

**STEP-BY-STEP TO LONG-TERM VOLUNTARY  
SERVICE**

Produced by Association of Voluntary Service Organisations, in collaboration with  
European Induction Programme (coordinator of Step-by-Step) and the European Youth  
Forum

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This brochure has been produced by the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) in collaboration with the European Induction Programme (the co-ordination unit of the Step-by-Step Programme), and the European Youth Forum.

It aims to document the experience and results of Step-by-Step - a multi-lateral project supported through the European Voluntary Service programme of the European Commission. The brochure is targeted at youth workers and grassroots organisations interested in developing long-term voluntary service as a means of tackling social exclusion among young people. It is also expected to assist decision-makers in the field of youth policy at regional, national and European level.

Since Step-by-Step began as a pilot action in 1996, it has enabled some 90 young people to participate in a period of full-time voluntary service abroad, and around 30 more to participate in a transnational preparation event. Few of these young people are likely to have had access to this opportunity without a support framework such as that provided through the Step-by-Step Network. The testimonies of these young people, provided throughout this brochure, are an illustration of the enormous impact such an experience can have on the young people's lives and future perspectives.

The goal of AVSO is to ensure that everybody in society has the possibility of undertaking a period of long-term, full-time voluntary service, should they choose to. AVSO has acted as umbrella for the Step-by-Step Programme since 1998, taking over from the Youth Forum after it initiated the Programme under its Campaign against Poverty and Social Exclusion. AVSO is proud to be able to present the work of the Step-by-Step Network, and particularly the coordination unit of European Induction Programme. We hope that this brochure will stimulate ideas and discussion about how this work can be extended and multiplied so that transnational voluntary service becomes a realistic option for many more young people.

John Stringham  
President of AVSO

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*All quotes cited in this brochure have been made by volunteers, trainers and project representatives active during the flagship Programme (1997-1998) or the latest Step-by-Step Programme (1999-2001)*

# I

## THE BROADER VIEW

Why do voluntary service?

Voluntary service as a means of tackling social exclusion?

Why Step-by-Step?

### ***Why do voluntary service?***

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**Voluntary service is a learning experience.** It provides an opportunity to take time out of a familiar environment and to learn, reflect and re-evaluate next steps. Voluntary service may provide practical or professional experience, but it is first and foremost about developing 'soft' skills such as good communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, independence and social responsibility. This distinguishes voluntary service from vocational training that focuses more specifically on an individual's professional development. Voluntary service is an important means of non-formal education, focusing on the development of skills and attitudes that are often inadequately recognised and nurtured in the formal education system.

**Voluntary service is open to all.** It is not dependent on the person's academic or economic background. For many, it is the first time they are not labeled according to their academic achievements, or lack thereof. It can help young people to gain a new sense of self-worth and a more positive view of their potential contribution to society.

*'Volunteering is useful for moving forward, knowing oneself, knowing your own capabilities (also your limits), maturing, and putting behind you everything you've done before..... People can argue : " It's a change of state of mind ".'* Fabien from France spent 6 months in Ireland.

**Voluntary service is about making a contribution.** It is driven by a motivation to make a positive difference, but also to learn and grow from the experience. Volunteers may be placed in projects in any non-profit making organisation; be it of a social, environmental, educational or cultural nature. What is important is that the person identifies with the hosting project and its goals, that they have the feeling of 'making a valuable contribution'.

*'I have gained a lot from my hosting project I learned that you have to respect other people, no matter who they are or where they come from, I have learned that there are a lot of other countries that need volunteers to help in any way they can.'* Rachel from Ireland spent 1,5 month in UK.

### **Defining Voluntary Service**

The definition of voluntary service can vary according to the organisations or networks active in this field. Here are just two in common use.

(1) A volunteer engaged in long-term voluntary service is someone who:-

- Is active in an unpaid activity, full-time, for a defined period of time, on the basis of an agreement between him/herself and the voluntary organisations involved
- Serves at home or abroad following a free and informed personal decision without compulsion (direct or indirect) by the State
- Serves in projects which promote the common good and are non-profit. Projects may be run by non-governmental associations, by religious groups, by local authorities, by communities etc.
- Engages in a personal, social and (in the case of transnational voluntary service) intercultural learning process both individually and in interchange with other volunteers, throughout their period of service.

*Definition of the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations, a representative body of 13 international voluntary service organisations and networks.*

(2) 'Voluntary Service is an exchange between an individual, or a group of individuals, and a local community. The volunteer or group of volunteers offers time, energy & effort to a project of benefit to a community, and via this project the community offers to the volunteer or group of volunteers an opportunity for experimentation, learning and personal and collective development.'

*Text of Reference on 'Voluntary Service' adopted by members of Cotravaux (co-ordination for Youth Voluntary Service, France) in June 2001.*

### **Voluntary Service as a means of tackling social exclusion?**

Voluntary service has a long history and its benefits to the volunteer and local communities are widely acknowledged. However over the last decade there has been growing interest in its use as a tool for tackling issues of social exclusion, particularly among young people. There are many reasons why voluntary service has the potential to transform the lives of young people who are marginalised from mainstream society.

Firstly, by participating in voluntary service there may be a shift in the young person's perception of their role in society. For the first time they may become a provider of support, rather than a perceived victim of the system or a dependant on social support. It is also important that they receive recognition and acknowledgement of their contribution to society and the community.

*'When I arrived in my project, it was a bit difficult to get to know all the people – I felt strange, I was not used to this life. Before, I was a little bit unsociable, now it's changed a lot and in my behaviour I feel more civil. I'm not guilty of being unsociable, I was living with "bad*

*persons”...I still have a lot of work on myself to do....( but) I feel more grown-up, more responsible, it gives me some courage for the future.’ Vito from Italy spent 6 months in France.*

Secondly, the young person moves away from home to carry out their period of service, often to a country with a different language and culture. While daunting, the experience usually generates a new sense of independence, self-reliance and individual identity. It may encourage the young person to see previous destructive patterns of behaviour from a new, broader perspective.

*‘I met so many nice people from everywhere. When I arrived, I was so crazy, I came from a fast life in Spain and I wanted to try to find myself there.... I changed my life a lot with all these people, I opened my eyes to move on in a good way....Now I’m more responsible and with more power to help people. Or more importantly to try to help myself.’ Antonio from Spain spent 6 months in Northern Ireland.*

Thirdly, voluntary service is an opportunity to learn new skills outside the formal education environment. It allows the young person to realise their own potential, cultivate new professional interests, and hopefully develop plans for the future.

*‘I believe it (voluntary period abroad) has influenced my plans for future, career, that is, I now want to be a leader of some type of network, organisation etc. volunteering mainly. I have high social skills and communication skills, so that helps but I gained these skills from interacting with different people.’ Danny from Ireland spent more than 2 months in France.*

The most important indicator of success is the personal development of the individual, in terms of self-confidence, self-awareness, ability to participate and speak out, and to learn from past experience. Secondary to this is employability – the ability of every individual to achieve economic autonomy through access to work. In most cases one follows the other, but it is the former that will make the greatest contribution to tackling issues of social exclusion.

*‘Before I went to Ireland I thought that I wanted to be a social worker. Now I know that before I can help others I have to help myself and the only person that can help me is me.’ Makrina from Greece spent 3.5 months in Ireland.*

### **EVS in brief**

The European Voluntary Service (EVS) was first launched as a Pilot Action in 1996. It became a *Community Action Programme* in 1998 and since May 2000 has been included as Action 2 of the YOUTH Programme (2000-2006).

EVS is open to all young people between 18 and 25 years old from all Member States of the European Union, Associate and Candidate countries. The period of voluntary service is normally between 6 and 12 months and is carried out in a different programme country. Volunteers' travel costs, insurance, food, accommodation and a small monthly allowance are covered by the grant from the YOUTH Programme.

The majority of placements are organised bi-laterally, through an agreement between a sending organisation, a host organisation and the volunteer. These projects are selected, funded and monitored through National Agencies in each programme country.

A small number of projects are supported centrally through the European Commission. These tend to involve more than eight countries and have a strong thematic content. It is this strand that has, in the past, supported a number of experimental projects, specifically targeted at disadvantaged youth, such as Step-by-Step.

For further information see: [www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/youth.html](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/youth.html)

### ***Why Step-by-Step?***

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The European Voluntary Service is undoubtedly the most important source of public support for transnational voluntary service in Europe. Since its very beginning in 1996, EVS has sought to prioritise the involvement of disadvantaged youth in volunteer exchanges. It reflects the overall policy of past and present youth programmes to help tackle issues of social exclusion by promoting mobility and non-formal education opportunities.

Despite this clear priority, the involvement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has so far been limited within the bi-lateral volunteer exchange programme. By far the majority of participants have had a strong academic background, knowledge of at least one other language, and some travel experience. However, alongside the bi-lateral programme, EVS has supported a number of so called 'flagship' projects that focus specifically on the inclusion of disadvantaged youth. Together these networks have enabled around 300 young people from this target group to participate in the programme over the past 5 years. The experience of these networks is also essential in understanding the most appropriate approaches and methodologies for encouraging and supporting the participation of disadvantaged youth.

The Step-by-Step project was one of the 'flagships' initiated in 1996. Since it began, around 80 young people have participated in a period of voluntary service in another country, and many more have been involved in preparatory activities. This brochure brings together the experiences of the Step-by-Step project so far. It gives an impression of its impact on the

young people involved, and provides an overview of approaches developed by project partners during its five years of operation.

### **Step-by-Step - A Potted History**

**1995:** A pilot action is launched within the framework of the Youth Forum's Combat against Poverty and Social Exclusion Campaign. 12 young people go abroad for periods of 3 weeks - 10 months.

**1997-98:** A second 2-year project is launched as a 'Flagship EVS Project' by the Youth Forum. 9 young people leave as volunteers. A further 5 young people drop out after the preparation event because they are unable or unwilling to commit to a minimum of 3 months.

**1998:** Under the umbrella of the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO), support is secured from the 'short-term' budget line of Youth for Europe for a parallel action which enables 14 more young people to carry out shorter periods of voluntary service in preparation for a longer period. The 'step-by-step' approach proves to be very successful with 7 of the 14 short-term volunteers deciding to stay on in the same project, move to another, or to go away again after a short period at home.

**1999:** The 'Step-by-Step Charter' is adopted by 20 project partners, consolidating the network by bringing together a common philosophy and minimum standards. And the fourth, most recent phase of Step-by-Step begins following approval of a 2.5 year project in 1998 under the EVS Community Action Programme.

**August 2001:** The fourth phase comes to an end. The project has involved 33 partner organisations from 10 countries, and 55 young people have successfully completed one or more periods of voluntary service abroad (an average of 3.75 months per volunteer).



## II

## THE VOLUNTEERS

Who are the volunteers & where do they come from?

What does the Step-by-Step process consist of for a volunteer ?

What comes next?

### ***Who are the volunteers & where do they come from?***

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The volunteers are recruited and selected by youth and social work agencies working directly with young people who are 'socially disadvantaged' or who are currently experiencing difficulties in their lives. These difficulties may range from lack of educational or vocational qualifications (early school-leavers), substance abuse in their past (drug- or alcohol-related), family breakdown, a history of sexual or other abuse, suffering from racism because of living in areas of high immigration etc..

#### **A Question of Definition?**

Attempts to find a common definition of 'disadvantaged youth' among Programme countries of the European Voluntary Service have been unsuccessful. Each country has a very different interpretation depending on their economic situation, the mobility of young people, education systems etc. Within the new Users Guide (January 2002), EVS identifies their key priority as 'young people with less opportunities (from a less-privileged cultural, geographical or socio-economic background, or with disabilities)'.

Within Step-by-Step, project partners describe their particular target group in the following way:

*' ...These young people may come from urban or rural zones. For economic, cultural or educational reasons, they are excluded from various social activities which could promote their personal development and allow them to develop their potential.....Because of the above named factors, certain young people find that they have problems related to :*

- *social relationships e.g. : family problems, isolation, peer pressure and influence etc.*
- *the cultural context e.g. : limited horizons, racist attitudes, suspicion towards or rejection of that or those who are culturally different, temptation to become involved in criminal activities.*
- *lack of plans for the future : of work and training possibilities.*
- *lack of confidence and difficulty in finding creative solutions to their problems.'*

This definition is narrower than that adopted by the EVS Programme in general, and the distinction is important. Step-by-Step aims to target young people that not only lack opportunity, but also demand a level of support and flexibility that cannot normally be provided through the bi-lateral system.

The young people targeted within Step-by-Step have typically been 'users' of social or youth services in disadvantaged areas. The local youth worker is responsible for encouraging the young person to think about their choices, and for preparing them for a period of voluntary service abroad if this is what they choose. Often the young person will be encouraged to volunteer locally or to participate in some kind of intercultural experience, such as a youth group exchange, prior to committing themselves to a longer period of voluntary service through Step-by-Step.

## **What does the Step-by-Step process consist of for a volunteer ?**

### ***The Notion of Pathway***

This section follows the steps in the pathway of a young participant in Step-by-Step; the recruitment and preparation of young people, the voluntary service placements, and the follow-up activities.

The Step-by-Step Programme is designed around the needs of the young participants. It sees transnational voluntary service primarily as a tool to help the young person break away from a difficult home situation or from destructive patterns of behaviour. But it is important that voluntary service is only **one step** along the pathway of the young person towards greater independence, self-confidence and social inclusion. The work carried out with the young person both before and after the period of voluntary service is equally, if not more, important than the impact of the project itself.

The pathways of Tracy, Alan and Ismaël, illustrated on pages 10-11, are cases in point. All three were referred to Step-by-Step through their local youth workers, and participated in local volunteering activities or international exchanges before deciding to do a period of voluntary service abroad. All three also experienced a period of disorientation on their return, but in the longer term have developed successful careers or projects strongly influenced by their exposure to international voluntary service.

### ***The Preparation Phase***

Many young people from this target group are understandably reticent about undertaking a period of individual voluntary service abroad. The youth or social worker's task is to help them overcome these doubts by providing information and opportunities to increase their self-confidence. Peer educators can play a very important role here. They are young people who have been through the same doubts - but who managed to overcome them and go anyway.

*'In the beginning I had a lot of doubts about volunteering in a different country, but now I am glad that I have done it. And now I know that it is a good experience and a lot of fun.'*

Russell from Scotland spent almost 7 months in a youth centre in Ireland.

Before deciding on the voluntary service placement, the young would-be participants are invited to attend a preparation event organised at European level. The event gives the young

person the opportunity to travel (for many it is their first experience of travelling abroad), to be exposed to foreign cultures, to learn the importance of communication, the challenges of interpretation and language learning, and also to examine their motivation for carrying out volunteering. The process of 'match-making' volunteers with projects also happens during this event – a process of mutual selection between volunteers, trainers and project representatives present.

*'The international nature of the prep event places the participants in a rich but often difficult social situation where they are immediately confronted with the reality of interculturalism. The young people find themselves in an unknown place with a bunch of strangers who speak different languages, who may look different from them, where the food may be completely different from what they are used to, where they have none of their usual support systems... and then they are asked to live, work, socialise, and co-operate together!'* Kathy Schroeder, Step-by-Step trainer.

Volunteers can and do drop out at any stage within the recruitment and preparation phase. A relatively high drop out rate is inevitable among this target group, as these young people's lives tend to be less structured and predictable than those of prospective students or young graduates. Of the 80 young people who participated in preparation events during the current programme, 55 actually went abroad to a voluntary service project. But Step-by-Step does not see participation in international voluntary service as the only valid outcome of participation in such an event. The experiences gained during these 5-day events will, in themselves, have an impact on the pathway of the young person.

*'I attended a short preparation event with 11 other young people from different countries. I was very nervous about going away on my own, I had never travelled alone, I didn't know the language, it was the first time I was leaving my family and I didn't know much about the country where I was going.'* Tracy from Ireland spent 3 months in Belgium & 6 months in France.

### ***The Volunteer Placement***

Step-by-Step supports volunteer placements for anything between 4 weeks and 12 months. In many cases, a young person decides to stay in a project for longer than originally foreseen, or goes away again for a longer period some time after their return home from a short-term project. The average duration of voluntary service for Step-by-Step participants is around 3.5 to 4 months.

In every case the project is chosen in discussion with the volunteer on the basis of their own experience, their aspirations, the length of time they can commit to going away, their level of independence and so on. Quite often the young person is first placed in a project where their own language is spoken, or in residential projects where there are other international volunteers. Later they may choose to move to projects where they are required to work individually or to a country speaking another language.

Examples of the types of voluntary activities carried out can be found in the next section about the host organisations.

# Volunteer Pathway

	Starting Point	Lead-in phase	Pre-departure	Volunteer experience
<b>Tracy</b>	<p>local youth project international group exchange (1990)</p>	<p>became a volunteer in her own local youth project</p> <p>continued as a participant in young adult group</p> <p>involved in "Combat Poverty &amp; Social Exclusion" European-level project (1994)</p>	<p>"volunteer element" of same Campaign</p> <p>European-level pre-departure session with 11 other volunteers (3 days) – 1995</p>	<p>assistant youth worker with young women in Moroccan neighbourhood – Brussels (3 weeks / 3 months) with 2 other volunteers</p> <p>attended evaluation session with same volunteer group as preparation</p>
<b>Alan</b>	<p>vocational training programme</p> <p>participates in teenage "workcamp exchange" (1993)</p>	<p>went on a "classic" international workcamp activity in France (1994)</p> <p>participated locally helping support "teenage workcamp" scheme</p>	<p>"volunteer element" of same Campaign</p> <p>European-level pre-departure session with 11 other volunteers (3 days) – 1995</p>	<p>Went for 3 / 6 months as volunteer to France (group project) - 1995</p> <p>Attended evaluation session with same volunteer group as preparation</p>
<b>Ismaël</b>	<p>local youth project</p> <p>crisis in family / neighbourhood and education</p>	<p>begins as volunteer assistant youth worker in own project</p> <p>involved youth worker working with family contacts S-b-S</p> <p>prepares for departure to English-speaking country (needs visa)</p>	<p>goes to France on group project for 2.5 months - for voluntary work experience &amp; some language preparation</p>	<p>Follows first experience immediately as volunteer in residential outdoor activity centre in Ireland (3 months - 1998)</p>

Return	Follow-up		
<p>Difficult / stressful / "back to the very beginning" feeling</p> <p>Re-integrated seasonal work in local fish factory</p> <p>end of the Pilot Project at European level</p>	<p>local level engagement limited</p> <p>no EVS programme</p> <p>significant adult left project</p> <p>integrated a local vocational training (2 x 6 month periods) - 1996</p> <p>employment</p>	<p>Contacted by Youth Forum to follow-up first pilot project – attended a peer group training</p> <p>Decided for "more of the same"</p> <p>Attended preparation event (1997) as "experienced" volunteer</p>	<p>EVS volunteer / 6 months to France (1997)</p> <p>local-level access course for youth &amp; community workers (1997-1998)</p> <p>attended language training (1998)</p> <p>diploma course in youth &amp; community work</p> <p>part-time sales assistant</p> <p>now in final year of Degree in Youth &amp; Community Work at University College, Cork (2001-02)</p> <p>attended 2 international conferences to speak about her experience (2001)</p>
<p>couldn't settle</p> <p>host project found other financial means to invite him to return to France - where he stayed for further 6 months</p> <p>participated as technical workcamp leader</p>	<p>Very difficult period of re-integration</p> <p>sending project's role limited</p> <p>long periods of unemployment</p> <p>intermittent building site work</p>	<p>Contacted by Youth Forum to follow-up first pilot project – attended a peer group training</p> <p>decided to offer peer support to others</p> <p>attended preparation event (1997) as 'resource person'</p>	<p>returned to same hosting project under the "Leader Programme"</p> <p>disillusioned</p> <p>attended evaluation / "resource person"</p> <p>sending project linked him in to EVS programme – decentralised</p> <p>5 months EVS in Belgium (1998)</p> <p>found full-time employment in Dublin</p> <p>active resource person locally (1999)</p> <p>attended 2 Salto courses (2001) on Inclusion in EVS as speaker</p>
<p>difficult / stressful / lots of family pressure / change of orientation</p> <p>phone contact with central organising body</p>	<p>language workcamp</p> <p>evaluation weekend with 8 other volunteers / meets other hosting projects</p> <p>decides to volunteer again</p> <p>integrated youth work training course / Mobility International</p>	<p>creates own EVS project for 6 months / Belfast working with handicapped children (1999)</p> <p>attends peer group training in France in 2000</p>	<p>employed by "Club Med" for several temporary periods - travels with them to France, Italy &amp; Dominican Republic (200-2001)</p> <p>introduces new sending project from his area to Step-by-Step</p> <p>attends international conference on "Social Exclusion" in London to talk about his experience</p>

## ***What comes next?***

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Often the hardest part of the experience for the young person is the return home. For many, the period of voluntary service forces them to view their life from a new perspective, and perhaps to change patterns of behaviour they were accustomed to at home. The challenge is then how to reintegrate back into their home community, and how to share their experiences with friends and family.

*'I was sad to leave the project but I felt it was time to get a job and earn some money. I am now working on the railways in England as a surveyor. I feel my volunteer work has given me the confidence to work with people'* Ian from UK spent 4 months in Ireland.

The sending organisation has the role of providing immediate follow-up support to the young person by offering guidance on other opportunities such as training courses, study or employment routes. In many cases, contact is maintained with the young person for many months or even years after the period of voluntary service.

In addition, the Step-by-Step Network organises European-level evaluation events, where volunteers look back at their experience, assess what they have learnt and how they can build on this in the future. Often these events overlap with preparation events, giving new volunteers the chance to learn from the experiences of their peers.

*'I took part in the evaluation event after my volunteer time. Going home for me was a very serious problem – we talked about this at the evaluation. It was hard for me to fit back in. I felt like I was up against a wall sometimes. I matured a lot, changed, did new things.'* Michael from Northern Ireland spent 5 months in France.

Peer educators have, as outlined above, been a vital resource of the Step-by-Step Network both in European-level events and, at local level, in the sending and host organisations. Fifteen ex-volunteers have participated in a training event where they have learned communication skills and how to offer support to other young people. Several of these volunteers have gone on to represent Step-by-Step at other conferences and training events, for both future volunteers and project representatives.

*'Speaking after 7 months, I am still working as a volunteer and will do so until I get a job in youth work. I have new ideas, for example, I would like to create an international youth exchange project with 6 other countries ... I know I want to work with young people and to give back what I have learnt and experienced.'* Jon from the UK spent 7 months in France.

### **What do the volunteers do next?**

An intermediate evaluation (in July 2001) of the 'outcomes' of the programme which finished one month later showed that of the 55 young people who went away :

**19** found work on their return from their period abroad – despite long periods of unemployment prior to their participation (**35%**)

**10** decided to stay on in the country where they participated - or move on to another country to find work (**18%**)

**7** went onto study again - or to enter a course of vocational training (**13%**)

**5** were in a greater degree of difficulty beforehand - and have since lost touch with the project in their home country (**9%**)

**2** are in the process of creating their own enterprise (**3%**)

**13** were still in their project or had just returned home (**24%**)

**(NB. 2 young people fulfilled 2 of the above criteria)**



### III THE PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

An overview

What types of organisations send volunteers through Step-by-Step?

What types of host projects are available?

#### ***An overview***

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There is no 'typical' profile of a Step-by-Step partner but all partners share a desire to offer transnational voluntary service opportunities to young people who would otherwise be denied access.

Partners are encouraged to send **and** host young people as volunteers in order to understand the process as a whole and have **better communication** with the partner in the other country. This partnership is vital during exchanges, especially where young people 'at risk' are involved and where some difficulties are inevitable.

Initially most of the project partners were individual, local-level non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working directly with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, as the programme has evolved, a wider range of partners has become involved. Smaller organisations have grouped together with other local or regional partners to share responsibility for the work involved. Some exchange organisations, which have the advantage of greater administrative capacity, have offered to act as the 'umbrella' sending or hosting body for smaller, very local-level, and sometimes understaffed, youth work organisations.

Host projects which do not directly target young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in their everyday work have also joined the programme. The activities and support they offer may be well-matched with the needs of such volunteers, but their main focus may be outside the youth or social field. These include for example rural or environmental projects.

The number and diversity of sending and hosting organisations involved in Step-by-Step has, therefore, grown over time. This has ensured the multiplication of the work and provided flexibility and variety in the types of host activities available to the volunteers. During the last phase of Step-by-Step (1999-2001) the number of partner organisations increased from 20 to 33, and from 8 to 10 different countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and UK.

#### ***What types of organisations send volunteers through Step-by-Step?***

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Many of the organisations that send volunteers are small, local-level youth or social-work agencies working in socially disadvantaged areas. They have direct and regular contact with

the young people of their area and usually know the young people's home environment very well.

*'Having sent several young people through the Step-by-Step Programme, I can say that what it has given our organisation is a better reputation amongst the young people from the area – they know now that we have something to offer, a new possibility and that we will “come up with the goods” and not just talk about it!’* Abdelkrim Ayad, Soleil du Nord in Brussels, sending organisation in Step-by-Step.

However, those organisations tend to have limited capacity to recruit young people because of their narrow geographic focus. Some organisations have therefore channelled the young people through a bigger agency which can prepare and follow-up the young people in small groups. In these cases, it is still the local organisation which maintains longer-term close personal contact with the young person. What is important is that someone who knows the young people well, and who has their respect and trust, is able to help them to make sense of the Step-by-Step experience in terms of their own personal 'pathway'.

*'In my view there are just two criteria which are essential for anyone wanting to send young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to volunteer projects abroad: Know the young person AND know the project you're sending them to.'* Trena Ratcliffe, VSI Dublin, sending organisation in Step-by-Step.

#### **Examples of partner organisations that send volunteers**

A local NGO in Athens, Greece offers social support for young offenders and unemployed people. It offers vocational training, psychological support, welfare and legal advice and a range of non-vocational activities. Locally, the young people may participate first of all in the activities of the organisation - workshops and small group work or counselling sessions - before taking part in Step-by-Step.

A Cultural Centre in Belgium, which has regional responsibility for creating partnerships with NGOs, the local municipalities, and the Province of Brabant Wallon. It has contacts with several youth centres and day-care centres throughout the region and acts as a link for these partners with the Step-by-Step programme.

A large UK organisation, based in London, runs a range of programmes to help young people facing difficulty to gain confidence, self-esteem, motivation and new skills. It acts as a gateway to European opportunities for this target group, working with a network of local 'satellite points' around the country.

An Irish organisation, in Waterford, runs general youth service provision in the towns throughout the county including an outdoor activity residential centre, information and counselling services, youth clubs and after-school provision. They also run 4 special community-based projects focusing on drug-education, youth crime prevention and early school-leavers.

## **What types of host projects are available?**

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The types of activities offered by host projects active in Step-by-Step can be categorised into four main groups:

### 1. Manual work / group dimension

The volunteers are mainly engaged in manual activities (renovation of buildings, environmental work, maintenance, gardening etc.) and do not require any specific skills. They live and work as part of a group of international volunteers and staff supervision is always on hand. This is often a good first step for a young person who has no experience of living alone or of volunteering. Around 70% of the volunteers in the most recent phase of Step-by-Step started volunteering through this type of project – mainly in Ireland or in France.

For example, this type of project is provided by a workcamp organisation in France which has 6 different rural bases where they host individual volunteers in small international groups which work and live together for 9-12 months. The activities they carry out are very accessible for volunteers to step in for a short time, and to prolong if things go well.

*'... I've met many people who are very different from one another. This cultural difference is very important for each volunteer and for myself. It allows us to know each other better as well as knowing ourselves better. There are sometimes disagreements but it's somehow that which allows us to open up our eyes and be aware of our own mistakes. It's not always easy to put up with other people and to put up with your responsibilities and to put up with yourself. But group-life is a great experience and you need to experience it to realise this.'* Achraf from Belgium spent 6 months in France.

### 2. Manual work / individual dimension

The volunteers are again engaged in mainly manual work activities but with **local** staff or volunteers rather than in a group of international volunteers. These placements require a certain degree of autonomy, and usually involve living in a small hostel or student-type accommodation or with a local family. Language skills are also more of an issue for the volunteers in this context.

One example of this type of activity is offered by a large, national-level NGO in the UK whose south-west branch recently proposed to integrate an Italian volunteer into their local volunteers' team. The volunteer participates in tree-planting, pond-creation, path-clearance, woodland management and other practical conservation projects like organic gardening and tree-maintenance.

*'... I think the Step-by-Step Programme gives really good opportunities to volunteers and I think it is an excellent development for my organisation in that we can now work with volunteers from abroad as well as at national-level.'* Ash Pearson, BTCV Falmouth, is a hosting organisation in Step-by-Step.

### 3. Social work / group dimension

The volunteers are engaged in mainly social work (with children, young adults, the elderly or people with physical or mental disabilities) but again the young person works and lives as part of a group of international volunteers. This type of project is targeted at young people with some language knowledge or experience in the field of work – but little experience of living independently. Histories of alcohol- or substance-abuse or offences may prohibit a young person's involvement at this level, depending on national laws.

A Cheshire Home in rural Ireland, home to around 30 residents with physical disabilities, is one example of this type of project. It has been temporary home to several volunteers who have discovered a whole new area of life in accompanying the residents in their day-to-day lives at the centre, offering artistic, occupational and recreational activities.

*'During my 6 months, I learned so much about working with people with disabilities... I want to say that we shouldn't forget that they too are human beings and that they should have the right to live like everyone else – even if we are different in certain things. Now, I think that working with disabled people has made me much more responsible and more respectful than before of these people ... I want to say that it was an important experience in a caring profession that is necessary today.'* Mohammed from France spent 4 months in Ireland.

### 4. Social work / individual dimension

The young person lives independently but volunteers in a social work project. This type of experience is only appropriate for more experienced, older volunteers or those who share a same language as the host country (e.g. between UK / Ireland or Belgium / France). Of all the projects on offer this type requires the greatest level of self-reliance on the part of the volunteers.

A summer children's play-scheme, whether in the south of Belgium, the heart of Cork or on an educational farm outside Cardiff in Wales, can be an ideal short-term activity well-suited to many of the volunteers recruited through Step-by-Step.

*'I worked in a youth project with young people (aged 13-15) that were at risk of taking drugs, getting into trouble with the law. I worked with two other people and because it was the summer we did a lot of outdoor activities with the groups such as kayak lessons, absailing. I made a two day course for the younger group (aged 10-12) making cards and origami. That was my favourite time during my volunteer work.'* Kelly from Greece spent 4 months in Ireland.

## IV THE NETWORK

### An Overview

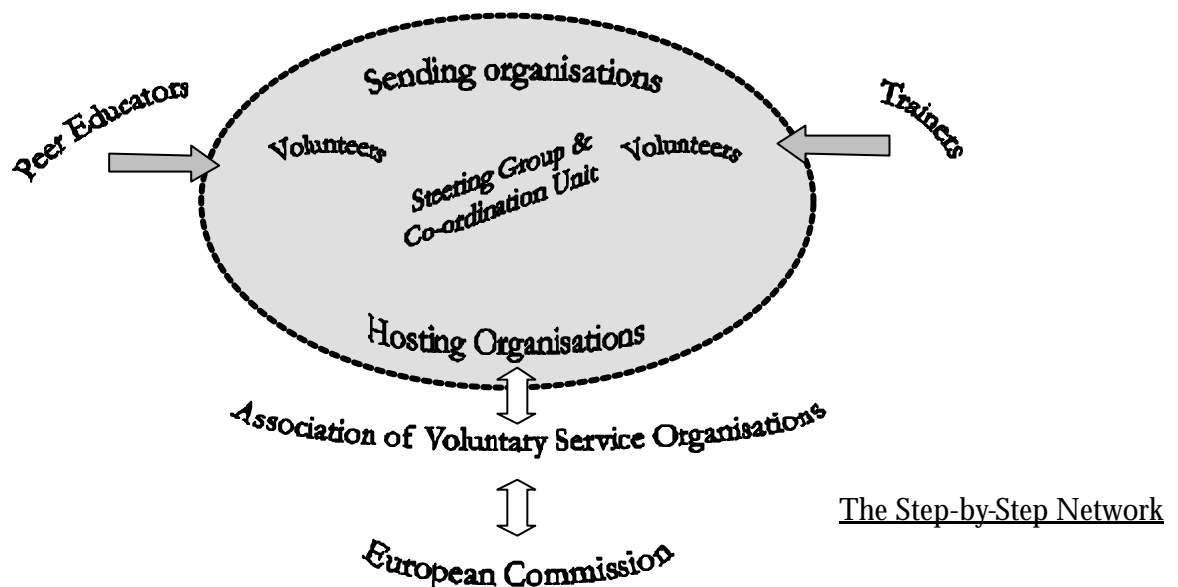
How does the Network work?

What is the added-value of working as a Network?

How is the work of the Network disseminated & multiplied?

### *An Overview*

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At the core of the Network is the *co-ordination unit*, managed by the European Induction Programme, a service NGO based in Paris. The unit's tasks are many and varied: the financial management of the project, offering support to partners organisations and volunteers, organising volunteer training events and project encounters, representing the Network externally and disseminating information within the Network.

The team is assisted by a project *Steering Group*, made up of five Network partners elected for two year periods. The *Sending and Hosting Organisations* all have direct contact with the co-ordination unit as well as to each other through annual meetings or 'project encounters' and informal contact. The Network is dynamic, meaning that new partners are regularly recruited and some partners leave the Network as their priorities change. This ensures that the Network can continually extend to new groups of young people, and can provide the diversity and flexibility of projects necessary for this target group.

The *Association of Voluntary Service Organisations* (AVSO) is the umbrella organisation that acts as the liaison between the Network and the European Commission. Its primary role is to ensure that the experience accumulated within the Network is disseminated to the wider

voluntary service sector in order to enable the extension of mainstream voluntary service programmes to this particular target group.

The *European Commission* supports and funds the Network's activities and in doing so aims to improve the accessibility of the EVS programme to young people with less opportunities.

### ***How does the Network work?***

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While Step-by-Step was supported by the European Commission as an EVS multi-lateral project, it has the characteristics of a Network rather than simply a consortium of project partners.

One of the characteristics of a Network is that its members are bound together by a common philosophy and objectives. The '**Step-by-Step Charter**' plays an important role in this. All partner organisations are required to sign up to the Charter before participating in the project, thereby agreeing to the philosophy of the Network and ensuring minimum quality standards. The Charter places a strong emphasis on the responsibilities of the hosting and sending organisations and provides a more specific definition of the young people the Network wants to reach.

A '**buddying**' system also helps to ensure project partners understand and comply with the philosophy and objectives of Step-by-Step. Newcomers to the Network are either proposed by existing members or propose themselves directly to the co-ordination unit. Experienced projects have a responsibility to support the new projects' induction process. This process is complemented by the work of the team from the co-ordination unit who try to visit all new project partners, before they send or host a volunteer, to talk about the specific nature of Step-by-Step's work.

It is also important that members have a sense of responsibility towards the continuity, success and multiplication of the work. This has been achieved in Step-by-Step by establishing a **Steering Group**, which comprises five individuals who are all active in sending and/or hosting volunteers.

The group played an important role in the development of the Charter, and has subsequently played a role in ensuring all projects adhere to these quality standards.

*'Being a member of the Steering Group is about.....participating in the life of the Network..... looking for - and finding - solutions to different problems faced by either volunteers, projects or the co-ordination unit.....visualising and promoting ideas for new kinds of exchanges. It's also about working on how to transfer this type of initiative to other contexts.....'* Louis Leroux who has been President of Step-by-Step since October 1999

### **What is the role of Step-by-Step Steering Group?**

The Steering Group is elected by other Network partners and their role includes:

- providing the means to ensure the smooth running of the Step-by-Step Programme
- stimulating, promoting and analysing the activities of the Network
- playing a conciliatory role, acting as a liaison between the sending and the hosting projects and/or the volunteers
- encouraging the full participation of all members in the decision-making processes of the Network

*taken from the "Step-by-Step Charter" (May 1999)*

### **What is the added-value of working as a Network?**

Since starting the flagship project in 1996, Step-by-Step has now successfully involved more than 110 young people in preparatory events, and sent around 80 of those to voluntary service projects abroad. The testimonies in this brochure illustrate the impact the experience has had on the lives of some of these young people. The approach to recruitment and preparation of young people, has enabled the Network to target some of the most vulnerable young people in society.

The success of the Network can be attributed to a few key elements, summarised below. It has proved difficult, so far, to integrate those elements into the bi-lateral system of volunteer exchanges within EVS, where the number of participants from this most vulnerable target group remains low.

Firstly, the Network is able to provide an enormous **degree of flexibility** in terms of the timing of the host project, its duration and the variety of projects available to the young people. Within the framework of Step-by-Step, a young person can participate in a preparation event, start the placement procedure and be in a host project within 2-6 weeks. Furthermore volunteers may initially commit to a short-term project, and then extend their stay or return for a longer-term project some weeks or months after they first return home.

Secondly, the Network offers several **extra levels of support** both for the volunteer and for the organisations. Already at the preparation stages, a sending project which has little experience of preparing young people for such an adventure, has the extra support of the European-level event where many issues will be dealt with directly with the young person with the support of peers from other countries. They hear from ex-volunteers who have actually been in some of the projects and also make links with the person from the co-ordination unit who will be jointly responsible for following their progress through the programme. Again, at the difficult stage of the return home, the sending projects and volunteers have the extra 'step' of the collective evaluation activity where they again have the support of other volunteers in the same situation as themselves.

However much planning and preparation is involved, it is inevitable there will be some unexpected difficulties or crises when working with young people who have not had previous access to this kind of experience. At such times, the organisations or volunteers themselves can turn to the co-ordination team, to other members of the Network or to the Steering Group members, for **advice or mediation**.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Network generates a **greater level of trust** between partner organisations. Youth and social workers need to have total confidence and trust in the support provided a host project, before entrusting them with a young person under their supervision. The Charter, individual training and mentoring, volunteer preparation and evaluation events, and the active involvement of a central coordination all contribute to achieving this level of trust. The possibility of attending annual Project Encounters, and/or attending one of the volunteers' preparation events as part of 'the team', are an essential part of knowing the partners involved at different levels and of being able to have confidence in the partnership in the volunteer process. Creating and perpetuating this trust and confidence in each other is what the Network is all about.

### ***How is the work of the Network disseminated & multiplied?***

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Since working together during the first Campaign against Poverty and Social Exclusion in 1995/6, project partners in different countries have been building links with other youth and social workers at grassroots level and sharing their experiences in order to facilitate the multiplication of their work.

Over the years many new organisations have joined the Network, enabling the participation of new groups of young people with no previous access to transnational voluntary service of this kind. These organisations are attracted to the Network because of the levels of trust and support offered within such a framework.

But of course there are many more organisations and young people that can benefit from participating in transnational voluntary service activities than can be accommodated within the Step-by-Step Network. The co-ordination unit and AVSO have a role in ensuring that the results and the approach developed within Step-by-Step are widely disseminated and understood. While different approaches may be equally successful, the experience of Step-by-Step indicates that certain criteria must be met if organisations and young people are to achieve the level of trust necessary to participate in this kind of transnational voluntary service.

This brochure provides only a 'snap-shot' of how the Network operates and the impact that the Network has had on the young people involved. It is hoped that it will stimulate interest among youth workers targeting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and engage policy makers at regional, national and European level looking at innovative approaches to social inclusion among young people.

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