
Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service Comité de Coordination du Service Volontaire International

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Cultural Diversity and Voluntary service: International solidarity or diversity consumption?

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History

The concentration of activities on issues linked to cultural diversity, non-violent conflict transformation and the effects of globalisation is a result of the reflections of the last CCIVS General Conference in November 2004. In addition the need to strengthen the capacity of youth workers and trainers on the questions linked to cultural sensitivity today has come up at all our last seminars: In October 2004 a seminar was held in Morocco with the support of the EYF on “Values and Violence”. A seminar and workcamp on Peace and Reconciliation followed in November in Kenya with the support of UNESCO, and another seminar was organised in January 2005 with the support of the Youth Programme about training methods for voluntary service within the Mediterranean region. All these projects came to the conclusion that there is a basic lack of intercultural competence, linked to the complexity of today’s world, which we are not yet in a position to address in a systematic way.

Besides internal reflections, we recognised similar reflections by scholars and by UNESCO and the Council of Europe. They provided other notions on cultural diversity and strengthened us in our conviction that something has to be done with cultural diversity in workcamps. In addition, the contemporary world, of which workcamps can be said to be a microcosm, provided us with a lot of examples of intercultural misunderstandings. Today’s world can be described as a "global village". Despite the growing potential for contacts between people of different origins and backgrounds, the level of understanding amongst the different cultures in the world remains insufficient and provokes conflict.

International workcamps, as organised by our member organisations, have been used as a tool to foster intercultural learning, reconciliation and dialogue between former enemies ever since the 1920s. Most workcamps, which are organised around the world concern apparently “normal” volunteers, which are not particularly exposed to any conflict. Nonetheless, the misunderstandings and misconceptions about “the other” can be numerous. In the worst case participants even go out of projects with worse stereotypes about each other than before the experience. The seminar aims at fostering the intercultural competence and knowledge about relevant methodologies of the stakeholders (organisers, trainers) of the projects in order to fully use the potential of learning of the international workcamp as a laboratory and microcosm for an experience of living together without a protectionist withdrawal in communitarian attitudes. The project aims at introducing the concept of cultural diversity as a choice for the everyday life beyond the festive and folkloric celebrations of difference on the one hand or its limitation to the issue of racism and discrimination on the other.

The seminar

The seminar will be based on participative methods involving the participants in various reflections about themselves and the other. Issues such as identity and belonging, communitarianism, dimensions of conflict, ways of looking at culture, multilingualism and other will be addressed through various exercises (verbal and non-verbal).

In addition some theoretic inputs will be given to introduce the notion of cultural diversity as laid out by UNESCO, collective memory (Benedict Anderson), cultural distinctions as introduced by Hall, Hofstede and others, the idea of ethno relativism (Milton Bennett), the notion of "bridge beings" as introduced by Amin Maalouf, and other concepts.

Our understanding of cultural diversity is based, beyond others, on [UNESCO's approach](#) of the concept. According to the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by UNESCO in 2001, it is crucial to foster awareness of the added positive value of cultural diversity.

The challenge lies in the understanding that pluralism is more than the cohabitation of various supposedly homogenous entities living side by side, but it reaches every element constituting society up to the very identity of each individual. Both societies and individuals are made of many different influences and origins, which can change during the course of time. It is by accepting this diversity and its ever changing nature that we can stop defining human relations in terms of 'us' and 'them' which induce clearly separated ethnic, religious or otherwise defined communities. International voluntary service projects, as organised by CCIWS member organisations, can have a positive influence in furthering another vision of diversity and help ensure harmonious interaction amongst people and groups. They can help foster a deeper understanding of the concept of cultural diversity beyond easy stereotypes.

A module with exercises that can be used during workcamps will be proposed and reviewed. This module has been written by an EVS volunteer for the last few months. It brings together exercises to promote intercultural learning to be used by workcamp leaders in their camps and theories on cultural diversity. The exercises are meant to 'open up' the minds of workcamp participants to other cultures. We wish to support intercultural learning and to prevent them from having misunderstandings and misconceptions.

This is not the first time the kind of exercises we propose in this module are used in workcamps. More than often, trainers tend to dissect popular training literature, taking out fragments that they believe to be successful during training courses. However, they rarely take into account the surroundings the training literature is embedded in. This means that, even though the idea or practice was successful in a certain context it may not be applicable or less effective in other situations. In this publication, we would like to embed the exercises in what we believe is a context that might prevent these failures to happen.

During the seminar, the participants will review and possibly rewrite parts of the module according to the things we learned on a specific topic.

During the seminar, the participants will be constantly engaged in small group discussions and reflections. Concrete positive and negative examples of intercultural communication they have experienced will be used as a basis for discussion and other case studies will be introduced. The diversity of the group itself will be a source of exploration of the deep issues involved in intercultural dialogue.

As a possible follow-up of the training course, the implementation of what has been learnt during the course in 'laboratory workcamps' in the summer of 2006 is foreseen.

The participants will be active trainers or coordinators of various voluntary service organisations, that are responsible for the training of workcamp leaders in their organisation, or will coordinate a workcamp in the summer of 2006.

They should have a considerable input as trainers within their organisation. They should be willing to multiply and disseminate the outcome of the training course afterwards.