



PARTNERSHIP-BUILDING SEMINAR

“MAKING EUROPE HAPPEN THROUGH EVS PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS THE EU, EASTERN EUROPE AND THE CAUCASUS”

NIJNI NOVGOROD 10 – 13 October 2005 (4 days)

Summary:

The main objective of the seminar was to bring together non-governmental youth organisations from the European Union, pre-accession countries, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus for the purpose of increasing, in quantity and quality, the volunteer exchange projects within the framework of the EVS programme and beyond. The purpose was to create and reinforce partnerships between sending and hosting organisations working within the EVS programme and the international networks. It is one of the continuing efforts of AVSO in extending partnerships to the Eastern European and Caucasus countries by raising awareness about the needs of prospective partners, the trends in voluntary service and the proper management of volunteer exchange projects. The event provided an opportunity for existing and potential hosting and sending organisations to meet and exchange ideas and information about youth work and voluntary service possibilities in their countries and organisations. It also acted as a forum endorsing the role of voluntary action in involving citizens in their societies, in recognition of its economic, social, cultural and intercultural value. The seminar enabled direct, personal contact between organisations serving as, or wanting to serve as EVS hosting and sending projects. It facilitated discussions on the barriers and solutions to creating more opportunities for long-term voluntary service, and allowed for comparisons between the conditions and setbacks in the different countries that were represented.

Activities implemented

Description of activities: The activities comprised a partnership-building seminar that brought together various non-governmental organisations, ranging from local, regional and national to international networks. Their motivation to take part in the seminar was to find reliable partner organisations with whom to exchange long-term volunteers mostly through the EVS programme.

The logical structure of the work programme was determined by the fact that the participating organisations had various levels of experience in the field of international voluntary service exchanges. Therefore, it began with two workshops which served as general orientations sessions. This was followed by input on the two basic models of voluntary service: the international voluntary service model (long-term and full-time) and that of the European Voluntary Service Programme. This was important in order to give participants some historical background from the different countries and a basis for comparison of the two. Being in Russia, we also included a presentation on the long-term voluntary service opportunities in the country. Finally, the participating organisations interacted together at the partnership-building fair where each organisation had set up an individual stand exhibiting its projects, activities, areas of interest through posters, photos, brochures, etc. This was time exclusively dedicated to contact-making by visiting the stands, discussing and making projects together.

Each working day finished off with the written feedback of the participants as evaluation of the day's activities. This allowed the preparatory team to improve and if necessary, modify certain elements of the programme that may not have been targeted specifically to the participants.

Day 1 of the programme was dedicated to laying the common ground and understanding of the concepts used in the field of voluntary service, its project management side, country profiles and

trends. Participants were encouraged to explore the differences between the country contexts. These issues were discussed from the point of view of their historical evolution as well as their modern developments. Participants were divided into three groups, each one discussing a different set of topics. Each group then prepared a presentation of its conclusions that it presented to the general plenary through a rapporteur. The presentation stage was followed by a question-and-answer debate.

We had conceived the programme in this way due to the fact that a number of the participants represented organisations lacking in experience. Therefore, it was important to provide them with points of orientation that however, were enriching for the more experienced participants too as they learned more about the different national contexts, and they could also impart their experience. The feedback in plenary served as a basis for recapitulation of the group discussions and also brought further clarifications to the subjects.

Day II presented the major long-term voluntary service models – voluntary service performed within the partnerships of the international networks and the European Voluntary Service. This comparison was executed in an original way with images and geometrical shapes that were moved and collated to an adhesive blue wall background. The presentation was followed by a debate on the advantages and disadvantages of each of the models. This was the prelude to the partnership-building part of the programme which opened in the afternoon and extended quite a bit after the scheduled hour.

On **Day III** we visited the headquarters of the Nijni Novgorod Voluntary Service, met their staff and saw how they have organised their activities. Participants met with the EVS volunteers hosted by the Nijni Novgorod Voluntary Service. This proved to be a very useful encounter as it clarified a great deal around the practicalities of being a long-term volunteer in Russia, the personal difficulties and satisfactions of the volunteers. In the morning of the third day, participants took part in workshops depending on their individual interests and choice. Part of the afternoon was set apart for a cultural visit to the local handicrafts museum and a tour of the city centre.

Day IV was dedicated to the final evaluation of the seminar. Participants filled in the evaluation questionnaires and gave their verbal feedback. Comparisons were made between the final outcomes of the seminar for the participants and their initial expectations, which had been collected from the participants in writing during the opening plenary session on the first day. Please, find below a more detailed analysis of the separate components of the programme.

The following section describes in more detail the methodologies and content of each group session, together with a sample of the results from each group.

MORNING GROUP SESSIONS

These focused on 2 topics related to the concept and delivery of quality voluntary service projects: (1) Introductory concepts of voluntary service (2) Voluntary service in the European Union, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. All participants were divided into 3 working groups. Each working group had a balanced representation of countries and the different levels of experience of the participants. In these sessions, participants also discussed the practical and administrative issues faced by long-term volunteers hosted or sent by their country as well as the future of transboundary voluntary service.

◆ GROUP SESSION 1: INTRODUCTORY CONCEPTS OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Objectives

The main idea for this workshop was to ensure that all the participants are departing and working from a common understanding of voluntary service. The terminology was clarified and the ground was set for the more specific discussions of voluntary service project management and quality assurance. The aim was to get people to think, to see if they share more or less the same idea about voluntary service, to get to know each other by expressing their views about voluntary service.

Methodology

Participants were asked to list all the aspects of voluntary service that can be seen and those that cannot be seen in order for them to discover new elements. The results of this brainstorming were presented by organisation. Then a moving debate took place on the base of several provocative statements which forced participants to take a position and discuss.

◆ Group session 2: Voluntary service in the EU, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus

Objectives

To develop a vision of the development of voluntary service for the participants' own organisation and country, and the role of EVS and international voluntary service in developing it. The aim was also to identify the contrasting elements and the touching points between voluntary service concepts in the different regions, and determine how these could interact successfully. One of the purposes of this

workshop was to generate a discussion on the legal and administrative obstacles faced by volunteers engaging in national and transnational voluntary service, the need for an appropriate legal support and the steps that should be taken at national and international level to achieve this.

- Share experiences and points of view;
- Obtain information on different national systems regarding trainings in EVS;
- Enhance common requirements and expectations;
- Clarify needs for a better co-operation;
- Make recommendations on future implementation of training within EVS.

Methodology

Group reflection on the various country realities, existence of legislative base, national policies towards the sector, how do the different societies view transnational voluntary service, especially the more tradition-based ones, cultural perceptions of the volunteers, their motivations to do service, etc.

- **Alternative workshops** where participants were given the choice of attending one of different workshops. These covered the themes of:
 - Finding hosting projects;
 - EVS basic training;
 - Managing and motivating volunteers;
 - Working with disadvantaged volunteers.
- **Plenary sessions** were held every day before and after the group sessions, when participants had the chance to report back on the results of each working group. During the plenary sessions preceding the group work, participants received orientational input regarding the goals of the workshops to come.
- **The Partnership-building Fair** was where the representatives of the organisations were each given a stand on which to present their activities through pictures, materials, posters and brochures. During the time for partnership-building parts of the programme, the participants described their organisations and projects, looking for future partners.
- **A pre-event session** was held in the evening of the 9th October where the participants introduced one another informally through introduction games. These served as “ice-breakers” and built the participants’ confidence for the upcoming working day.
- **Informal occasions for contact-making**. The participants’ accommodation was at the same place as the seminar venue. This provided plenty of opportunities for informal networking during the meals, the breaks and in the evening. An intercultural party was held the second evening, which met with great success as each participant had brought music, food, drink, clothing, objects, flags, etc. typical of his/her country of origin.

B. Preparation

As soon as the event was approved for funding, we began the actual recruitment and selection of the participants through the AVSO members’ networks, the National Agencies, the National Coordinators, and other known networks. A registration form was sent out requesting details of the participants’ motivation for attending the seminar and their organisation’s details, as well as feedback on their experience with EVS and interest in the optional workshops. This enabled us to better tailor the event to the participants’ needs, and also to ensure that the seminar has maximum impact on the creation of partnerships and the future delivery of EVS exchanges.

Each participant was required to prepare for the event by identifying concrete proposals for future projects, by collecting information on the development of long-term voluntary service in their country and by preparing materials on their organization and projects.

Throughout the preparatory period all partners involved in the preparation were in regular intensive contact by telephone and e-mail. A virtual discussion of the work programme was launched. AVSO was responsible for the logistical arrangements and for maintaining regular contacts with the participants, the partners and the hosts. A preparation meeting of the project partners took place right before the event itself. This meeting finalised the details of the contents of the programme, the topics to be covered and the methodology to be used, as well as the techniques on how to make the programme more interesting and stimulating.

C. Practical organisation

We chose accommodation that was approximately 40 km away from the city of Nijni Novgorod in a district that is considered a recreational area of the city. We chose from three alternatives, finally settling

on this one on the grounds of the following factors: the room-rates were lower than the ones offered in the city, which were beyond our affordable price-range; the facilities in terms of the number and the size of the meeting rooms and plenary halls were ideal given the number of participants and the organisation of the event; equipment such as computer, printer, multi-media projector, and photocopier were readily available. Another important consideration for our final choice was the fact that the other places demanded 50 per cent of prepayment, which was not found to be acceptable. Also, at the time, we were the only group staying at the hotel at that point in time, which raised the level of attention to detail and the quality of the service on part of our hosts.

The transport concerning the airport transfers was quite challenging since the participants were arriving from a number of various points of departure and respectively, they were arriving at completely different times, including the very late night hours for some. The great majority of the transfers was to take place in Moscow, from airport to train station. We had organised a network of volunteers that met participants at the respective airport and accompanied them to the train station. These volunteers had also purchased the train tickets in advance to have them ready for the participants on their arrival. Therefore, the difficulties of directions and instructions exclusively in Russian were overcome. Transfers were then organised from Nijni Novgorod to the venue.

D. Achievements

- **The creation of new, stronger partnerships for YOUTH projects:** The project provided a forum for the organisations from Europe, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus to meet and exchange their ideas, experience and best practice related to voluntary service. The creation of new partnerships have already generated and facilitated concrete volunteer exchange projects. Having concrete exchange projects advance from the seminar was one of the main priorities of the event. The participants had the advantage of the direct, personal contact with their future counterparts, which laid a basis of trust, reliability and understanding.
- **The seminar gave way to the free exchange of information on the needs and potential of EVS,** particularly in relation to the barriers and solutions to the participation of new partner countries, and the benefits that EVS can bring to non-EVS volunteering activities. This was achieved not only through the work programme of the seminar, but also by means of the direct contacts that the participants made with one another, and their one-to-one discussions, which continued during the meals and other informal occasions that the programme provided.
- **Another objective was the improved quality of volunteer placements.** It was pursued through the very contents of the programme, which led participants through the entire cycle of the voluntary service project, and of an EVS long-term project in particular. The group workshops examined the roles and responsibilities of the different partners involved. We believe that the improved quality of YOUTH projects will inevitably be ensured by the very fact that organisations have been in touch with one another, they have exchanged experience and best practice in relation to the management and implementation of EVS volunteer exchanges. The participants will act as multiplier agents within their organisation, their community and environment, and will transfer their experience and knowledge to others.
- **The seminar was in itself a promotional event of the YOUTH programme** as it offered an important 'display case' for the programme and its relationship with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region. It conveyed a message of confidence in the EU's commitment to a social model built on cultural diversity through mobility, exchange and informal learning.
- **The seminar generated new ideas, new methodologies, and new approaches** that motivated participants to develop new and better quality projects in the future both at national and at international level. It also raised awareness of the realities in other countries, and that was quite revealing especially along the lines of the European practices and those of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

E. Working methods

In general outlines, the working programme was structured into morning group sessions, plenaries, partnership-building fair and optional workshops. Each session started with a warmer in order to stimulate interest and keep motivation high. For details on the separate programme components, please see point A.

F. Beneficiaries

The direct beneficiaries of the project were the representatives of each organisation that attended the seminar. However, the participants will act as multipliers within their own organizations, localities and regions. The members of each organisation will benefit from their participation through the creation of

future projects and activities. In a mid-term and long-term perspective the final beneficiaries of the project are expected to be:

- The young people themselves, by increasing the number and the quality of the opportunities available to them;
- The voluntary sector as a whole through the building of stronger liaisons between organisations, and through the direct exchange of best practice.

The results in the form of materials containing the reflections of the participants in the group sessions were distributed immediately after each session.

The effect of the seminar on the local community was that of awareness-raising and intercultural interaction.

G. Follow-up and evaluation

The evaluation of the seminar was performed at the venue on the last day by having the participants fill out the evaluation questionnaires, share to what extent their initial expectations were satisfied and giving some feedback on the quantitative results of the contact-making.

AVSO has created an electronic mail group specifically to facilitate and consolidate the communication between the participants in the seminar. We are also preparing a booklet which will contain the description of all the organisations that took part, and send it out electronically.

As a result of the seminar, AVSO received two applications for membership in its international network.