our English classes, it's work where you see an immediate effect after two or three days of hard work, which is the time it usually takes us to build a house. After this weekend of hard work, the family has a firm roof to sleep under and a good wooden floor to sleep on.



**Assembling the floor panels, El
Recuerdo, Ciudad Bolivar**



**Digging holes for the posts Rincon
De Lago, Cauca**

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

It's nice to work in so many different areas of the organisation: in the office where usually there is not really a visible impact of my work, even though I help in a lot of different ways and where the best reward is probably the friendships I could forge with my co-workers. The English classes where there is very little visible progress but a lot of fun and the satisfaction of seeing the kids come every time or even waiting for us. And the building where there is not a lot of continuity because I often work with volunteers, whom I might not see again for a longer time, and also often work with families I might not see again more than one or two times, but where in a short period of time a lot of visible progress with my help is visible.

I think I've gained a lot of experience working here: teamwork, being dedicated to a cause, working with children and with persons very different from myself. The experience has also helped me to see more clearly; at first a lot of aspects may be invisible - inequalities that poverty and an unjust distribution of means give to those at the bottom of society, and also it helped me to see where that can lead to.

Dealing with cultural differences

Regarding the negative parts, Bogota is huge and, in the poorest neighborhoods in the south, the roads are bad and public transport doesn't work that well. On Mondays when we offer English class, about five hours of my day is only spent in transportation from my apartment to the neighborhoods and back home. But working with the kids is a lot of fun. It was and still is pretty hard for us at times because, even though it is voluntary, many of the children would rather like to do other things than learn. After all, we teach them at the organisation's community house, where there are also games and children's books.



Building houses, Rincon de Lago, Cazuca

In addition to that, neither Tue (the Danish volunteer) nor I had previous experience in teaching. But somehow it works and the kids also return; in fact, the number of kids is increasing. It's a long way until they learn to say and understand some things in English and it also depends on their dedication, but some actually show progress. For the others, we hope they have a fun time with us at least.

Cooking and serving food for 50 volunteers at a 3 day camp, La Esperanza, Usme



Márton Szabó

Hungary – Honduras



Doing activities with the teenagers at the host project

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

In "Asociación Compartir con los Niños y Niñas de Honduras", we are fighting for the rights of the children, right in the capital of Honduras, Tegucigalpa. We are located in the poorest districts in the outskirts of the city. I work in one of our centers in the district called Villa Nueva. We open every day so that kids and youngsters can spend their time with us in a positive way; otherwise, kids would just have the street to spend their time in, and these streets full of gangs, violence and dirt can be worse for a kid to grow up in. Also, we are helping them with their studies by giving them a daily lunch and organizing all kinds of activities for them to learn and have fun at the same time. We give them school supplies, like exercise books, papers, pens and all kinds of material they need, which they can't afford for their studies.

These kids come from the most vulnerable backgrounds inside of this district, which means extreme poverty mixed usually with problematic family situations. We have a group of 40 kids (between 6 and 13 years old) two days a week, and a group of around 20 teenagers on the other two days. On the last day of the week, we attend to their parents (or let me say mothers, because we had a father participating only once) because we believe that the help must be given at every level in order to achieve a change in the community.

I have learnt a lot here, about dealing with kids, about Honduran social problems, about having faith even if we live in such difficult social situations and about how to look forward to make these places a better place to live. But the most I have learnt was from the kids themselves.

Playing with kids in the garden at the host project



What does a typical day at the project look like?

I work together with a psychologist, who was running the program alone when I came. But with so many kids to attend, and so many activities to organize, both of us are not enough to complete all the things that we have to do. So, most of the time we divide the work, and I open the center in the morning, clean it up with the kids, play with them, help them in their homework, organize the cooking (which the mothers do), while he organizes the other activities and the administrative work. I also give English lessons, help kids to learn and practice reading and writing if they have difficulties, and anything else they need help with. We give them lunch and make them wash the dishes, and we close the centre when they go to school at midday. We open again in the afternoon and do the same with the kids who went to school in the morning.

Of course, this is just the description of an ordinary day, but a lot of times we do other tasks like visiting the families, celebrating all kind of occasions (mother's day, children's day, student's day, etc.) Sometimes, if God and the economic conditions of the program make it possible, we also go on excursions with the kids, which they really love. We go to a national park or some beautiful place nearby to let them disconnect from the same dusty streets of their district, and to have some fun playing football or some other games. I love these occasions a lot, just like them, because even if it is hard work for us to coordinate more than 30 kids running in every possible direction, it is priceless being able to show them something really different from their streets.



**Playing with kids
at the host
project**



Kids at the host project

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

These kids see crime, theft, drugs, violence and unemployment around them every day. Our most important role is to teach them that there are other things too in our world, and they can choose if they go for it. Being a foreigner, I have the great opportunity here to be a window for them to a giant world to discover outside of the district they rarely leave.

I have learnt a lot here, about dealing with kids, about Honduran social problems, about having faith even if we live in such difficult social situations and about how to look forward to make these places a better place to live. But the most I have learnt was from the kids themselves. These boys and girls are very undisciplined, and really hard to deal with, but in one way or another, they are wise and know a lot about this world. They know how to laugh, to cry, to love or dislike sincerely and deeply, and one part of me will always stay with them, here in this almost forgotten district of Tegucigalpa.

Andrea Stasenкова

Slovakia – Mexico



Party at the host project

The only way to understand the culture is to live in the community, to speak with local people, really listen and feel the spirit of the culture.

What is your local host project's mission and what is your role?

Organization IPODERAC helps street children, who were maltreated, abused or abandoned. It offers boys aged 6 to 19 a permanent home, social and cultural integration, psychological support, education and trainings.

The educational model of IPODERAC is based on work. In the mornings, boys attend a school; in the afternoon, educators and volunteers support boys with their homework and, if needed, boys have special psychological and pedagogic advice. Every day, boys and volunteers take part on productive activities inside the institution.

The Organization has 6 houses with capacity for 12 boys, one educator and two volunteers. I live in a house called San Juan with children, one educator and another volunteer, Lenka from Check Republic. When my friends ask about my position in the project, I say that I work as a mother. Boys in IPODERAC generally learn to be independent: they wash their bed's sheets, uniforms and clothes by hand and do their tasks under the supervision of educators and volunteers. At the moment, we are three international volunteers, two of which live in one house. This is because the situation is different at the house San Juan, where I live: young children need more attention and patience.

My role as a volunteer is to take care of the children and help them with their roles and responsibilities. Me and Lenka accompany young boys all day: we supervise the children's activities in the house, support them in their studies and homework, play with them, wash children bed sheets, school uniforms and iron all the clothes; we prepare food for children and collaborate in other activities.

Having fun with a friend of mine



What does a typical day at the project look like?

The day in IPODERAC seems to be very fixed with an specified schedule of the day, but to live here means to have a new experience every day. Rules are same for all of us living in this institution and all boys have equal opportunities to develop, to study and to learn new skills for their future. My work starts at 7p.m. on Sundays and finishes at 7p.m. on Fridays. When I enter the house on Sundays, all children hug me and we talk about how our weekend was; I iron the children's school uniforms; we play together, and sometimes we have mass at 8p.m. Every night at about 9p.m., we ask children to go to bed, hug and kiss them good night and speak with them when they are very sad because they miss their family and friends. During the school day, we wake up children at 5:10-5:30a.m.; they have a shower, and we check if all the children have made their beds put on their uniforms, gel and cream. In Mexico it is very important to be handsome and clean. In the meantime, we prepare breakfast for 15 people and eat together. After every meal, the boys clean in and around the house. They wash the dishes, dining room, clean the floor in their rooms and swap outside the house. The role of the educator and volunteers is to check if all boys do their work, and we help them with their tasks.

Around 7.30a.m. children go to school with one educator. Then I have free time between 8-10a.m. If some children don't have school, I spend my time with them and we study, clean the house, play or watch TV. In case they are at school, I help in the main kitchen preparing food for all the people who live and work at IPODERAC. Around 1.30p.m. 3 of our kids return from school and we prepare the table for lunch. After 2p.m., the rest of kids come from the school and we start to wash their school uniforms and eat lunch. During lunch I ask the boys what they need for their homework so that they can work on it later in the afternoon.

At around 7.30 in the evening, we prepare the table for supper. During this meal, we have more time to speak with the kids about how they spend their day in the school and at IPODERAC. After the meal, children clean the house and then we have a short time to play.

Before 9 p.m. kids go to bed and we wait while they fall asleep. The day ends and the educator and volunteers go to sleep and relax before the next day.



Fiesta in Atlixco

Activities in San Juan





Volunteers with children of San Juan

What have you contributed to the project and what have you learnt and gained from this experience?

The first day in the project was very difficult for me. I felt very lonely because of the language barrier and frigid approach of the children. Every day, I learnt how to integrate with the children and people who work in the project. I could see how independent and self-confident the boys are, and I felt powerless. I didn't know what my role was and I didn't know how to explain what I needed to know and what I wanted from others because I couldn't speak Spanish. All my feelings changed every minute. Once, I was very happy for being part of this institution and, two minutes later, I wanted to be at home.

Often I had to decide quickly what to do in situations where the kids don't listen and run around all over the house, when they lie and don't have any respect. It taught me to behave responsibly, to make decisions rationally and correctly and to be a teacher and a good example to children although I have no special education in social work.

I learned to be more patient and manage the house with 12 children without language skills and without special training. The voluntary service in Mexico is a great life experience. IPODERAC is a very specific project with an amazing education model, but very time-consuming. This project is now my home and my work, and I am very happy.

Dealing with cultural differences

My first impression of Mexico? Free spirit in the streets, people sitting and selling everything everywhere, the smell of food and interesting prehispanic culture mingling with the present. I spent my first two days with a Mexican host family and I experienced flooding in Puebla. Then I went to the camp for volunteers where I got some information about Mexican culture and voluntary service in Mexico. I met many volunteers from abroad, who arrived at the same time in Mexico to do their voluntary service.

My first impression of Mexico was very good. I expected many differences compared to European culture, but I didn't have problems in integrating. The real hard time came when I had to deal with cultural differences in my project and to integrate without language skills.

I felt very lonely because I didn't understand Spanish at all and especially children were using street language. They were also hesitant to open to the new European girl, who came to do her voluntary service.

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