

Volunteering: best practice models in the international arena

Önkéntesség: jó gyakorlatok a nemzetközi térben. Egy nemzetközi program példája

LUCA CSIKÓS

Abstract

In 1983, the European Parliament defined voluntary work as an unpaid activity based on one's own decision. Further, voluntary work has to be "socially relevant", which means that it can be performed in the following sectors: environment, welfare, education and health. In recent decades, voluntary work has become not just a personal hobby or social expectation but also way of personal development (modern versus traditional volunteering). Positive impacts of volunteering have been studied extensively and favourable effects on both the volunteers and the beneficiaries have been identified. The European Union has launched its own program, called European Voluntary Service, which provides a framework for young adults Europe-wide. In this work I will focus on social and personal benefits of international volunteering.

Keywords: *international volunteering – civil society – Youth in Action – European Voluntary Service – EVS*

Összefoglalás

Az Európai Parlament 1983-ban az önkéntességet egy olyan tevékenységként definiálta, melyet az egyén szabad akaratából, anyagi ellenszolgáltatás, fizetség nélkül végez, illetve mások, a társadalom javát szolgálja a következő szférákban: környezetvédelem, szociális szektor, oktatás és egészségügyi ellátás. Az utóbbi évtizedekben az önkéntes munka már nem csak személyes időtöltés vagy társadalmi elvárás, hanem sajátos módja az egyéni, személyes fejlődésnek (modern kontra tradicionális önkéntesség). Számos tanulmány, kutatás rámutatott az önkéntesség pozitív, kedvező hatásaira, mind az önkéntesre, mind a helyi közösségre nézve. Az Európai Unió létrehozta saját önkéntes programját, az Európai Önkéntes Szolgálatot, mely Európa-szerte nyújtja az önkéntes munka lehetőségét fiatal felnőttek számára. Tanulmányom az nemzetközi önkéntesség társadalomra és egyénre gyakorolt hatását, előnyeit vizsgálja.

Kulcsszavak: *nemzetközi önkéntesség – civil társadalom – Fiatalok Lendületben – Európai ÖnkéntesSzolgálat – EVS*

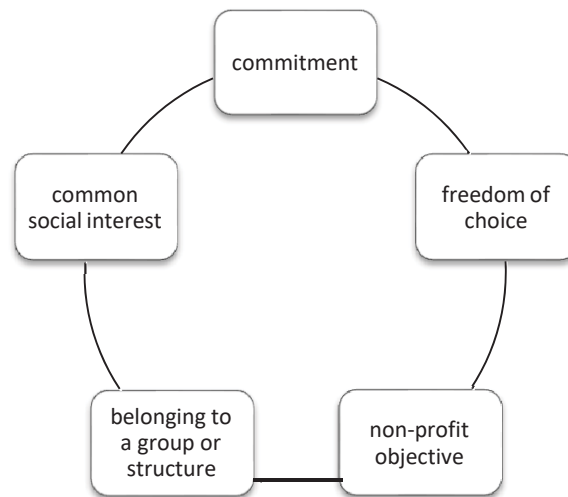
Introduction

The volunteer *"is a person who commitshimself of hisown free will, without profit motive in an organized action, to the service of the community."* (Beigbeder, 1991, p. 103) The volunteer is a person who offers her help by her own decision, and s/he does not receive any salary or does not financially profit from this activity. Professionals usually help them by coordinating their job. (Gosztonyi, 1998, p. 100) In 1983, the European Parliament defined voluntary work as follows: First and foremost, voluntary work is unpaid and has to be based on an own decision of the participant, therefore it cannot be an obligation. In addition, voluntary work has to be "socially relevant", which means that it is performed

in the following sectors: environment, welfare, education, corporation and development. (Falk, 1992, p. 25)

What is the volunteer's motivation? Why do they work if they do not receive any payment or profit financially from this activity? According to Beigbender the volunteers "need to help others, to feel useful and needed." In this situation, the volunteer has a chance to choose the organization and activity that s/he is most interested in. Beigbender has collected the potential motivations that volunteer work may be based on. (Beigbender, 1991, p. 106)

Figure 1. Who is the volunteer?



Source: Beigbender, 1991, p. 103.

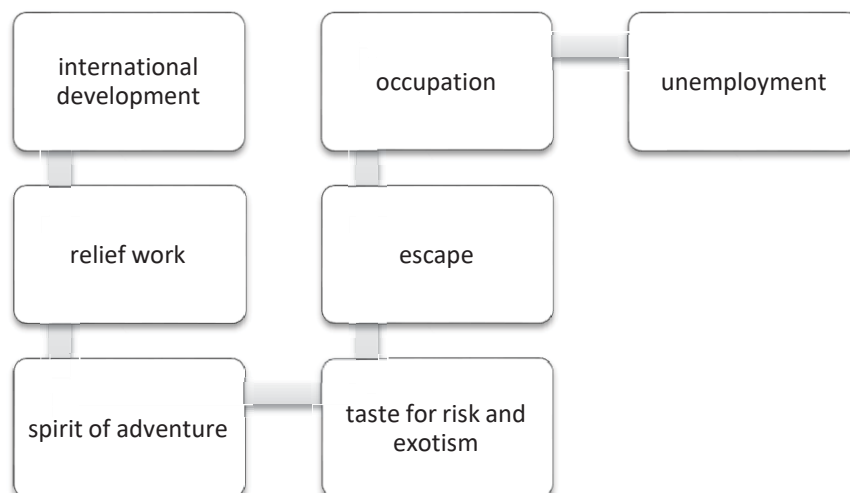
Figure 2. Motivation of the volunteer



Source: Beigbender 1991, p. 106.

Motivations of *international volunteers* are probably a bit different: in this case the volunteers have to leave their own environment and culture, with the sole purpose of volunteering. This decisive step possibly includes some distinctive personal features:

Figure 3. Motivation of the international volunteer



Source: Beigbeder, 1991, p. 106.

The “Youth in Action Program” in the European Union

Every society has created formal structures and informal ways of providing help. From this point of view the concept of spending our time, giving our knowledge and skills without being paid is not a modern idea.

From 2002 to 2006 the European Union operated a program called Youth Program. Because of the success of this program, the European Parliament and the European Council accepted a document in 2006, establishing “Youth in Action Program”, which is a successor to the previous one. The budget of the program was 855 million Euros for the period between 2003 and 2007. The program was meant to improve European citizenship, develop internal mobility and – in some cases even outside the European Union - give a chance for young people aged between 15-28 and 13-30 (depending on the given subprograms, respectively) to participate in several kinds of mobility programs with varied durations, highlighting the following priorities: European citizenship, participation of young people, cultural diversity, inclusion, and various annual priorities. The following countries were eligible for participation: “*EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Turkey, the EU neighbors (Eastern Europe and Caucasus, the Mediterranean region, South-East Europe) and other partner countries in the world.*” (Youth in Action, 2010)

The Youth in Action contains five kinds of subprograms: “Youth for Europe, European Voluntary Service (EVS), Youth in the World, Youth Support Systems and Support for European Co-operation in the Youth field”. Basically, all of the programs aim to encourage

young people to participate in different projects, organized by NGOs, which work in the field of youth work.

The European Voluntary Service (EVS), unlike other subprograms, provides a unique opportunity for young adults to spend long-term voluntary placements abroad. In 2009 as a social worker student I have joined the program as an EVS volunteer helper, and I spent six month in Croatia, working with sexual workers and drug users.

A pilot study on EVS volunteers

In 2011 the European Union has made its own evaluation survey on Youth in Action, asking EVS volunteers, sending and host organizations about their experiences. According to that research, 91% of the participants claimed that their participation in Youth in Action has increased their foreign language skills, 75% of the young adults asserted that they could improve their skills and abilities to find and identify their future opportunities both in their personal and their professional life, and 73% of them said that "they felt more European". 92% of the youth workers agreed that they could gain different skills which they couldn't have acquired without the program. (Youth Volunteering, 2012)

After returning from my EVS service I have decided to conduct a pilot study among EVS volunteers on their experiences – as part of my thesis work. In this paper I summarize my findings and explore both the negative and the positive impacts of international volunteering by describing what it is like to be an EVS volunteer.

I asked 20 ex-EVS volunteers about their experiences, problems with integration, re-integration, and the level of "internationalism", by which I mean how they have been influenced by doing international humanitarian work and whether they plan to continue it. Was the EVS volunteer activity the first international activity for them?

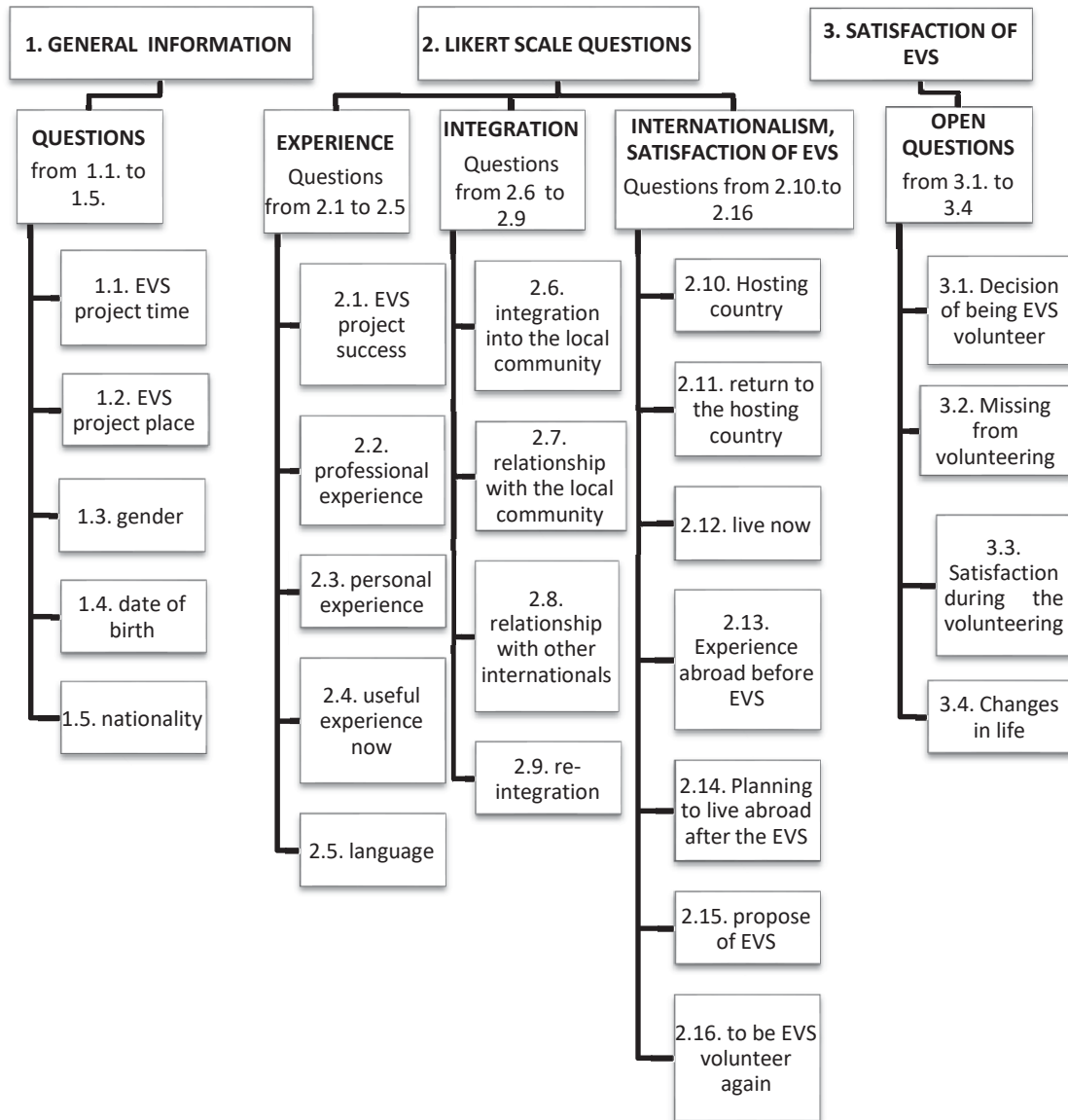
I introduced only one criterion when selecting the sample. Volunteers who answered my questions were ex-EVS volunteers and had to have a completed EVS project, what means they had not quit before their project was finished. I sent the questionnaires via e-mail and there I had my first surprise. The volunteers started to forward my mail (without my asking them) to other ex-EVS volunteers to help my research, so a spontaneous snowball method was formed. This is by all means an extraordinary experience, as usually fewer and not more persons answer an e-mail questionnaire than the number of persons included in the original sample. Finally 25 completed questionnaires have arrived in my mailbox. It could be the topic of another research to find out why strangers answered my call without any obligation or gains. My hypothesis for this second possible study, which would have been beyond the given frameworks, is that volunteering is a result of a personality trait rather than an activity.

My research hypotheses:

- EVS helps improve participants' professional skills. Personal experiences of international humanitarian activity are more accentuated than professional ones.
- International volunteers live together in one location, therefore they may have difficulties in integrating in the local community.

- Reintegration into the own society after the EVS project may present some difficulties for the volunteer.
- After being an EVS volunteer, living abroad becomes a future perspective of the participants.

Figure 4. The structure of the questionnaire



Results

Results, questions from 2.1 to 2.16

- My hypothesis about the different importance of the professional and personal experiences has been confirmed by the respondents.
- Only two of the volunteers assume that their EVS project was unsuccessful; all the others answered that their project were more or less successful.
- Eight of the volunteers answered that they didn't get that professional experiences what they had expected, but all of them agreed or strongly agreed that they had received the personal experience that they had expected from their service.
- Five of the volunteers more or less agreed; the others agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they benefitted from their EVS experiences in their current life.
- Fifteen volunteers were able to learn the language of the hosting country and they could improve their language skills during their stay.
- Twenty volunteers felt that they had been able to integrate into the local society, and had developed good relationships (friends, colleagues...etc.), with the local people and internationals as well.
- Sixteen volunteers had some problems with reintegration into their own community; one of the volunteers chose to live in her EVS country after her service.
- Except one person, every volunteer would propose the program to other future participants and would accept being an EVS volunteer again.
- Twenty-two volunteers are planning to return to their hosting country, and sixteen of the volunteers would choose the same hosting country again.

Second part of the questionnaire (questions from 3.1 to 3.4)

- I wanted to explore how volunteers connected to their hosting country. My hypothesis was that by being international volunteer, the participant would develop a new way of "internationalist" thinking. Living in another country after completing their EVS project becomes easier for them and represents a more attractive perspective or plan. Twenty of the volunteers were planning to live or work in another country (some of them in their hosting country; one person is still living in her hosting country) Fourteen volunteers had already lived abroad before their EVS project started.

3.1. Why did you decide to be an EVS volunteer? What were your aims?

Key words from the answers:

- challenge myself,
- find my way,
- being independent,
- discover other cultures,
- discover the world,
- improve my professional skills,
- study other languages,
- meet with other people,
- get new experiences,
- new way of life,
- do something different and special

Some participants mentioned that they had had a gap year in their university studies to become an EVS volunteer. One person wanted to discover her cultural roots. Some participants mentioned (who live in Western Europe and performed their EVS projects in Middle, and South East Europe) that they wanted to “live somewhere else”. These people wrote that they had “re-constructed the map of Europe” in their minds.

3.2. What are the things that you were missing from your volunteering experience?

Key words from the answers:

- missing family, friends,
- problems with the hosting organization /unqualified colleges, no experience of international volunteers, weren't able to host EVS volunteers/
- no practical help,
- chaos of the project,
- no clear missions, aims, explanations,
- more professionalism,
- feeling needless,
- too much free time, no job to do,
- poor accommodation,
- unqualified language teachers,
- not enough pocket money,
- don't have mentor,
- better integrations strategy,

One volunteer mentioned that she had made a mistake by taking 9 months instead of 12 months. Another person concluded: *“I missed to have friendly and understanding colleagues.”* One had problems with privacy: *“You can never be alone if you're surrounded by Italians.”*

3.3. What are things that were most satisfying during your volunteering?

Key words from the answers:

- people, social life, culture, history, politics,
- local community, way of life,
- adaptable helpful organization,
- meet different people /how easy to get friends/,
- rich culture of the hosting country,
- learning language,
- using creativity,
- friends, other EVS volunteers,
- share experiences with other EVS volunteers,
- EVS trainings, intercultural learning,
- Traveling

A literal quote from a volunteer: *“We did great things, we have left our fingerprints on the local cultural life.”*

3.4. What are the things that have been changed in your life by having lived abroad? E. g., your thinking, your relationships... etc.?

Key words from the answers:

- way of thinking, way of life,
- easier talking with foreigners

- more self-confident, open-minded
- have more information of the world
- eternal, lifelong friends
- professional skills
- break some stereotypes
- learn the language
- more flexible, tolerant, understanding, patient
- autonomy

Some literal quotes:

- *"I'm the richest person in the world with my experiences."*
- *"My articles about EVS project and Macedonia have been published in a few magazines in my home country."*
- *"Oh, and I decided I wanted to learn Hungarian as well now."*
- *"It's difficult for me to stay in one place for longer."*
- *"Adapt myself to unexpected situations, to other ways of working, of thinking, to cultural and personal differences."*
- *"It changed my philosophy of life in a way, because I learnt that when things don't go the way we wanted or we expected them to go, there is often something good or even better that what we had expected coming. It made me more relaxed about the future, more optimistic. It helped me to see the positive things in a complicated situation."*
- *"What I have learnt in this experience abroad was about myself, what I need, who I am, who I want to be, what I want to learn, what I want to do etc etc."*
- *"I realized that I can live by myself that earlier I couldn't even imagine."*
- *"I understand and accept new cultures better."*
- *"I'm currently majoring in Serbian, the language of my host country, at university, something I never even considered before."*
- *"I feel that I became better person."*
- *"I'm looking differently at the European map."*
- *"... much I need to work on something useful... with other aims than money."*
- *"I'm more open to different cultures and ways of thinking."*
- *"I understood my own limits and other people limits, what can I or not expect from myself / from them."*
- *"Even if people don't have a lot of money, the situation satisfies them."*
- *"The big change is that I realized that I want to live in my EVS country!"*
- *"Discovered my own weaknesses and "faults".*
- *"I have a motivation that I didn't have before, in my studies, in my life."*
- *"whatever happens, I'll be linked to this country."*
- *"I don't really know how to explain it!"*

Conclusion

There are many ways to continue my research to identify the positive and the negative aspects of international voluntary work. My aim was to explore the nature of volunteering, and contribute to existing evaluations on an actual international voluntary program. In the past century, volunteering became a movement: its impact on the society is gradually increasing and it deeply influences the lives of the volunteers involved in various projects – either on a local or on an international, global level.

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