



SAGE Net
South African German Network

Research based recommendations for enhancing mutual satisfaction and success in international voluntary service

Drawn from the SAGE Net qualitative impact research on the German weltwärts-programme to South Africa

➤ **FOR THE VOLUNTEERS** the *weltwärts* experience is an utterly interesting and fruitful experience. However, to make it a mutually satisfying experience for both parties – the German volunteers and the South African host organisations – requires further consideration about how to deal with and shape the respective expectations and perspectives which are being evoked by the *weltwärts* interaction.

A key research finding is that it is not only volunteers' attitudes that determine the level of satisfaction and success perceived by volunteers and local staff, but to a large extent also the cultures of the host organisations at which the volunteers are placed. Mutual satisfaction is higher in organisations with strong leadership skills and/or organisations in which values and ideals are similar to those of the volunteers. In organisations with weaker leadership and/or values that differ greatly from those of the volunteers, both volunteers and members of the organisations find working together much more challenging.

Those placement locations which are very satisfied with the contribution of the volunteers and in which the volunteers tend to be happy, bind the volunteers systematically into the organisation and promote genuine cooperation between the volunteers and local staff. They possess strong management and leadership skills, and lead the volunteers by balancing the elements of freedom with the need to obey instructions.

Where the leadership at inclusive institutions channel volunteers' energy and convey their appreciation and support, problems and conflicts can be identified and reflected upon. Host organisations therefore play a much greater role in ensuring that volunteers feel successful than was expected at the start of the research. What is more, their leadership and involvement is far more

labour-intensive than initially suspected. When conditions at the placement location are experienced by the volunteer as being exclusive, the experience can be challenging and frustrating. Nevertheless, the data show that crises that are experienced during the assignment 'shake and wake' volunteers, challenging their attitudes. The volunteers learnt that self-knowledge, for instance about their own role in the globalised world, is often obtained via intense and often disillusioning, confusing and occasionally disturbing experiences. It is upsetting, but also instructive, for volunteers to remember that, on location, it is often not possible to provide as much help as they had originally expected, and that they need to rely instead on the support and acceptance of their more experienced South African colleagues. In terms of the host organisation experiences, it can be said that they sometimes experience far greater benefit from the *weltwärts* programme than the volunteers think is the case. In addition to hands-on assistance on site, the service also has an important symbolic effect. In this context, the question arises from the host organisations' role in South Africa as a 'developing country'. Host organisations that are aware of how much they can teach young volunteers from an 'expert country', experience a confidence boost. Here, the usual 'give and take' relationship in the field of development cooperation is suddenly reversed. In other words: If German volunteers get the impression that they can learn from South Africa and their host organisations, and if at the same time the South African host organisations set clear parameters within which the volunteer is expected to carry out his or her activities, both parties reverse the traditional donor and recipient relationship between countries. This can be seen as a contribution to more equitable global relationships.

Weltwärts voluntary service therefore possesses a highly symbolic, exciting and challenging impact, especially in respect of this potential for a reversal of roles. However, the results of the investigation clearly show that the care and management of volunteers is a challenging and time-consuming task that is beyond the capacity of many organisations. At this level, South African host organisations need and welcome supporting activities provided by the *weltwärts* programme.

Figure 1 illustrates the expectations and perceptions held by volunteers and host organisations in situations where there may be conflict or differences of opinion. Conflicts seem to occur more often when groups of *weltwärts* volunteers (rather than individual *weltwärts* volunteers) are placed at the host organisation.

Figure 1:
Perspectives of respective parties involved in the volunteer experience

| | German volunteer perspective | South African host organisation perspective |
|---|---|--|
| What are the hopes and expectations of each party in relation to the other? | South Africa is a country in the need of help. Host organisations enable volunteers to make an input. | Germany is the country of experts. The volunteer is expected to be well educated, bringing a lot of skills as well as financial resources. At the same time the volunteer is expected to carry out instructions during the service period and to be cooperative. |
| “Light”: What is the positive self-image? | A noble helper entitled to personal freedom | A fighter against real suffering and adversity |
| “Shadow”: What is the image of the other party when things are difficult on site? | Host organisations are perceived as being ‘ignorant’ or ‘incompetent exploiters’ | Volunteers are perceived as being somewhere between ‘all-knowing experts’ and ‘spoiled brats’. |
| What elements are not seen? | - organisational and other cultural & historic realities and constraints - constraints of the host organisations | - volunteers own biases, culture shock and psychological confusion of the volunteers |
| What lessons are to be learnt? | reflection on one’s own personal and cultural biases | - the importance of clarifying the organisation’s values and vision - gaining an understanding of the reasons for the volunteers’ confusion |

Lessons learnt from ‘successful’ placements

Cases in which the host organisations as well as the volunteers showed evidence of mutual satisfaction tend to manifest three common features:

The host organisations have a clear sense of purpose and leadership strategy that guides the volunteer’s experience. They

- know how they want to draw on the volunteers for the benefit of their organisation.

- consciously use the volunteers' 'fresh perspectives' to improve their organisations (e.g. listening to the volunteers' concerns and observations with regards to the organisation and using the information to foster the organisations' development).

They invest time, energy and leadership capacity in integrating the volunteers in the organisation e.g. by

- creating the communication channels for mutual understanding (e.g. providing an atmosphere and a culture of communication);
- making the volunteers feel welcome and part of the organisation from the start (e.g. by ensuring that they are formally welcomed into the organisation);
- helping the volunteers to fully understand the organisation's vision and objectives as well as the reasons behind certain its rules and procedures;
- developing clear and compulsory work procedures and job descriptions and talking these through with the volunteer as well as with the staff;
- clarifying the volunteers' relevance and positions for the staff and discussing the potential benefits of using volunteers. They help staff understand the benefits and calm down their fears, e.g. of being in competition with the volunteers;
- actively mixing staff and volunteers to work on the same assignment (e.g. developing a project together, having to discuss how to cooperate, exchanging views, AND monitoring the process!).

They invest in the personal, cultural and professional development of the volunteers e.g. by

- keeping in mind that the volunteers are learners;
 - actively giving them emotional support and assisting them with continuous supervision and time for reflection;
 - providing the volunteers with a contact person who also mediates in case of conflicts between volunteers and staff;
 - trust the volunteers' ability and commitment to creatively work on their assignments in a disciplined manner;
 - giving the volunteers the chance to actively experience how development works (e.g. through concrete work projects; participation in staff meetings) as well helping them understand why it is NOT working;
 - creating a balance between expecting the volunteers to abide by clear rules and giving them space in which to act more freely (e.g. through small projects in which they can test themselves).
- **And finally, they enjoy intercultural exchange.**

Research based recommendations

The research findings show that both partners – volunteers and host organisations – profit from the service. At the same time, however, they reveal how much time, energy and leadership capacity an effective partnership requires from the host organisations. In order to create a *weltwärts* experience, which is perceived as being successful and satisfying for both volunteers and host organisations, and which supports positive outcomes without concealing

the negative ones, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations for SAGE Net Germany as a sending organisation

Support the leadership of host organisations

Strengthen their role and authority in relation to the volunteers by all possible means. Discuss the *weltwärts* objectives with them and explain the role of the volunteers as *weltwärts* perceives it. Form an alliance between the German sending organisation and the South African host organisation and agree on how this experience can be mutually beneficial. A good partnership is critical if the volunteers are to have meaningful placements.

Thus, deepen the cooperation between sending and host organisation by focusing on a shared vision for the placement, which exceeds the mere sending process.

Support mutual exchange and cooperation through a facilitated group process of ‘deep reflection’ on the volunteers’ experiences in the host organisation.

This should occur at two levels. First, the staff of the German sending organisation should engage with the staff of the South African host organisation around the volunteer experience. Second, the young German volunteers should engage with young South African volunteers about their respective contributions to development.

Through facilitated workshops, support self-reflection among the volunteers as a basis for understanding ‘the other’.

Sending and host organisations should work together to plan how to sensitize the volunteers to issues of race in Southern Africa. This involves helping the volunteers become aware of their own attitudes and possibly their stereotyped views or prejudices about African people and the causes of underdevelopment and development in African countries. It should also make them aware of how young white Germans might be perceived by African people in stereotyped terms, namely as representatives from powerful northern countries with a history of racism and colonialism.

Frame the volunteer experience as a learning experience.

Help volunteers understand the importance of a respectful and learning orientation to their hosts (organisations, communities and families).

This involves clarifying the importance of the volunteers adopting a ‘serving’ mindset and can be achieved by

- ✓ understanding the importance of respectful communication, which involves accepting hierarchy, age and status;
- ✓ helping to bridge cultural, racial and educational chasms by expressing politeness, modesty, respect and appreciation;
- ✓ exposing themselves to the local environment and being in touch with the people;
- ✓ making their skills available as needed, but demonstrating an attitude of service at the same time;
- ✓ refraining from an impulse to act immediately: rather to slow down, be there, observe and learn before taking action;
- ✓ expressing a genuine willingness to learn.

During the preparatory, intermediate and final reviews with the volunteers, apply ‘deep reflection’ techniques to help them learn from critical intercultural incidents and experiences.

It takes time to talk about, explore, identify and interpret the meaning of critical incidents and difficult situations, as well as acknowledging one’s own role in those incidents (including one’s own ‘shadows’ such as hidden prejudices and racism).

- ✓ Prepare your trainers to use ‘deep reflection’ techniques. Effective approaches to ‘deep reflection’ can be found in the techniques used within the U-Theory-Approach of Otto Scharmer e.g. guided story telling, journaling, case clinics and sculpturing, etc. (see *Theorie U Toolbook 1.1*, <http://www.nysacra.org/nysacra/li/UToolbook.pdf>).
- ✓ If acceptable to the host organisation, help South African and German staff work on their own culturally bound perceptions and prejudices of young white European (German) volunteers.

Work with the volunteers to understand the dynamics of

- ✓ helping (achieving their own goals, wanting to make an impact) versus learning and serving
- ✓ the word ‘voluntary’ (which carries a sense of free will) versus the word ‘service’ (which stresses contractual obligations and responsibility).

The concept of the ‘weltwärts voluntary service’ and its terminology contains some pitfalls: (a) When volunteers are sent abroad through a government programme, there is the risk that they feel they are on a mission, with a duty of having to

make an impact on the country to which they are being sent. The research shows that the German volunteers in South Africa feel they are under pressure to act and have the strong feeling that they should not fail. (b) The term ‘voluntary’ makes them feel that they do not necessarily have to follow the rules of the host organisation. (c) The term ‘service’ is often understood as having contractual obligations to the German government. This is strengthened by the reality that the costs of their voluntary service experience are covered by the German government. The research shows that this is sometimes used as a basis for flaunting the authority of the host organisation:

“I’m just a volunteer. I don’t need to do what they [the organisation] want me to do.”

Clarify conditions of service and the assignments at the placement location.

This is particularly important in respect of the challenges, hardships and living conditions the volunteers will meet in their placement.

Recommendations for the South African host organisation

Clarify in which way the weltwärts volunteers might be of use to your organisation.

Be aware that weltwärts volunteers are not only a free pair of hands. They need a lot of time, energy and leadership from your organisation if you want the placement to be a mutually valuable experience.

Create a culture of inclusion which integrates the volunteers into the host organisation.

- ✓ Develop clear and mandatory working rules and job descriptions and talk these over with the volunteer.
- ✓ Clarify the role of the volunteers for the staff and discuss how they can best be managed. Staff are often suspicious about the volunteers' position and may feel that the volunteers are competing with them.

Help the volunteers to understand your organisation's vision, make them part of it and show them how to contribute to achieving the organisation's objectives.

Volunteers want to be part of the organisation they are working in. Therefore:

- ✓ Help your volunteers to understand your organisation's background as well as the reason for its rules and procedures.
- ✓ Try to integrate them from the very beginning (e.g. through a formal welcome address).
- ✓ Provide a contact person within the organisation who has the time and is willing to manage and support the volunteers.
- ✓ Let the volunteers participate in meetings and discussions as much as possible. At the same time it is important to clarify that while volunteers are welcome to share their opinions in a polite and respectful way, the host organisation makes the rules and has the final say.

Be a strong leader for the volunteers.

- ✓ Instruct and manage the volunteers.
- ✓ Set clear parameters within which the volunteer is expected

to carry out his or her activities and deliver certain outputs.

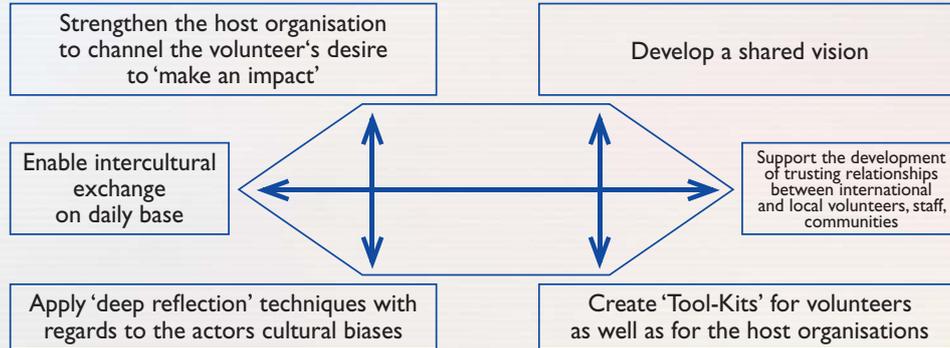
Volunteers need clear guidance and some of them need a lot of emotional support. Engagement between the volunteer and the volunteer manager is the point at which mutual learning can take place. Volunteers more or less unconsciously expect clear instructions and close guidance from the volunteer manager. On the other hand they are looking for space in which they can innovate. Volunteers will obey the rules as long as they are made very clear. If volunteers sense that the host organisation is insecure in the partnership with the sending organisation, they will take advantage of it.

Support teamwork, pairing or a close 'instructor'-learner working relationship between German volunteers and South African volunteers or staff members.

Just being placed in a South African organisation doesn't necessarily mean that cooperation or exchange will occur between the international volunteer(s) and local staff or volunteers. In host organisations where volunteers are working in close cooperation with staff or in a instructor-learner relationship, challenges and conflicts can be productively managed and rich learning experiences can occur.

- ✓ Pay attention to age and status issues when forming teams. Cooperation and team work may require certain age, gender and educational similarities between the volunteers and the local counterparts. Mentoring the young German volunteers will be done most effectively by South African staff who are confident and can deal with the seemingly confident attitude of the volunteers.

Figure 2: Action points for quality assurance in the international volunteer placement



An extract from the recently published book “International Volunteering in Southern Africa: Potential for Change?”

Details from amazon.com:

Paperback: 260 pages (also available as ebook)

Author: SAGE Net

Publisher: Scientia Bonnensis (2012)

Language: English | Price: 14,80 €

Dimensions: 22,9 x 15,2 x 1,5 cm

ISBN-10: 3940766496

ISBN-13: 978-3940766496



Also available as a result from our research: “Verkehrte Welten...”

Details from amazon.de:

Paperback: 232 pages

Author: Brigitte Schwinge

Publisher: Scientia Bonnensis (2011)

Language: German | Price: 26,80 €

Dimensions: 21 x 14,6 x 1,8 cm

ISBN-10: 3940766380

ISBN-13: 978-3940766380

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