

5. Returning home



T-Kit
on International
Voluntary Service

5.1 Evaluation

Evaluation, not just a couple of questions at the end...

Evaluation is a lot more than the traditional few questions before the volunteers go home after their IVS. Even though this chapter is put here in "Returning home", we will argue that evaluation should be an integral part of your whole IVS and goes hand in hand with Chapter 4.3 Ongoing support of volunteers.

One thing all evaluations have in common, is that they measure goals that were set before starting the project, because it goes without saying that you need to have defined where you were going, in order to measure whether you have reached this destination or not. In an IVS these goals lie in different areas: the work and related outcomes (for example learning skills, training opportunities, doing projects, being efficient), the social integration (getting to know friends, having fun, getting along with colleagues, etc.), the intercultural dimension (for example getting to know the people, learning the language, experiencing the country) and personal issues (for example motivation, homesickness, conflicts). And, last but not least, the practical arrangements (food, accommodation, transport facilities, free time arrangements, etc.) should also be evaluated. These are areas in which regular evaluation can prove useful in order to improve the voluntary service for all involved – rather sooner than too late.

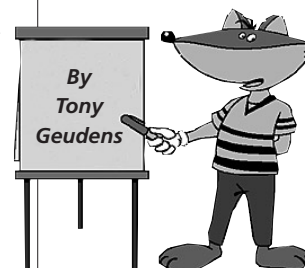
Evaluations can have a lot of different functions and can take very diverse forms. Here's a rough overview of different kinds of evaluation:

Evaluation why oh why?

Evaluations want to find out whether the aims are reached, but for different purposes:

- The best known evaluation is probably the "summative evaluation". This kind of evaluation generally comes at the end of a project (or of a certain period of the project) and tries to sum up the outcomes and the results achieved. Often it also leads to a judgment on the quality of the project, which then could lead to a positive decision to give a certificate to the volunteer, to attribute more money to the project or to repeat the experience in the future or not. These evaluations are not very comfortable because a lot depends on them.

- "Formative evaluations", on the contrary focus a lot more on the process and not so much on the result. They aim to analyse how the project and the volunteer are doing and allow influence on their development. It is held all through the duration of the IVS and it provides feedback about the project and the people involved in it; whether it is going somewhere or where improvements should be made in the future. For the volunteers it allows you to let some steam off and exteriorise ideas, frustrations, etc. This type of evaluation is less judgmental and on the contrary creates an atmosphere of openness and caring where concerns can be voiced in a safe environment. By putting compliments and problems on the table, the formative evaluation is a way of making the volunteer co-responsible for his/her learning experience.



Summative Evaluation

- * focus on result
- * looking to the past
- * to judge
- * summing up
- * consequences
- * at the end

Formative Evaluation

- * focus on process
- * looking to the future
- * to help
- * steering
- * development
- * all the way through



When we consider the IVS as a learning experience, it is evident that “formative evaluations” are a necessity to help steer the development of the volunteer, but also of the other actors involved, including the project, to make the project a success. That is why this chapter focuses on the ongoing formative evaluation. However the organisation will have to make a summative evaluation as well at the end of the IVS for the funders, but also for themselves to take stock and see if the goals were reached and to take the decision to repeat the experience or not.

How to evaluate?

There are also many different formats of evaluation. Some are very formal and structured, but this information can be complemented with informal indicators.

In schools you often find very formal evaluation methods such as exams, because they also allow for more objectivity. In an IVS you could use the services of an external evaluator who will come and interview people using a grid to assess whether your objectives have been reached or not. It is not surprising that these methods are mostly used for summative evaluation purposes. In the case of formative evaluations, the most formal and structured method would be the “evaluation sessions”. This entails taking some quality time at regular intervals using some of the many exercises available (see below). Using the same method several times allows you to monitor an evolution that is going on. Different exercises could keep the evaluation sessions fresh and exciting. Sometimes there might not be any specific exercises used, but there is more of a evaluation chat, in which both the volunteer and the support person can bring up topics of concern. Of course exercises can be combined with opening the floor for any other feedback. These evaluation sessions provide a clear framework for the parties involved to come up with positive or negative criticism. A safe atmosphere of trust and co-operation will contribute towards making the project a success.

Evaluation does not always have to be done with someone else. Self-assessment is also a valid tool for evaluation. The advantage is that the volunteers can do this at any moment they choose. It allows them to actively monitor

their learning process and take all different feelings, experiences and observations into account to construct their big picture. Of course the results should be communicated regularly to the support person in the project in order to share the responsibility for the voluntary service together. Self-assessment can be done according to a grid with the different goals of the volunteer (or of the project), but it can also take the more free format of a diary.

The information from the formal evaluation and of the self-assessment can be complemented by “informal evaluation” elements. This is information gathered randomly about the project, the volunteer or other actors involved. It can help to reveal the motivation of the volunteer (spontaneous overtime or absenteeism, the look on the face, etc.), the quality of the work (incoming complaints or compliments, speed of tasks accomplished, etc.), co-operation with other staff (reactions of staff to the volunteers, time spent together, frictions, etc.) and so forth. These indicators can then be interpreted and discussed at a formal evaluation session, to find out what the real meaning of them is.

Do you want to evaluate with me?

The person doing the evaluation influences the tone of the evaluation a lot. Ideally evaluation should be done in a supportive and constructive atmosphere. So the person doing the evaluation should best not have a position that would be too high up for the volunteers to feel comfortable with. And the evaluator should not judge but rather work together with the volunteer on the future of the project.

If the evaluation is done individually, it can be tailor-made, addressing the specific need of the volunteer. It will allow it to be more personal and it should be confidential. Evaluating together in a group with the other volunteers has the advantage of comparing their experience with the impressions of others. This can have a reassuring and motivating effect. In any case, evaluation should be done in an appropriate space (no people walking through, no noise, no phones, etc.) and in a clear time frame (everybody should know how much time there is for how many subjects).



Tips for evaluating during your International Voluntary Service

- Make sure you have clearly defined your objectives in a measurable way – what are the criteria that allow you to say that you are on the right track in reaching your objectives?
- If language is a difficulty for the volunteers, use more visual methods or use a language that the volunteers are more comfortable in.
- Evaluations should be confidential unless all involved agree to inform others.
- Therefore evaluations should also take place in a private atmosphere and not in the middle of the office where others can listen in.
- Evaluations should be repeated at regular intervals in order to grasp the evolution.
- Sometimes it can be useful to take some distance from some strong experience that just happened in order to evaluate more objectively.
- Try to use neutral words in your questions (instead of “bad” use “needs improvement”, instead of “don’t you think it would have been better to xyz?” try “what do you think could have been better?”).
- Sometimes it is easier to use symbols or drawings than to explain feelings.
- Invite the volunteers to do self-assessment and give feedback afterwards.
- An evaluation should be a two-way discussion.
- Build up confidence and trust with your volunteers in order to get the real information out.
- Do not let little difficulties become bigger, take the evaluations seriously and act upon them.

Some methods

- Draw up learning points and strategies to achieve them – for example a step by step approach (see Chapter 4.2.1 Motivating the volunteer).
- Draw a thermometer and invite the volunteers to put a mark on it according to their motivation at regular intervals (very low motivation below zero or high motivation at 50°).
- Ask the volunteers to write a letter to themselves stating where they would be in, for example, a month’s time. You give or send this letter after this period.
- Make a list of red flags (negative experiences that put the volunteer off) and green flags (positive experiences that keep the volunteers going), check how often green flags happen and how often red ones; elaborate strategies to hoist more green flags and to get rid of the red ones.
- Draw a circle with different sectors (like a darts board). Put an element you want to evaluate in each sector. Ask everybody to put a symbol in this sector, either more towards the middle if they liked it, or more towards the outside edge if they did not. Different symbols could be used for different people or for the same person at different times.
- Find a multifaceted picture with a lot of people/buildings/items etc. and ask the volunteers to identify with one of them and explain why (for example “I am this jumping man because I feel energetic in my project” or “I am this highway because things are going too fast for me”). A variation could be to find an object that symbolises their feeling about a topic you decide.
- ...?

If you want more, there is a chapter on evaluation in the T-kit on Project Management (available to download at www.training-youth.net).

5.2 Follow-up

For many organisations voluntary service is defined mainly as the period of time a volunteer spends in a specific project; everything that happens before and after that period is considered of less importance. In previous





chapters we have already seen how important preparation is for a successful experience abroad. But also after the placement abroad, there are many possibilities for *follow-up* that could be taken into account when designing an IVS.

Coming back after being abroad

Volunteers often suffer from reverse culture shock when they come back home after a long stay abroad. The volunteers have gone through an experience that the people at home do not necessarily understand. The volunteers have developed during their voluntary service, without people at home knowing. The volunteers' behaviour might have changed and be frowned upon when back home, because they expect the same person that has left them some months before. The volunteer thinks that people will react in a certain way and in reality they do not.

Volunteers also often complain that little attention is given to their needs after they conclude their voluntary assignments abroad and that in most cases they experience reintegration difficulties upon returning to their home countries. During their stay abroad in the project they were perhaps the centre of attention and lots of new things were happening, whereas back home they are faced with their old reality again. The volunteers seem to have returned to where they left off.

But going back home should not be the end of it all – it could be the start of new things, when planned properly. Hopefully the volunteers went through a lot of interesting experiences when abroad, but this learning could be taken further. The support person of the hosting organisation might be vital to monitor and optimise the learning process of the volunteer during the project, but it is up to sending organisations to provide their volunteers with follow-up opportunities. Sending organisations could guide and support the volunteers in doing something with what they gained during their voluntary service.

In fact, follow-up opportunities should be foreseen as much as possible right from the start of an IVS. Sending organisations are in a particularly good position to do so since they are also responsible for preparing the volunteers before their departure. They could work with the volunteer on a plan of action, according to the interests and wishes of the volunteer and sending organisation. Follow-up in the end is nothing more than making sure that the impact of IVS will be maximal.

Follow-up meetings

One way of addressing follow-up is to organise one or more meetings with your volunteers, either in groups or individually, or in the case of long-term volunteering ideally both types of meetings.

A follow-up meeting with your volunteers could be used for:

- Evaluating the IVS in general;
- Comparing expectations or objectives with concrete outcomes;
- Identifying the main negative and positive outcomes;
- Helping the volunteer to deal with negative experiences abroad in a constructive manner;
- Helping the volunteer with particularly difficult reintegration problems (reverse culture shock);
- Providing the volunteer with opportunities to share his or her experience with other volunteers that went through a similar experience;
- Informing the volunteer about other volunteering possibilities or commitments within the same or other organisations.

Educational and professional opportunities

With some target groups or in some sending organisations, the aim of sending a volunteer on an IVS is to develop skills (language, social, practical skills) outside the regular schooling or training opportunities for their future pathway. In these cases, it is important to keep this educational perspective in mind right through the voluntary service, but especially when going back to the home country, into a next step in their life project. After the IVS they will be able to decide better on what it is that they wish to do with their lives, and whether what they did abroad will be of use to future activities. For example doing a voluntary service with the disabled might trigger a professional career in this sector, or the volunteer might have developed an interest for the language of the host country etc. The sending organisation is a vital player to facilitate the development of such new educational or professional perspectives as much as possible upon the young person's return.



Social security

Another issue that sometimes needs special attention is that of social security. Most European countries do not have laws defining the status of volunteers, therefore volunteering abroad often has an effect on social security such as unemployment benefits, housing support, minimum income, etc. Most long-term volunteers lose their social benefits once they leave the country. But sometimes upon return, the volunteers even stop being eligible for different benefits or student allowances. National authorities can be very bureaucratic and reticent about accepting any claims made by the volunteers, and sending organisations must often intervene as mediators between the two of them in order to explain what the voluntary scheme was about. Preparing in advance for these eventualities is by far the best way of avoiding them once the volunteer is back.

Follow-up for sending and hosting organisations

Follow-up should not be seen as benefiting only the volunteer. Sending organisations could see their participation in IVS as a learning experience too and one that can benefit them in many concrete ways. After evaluating their experience, follow-up, for a sending organisation, could mean, for instance:

- The continuation, or interruption, of a specific partnership;
- The search for new partners in the same or different areas of work;
- The integration of new working methods in response to suggestions made by the volunteer or due to the observation of best practices in the host organisation.

Volunteers who return can also be seen by sending organisations as important resources to help them with their work, for instance:

- The sending organisation may invite the volunteer to join them and introduce what he or she learned abroad in their current activities;
- The volunteer may start helping them with the recruitment and preparation of new volunteers by sharing his or her experience with them.

Host organisations can also follow up on IVS by reinforcing or revising their partnership strategies and by using the volunteer to further

develop their activities. After evaluating the voluntary service, the host organisations may also decide to introduce new working methods and activities, following suggestions by the volunteer or simply by realising that things could be better if done differently. Quite often having a fresh look at your organisation by a foreign volunteer allows you to improve your activities by making you more aware of how things are actually done and how they could be changed.

5.3 Recognition and certification

IVS is not only a great experience, it does not only support communities in need but at the same time – like it or not – the voluntary service also gives skills to the volunteer. Some sending organisations even send volunteers with the main purpose of providing them with a learning experience, of gaining skills and increasing their employability. Even though we argued that there should be a balance between the personal development of the volunteer and the altruistic contribution to society (see Chapter 1.4 Reasons for International Voluntary Service), it would still be a missed opportunity not to recognise the benefits of voluntary service for the volunteers. Some of the skills that volunteers gain are:

- Life experience and maturity, which have an impact on their future personal and professional development;
- At the same time they get a complex of so-called soft skills, for example abilities to communicate and co-operate with people, to create contacts and partnership at personal and professional levels;
- Communication skills in the sense that volunteers abroad often learn to use various means of communication (Internet, e-mail, phone, etc.);
- They also acquire knowledge to work in a team and to make decisions, as well as to be flexible and autonomous;
- Young people also get a wide range of professional knowledge and practical skills in certain areas of work, for example administration, social care and services, intercultural communication, accountancy, environment, etc.;





- Having been in language environment other than their native language, volunteers also acquire specific language abilities;
- Intercultural skills, understanding a different culture, trying not to judge and interpret behaviour wrongly, tolerance of ambiguity, learning to see things from different perspectives.

It is important to recognise and accredit all these skills that the volunteers gained to a certain extent and preferably to document them as this might have an influence on the future perspectives of volunteers regarding job search. The IVS can be the experience that many employers nowadays ask for. When documented and certified properly, the volunteers' work and training completed within the IVS will stand in good stead for them in the future and are a plus on their curriculum vitae.

Within Europe, there exist a wide variety of formats of recognition and certification. In some countries you need to keep a portfolio with all your achievements while in others the voluntary service organisation has to be approved in order to provide certificates for gained skills. Some employers get in touch with the volunteer's referee whereas others base themselves primarily on diplomas and certificates. So depending on the situation of the volunteers, they might be helped by different types of certification.

One easy and common way of documenting the skills gained during the voluntary service is a certificate. This is a written formal statement certifying that the volunteer has participated in the IVS in the hosting organisation over a certain period of time. In order to give these certificates more weight you could do the following:

- Detail the tasks and responsibilities of the volunteer during the voluntary service;
- Write a recommendation letter to go with the certificate;
- Add the contact addresses of some referees in the certificate;
- Argue which skills the volunteer gained during the voluntary service and how you can deduct this;
- Establish a portfolio with the outcomes of the tasks of the volunteer (pictures, articles or posters of the events that the volunteer organised);
- Try to get links with educational institutes or authorities that could certify the learning that happened during the IVS;
- The visual aspect of the certificate is also important – make it look serious and provide it with the necessary stamps and signatures;
- Consider having the certificate in a widely known language (or even bilingual) keeping future readers of it in mind.