

6. Did you consider...



T-Kit
on International
Voluntary Service

6.1 Voluntary service for “disadvantaged young people

What’s in a word...?

First of all, we should be careful with the term “disadvantaged” young people, since it has a lot of negative connotations and tends to stigmatise the people we are referring to in this chapter. Mostly the young people themselves do not want to be labelled “disadvantaged”. Instead the concept of “social exclusion” would be more appropriate, because it refers to the situation which excludes them and gives them only limited opportunities, and not to the persons. On top of this, the definition of “disadvantage” or “social exclusion” varies according to the situation the person comes from. In Sweden an unemployed person is considered “disadvantaged” whereas this would be inconceivable in the North of England where the high unemployment rate would condemn a ridiculously big part of the population to “social exclusion”, which is not the case. In the same way being a woman should not lead to social exclusion, but in some immigrant groups the position of the woman offers fewer opportunities. It also depends a lot on how the person deals with a particular social situation. Coming from an ethnic minority could engender social exclusion, but a black person could just as well have found access to the same opportunities as the rest of society. Therefore, in this chapter we refer to “young people that need some special attention and additional resources” for participating in a voluntary service programme.

There has been a lot of talk over the last years about IVS as a method to help socially excluded young people to improve their life conditions. But IVS should not be considered to be a goal at the end of the line for this target group. It is one step in the longer-term pathway of the young people in difficulty. There are aims beyond the IVS that are set from the beginning of the work with them (for example independent living, finding a job, etc.). So it is more likely that the youth or social workers initiate an IVS than the socially excluded young persons themselves.

Working with socially excluded people requires quite a lot of sensitivity and special care. Therefore it is desirable to co-operate with organisations with experience in the field of social inclusion. Working with young people

in difficulty brings extra work compared to working with the “classic” target group. However, projects giving young people who need it most a chance to go abroad and become involved in a project, are all the more rewarding and needed in society.

Preparing for the big jump

So if your volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds need more attention, what should the attention focus on? One of the big principles in the preparation of volunteers is uncertainty reduction. New and uncertain situations are scary, especially when you do not have a lot of practice in dealing with them.

Most of the time socially excluded youngsters have had very few opportunities to go abroad or to cope independently with new situations. One way to prepare volunteers for an IVS is to gradually familiarise them with the kind of situation the volunteer will end up in. International exchanges or simply holidays could give the volunteers a better view of what it is like to be in another country (buying train tickets, being confronted with a different language, a different religion etc.), but still in the safe environment of a group of friends from their own country that speak their language. Other methods and techniques to work on intercultural sensitivity are described in the *T-kit on Intercultural Learning* (available to download from www.training-youth.net). The voluntary service aspect can be stimulated by gradually increasing involvement and tasks in volunteering in the home society. Before leaving for an ecological project abroad, the volunteers could take up some responsibilities within a local nature organisation. This way the volunteers already get a feel for working in a project, carrying out tasks, working together with others etc. The stay abroad can be short at first, but gradually prolonged if wished, or longer in a future IVS.

Other concrete measures you can take in order to increase the volunteers’ ability to cope with the new situation, could be a familiar person that joins in the project. This could be a friend, a youth worker, a peer volunteer in the same situation or simply someone that could speak their mother tongue. Visiting the project with the volunteers before the actual (longer-term) voluntary service could reduce considerably the anxiety about where they





will end up. It is very important to build up a trust relationship with your volunteers, so it is advisable to have regular (informal) meetings with them to show that they are respected and listened to. Always involve the volunteers in the decisions that concern them. Furthermore, sending volunteers to a foreign country where the same language is spoken could make the stay considerably less challenging and frightening for them.

The way you go about preparation and the whole project is very important. Especially when working with volunteers with learning difficulties or that have a turbulent or short school record, a formal academic approach might pose a lot of obstacles. Some volunteers might even be (semi) illiterate, so in this case visual material (video, pictures, etc.) or oral contact would probably work best. It is advisable in this case to do away with everything that reminds them of school. In this case, the most appropriate way to learn skills, tasks and even language is learning by doing, on the job.

One of the aims of the voluntary service is to give back some necessary self esteem to the volunteers and to move away from life in the margins of society. Achievement is beneficial to enhance self-esteem; failure punches it down, especially when the volunteer feels responsible for the result of his actions. Therefore it is very important to create successive successes for the volunteers, starting with small tasks but gradually providing bigger challenges, always, however, with enough support and follow-up. Positive feedback (from significant others such as colleagues, peers, etc.) is an important element in raising self-esteem. Failures should be put in perspective and used as a learning experience for the future. But besides work there is also an atmosphere in which the volunteers should feel at ease. You can easily make the volunteers feel welcome by making time for a chat, some jokes, some little attentions, etc. However be careful not to create situations that can make the volunteer feel awkward or a burden by overdoing it (see also Chapter 4.2.1 Motivating the volunteer).

Sometimes motivation is a big problem for socially excluded youngsters, especially when the idea of a voluntary service comes from someone else. It is therefore important to closely monitor the level of motivation and keep it up by using the methods mentioned in the chapter on motivating volunteers. In

order to keep motivation of the volunteer high, it is important to limit the delay between the decision of doing an IVS and leaving for the actual placement. And even though you might manage to keep the volunteers' motivation high, do not forget that they are not isolated persons – sometimes convincing parents, explaining the project to peers etc. is also needed.

It is also important to “tailor-make” the preparation for volunteers coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, since every single one of them might face specific difficulties. Therefore it is best that youth workers who know the young volunteers in question are closely involved in the preparation in order to focus attention on the specific needs or problems that the volunteer might face.

Given the diversity of the target group of socially excluded young people, it is essential to communicate between the sending and hosting organisation as to what this “social exclusion” actually entails for them. The background and profile of the volunteer should be clear to both sides. This raises however the issue of confidentiality: what do you communicate about the volunteer to whom? The support person in the host organisation is probably the one that should get all the necessary details about the volunteers in order to coach them in the best possible manner and to ensure the physical and moral safety of all. Previous health or drug problems should be communicated, as well as possible offences (theft, sexual abuse, etc.), preferably with the consent of the volunteer. Other workers or volunteers in the host organisation mostly do not need to know these private details, unless they need to know for their co-operation with the volunteer.

When the going gets tough...

During a voluntary service, support is very important for the volunteer, again to help the volunteers cope with the new situation. This support should take place at several levels as mentioned in Chapter 4.3 Ongoing support of volunteers: on an intercultural level (explaining cultural differences or misunderstandings), in the professional area (training support: induction to the tasks and the work environment) and in the personal day-to-day life of the volunteer (social support: arranging social activities to meet new people etc.). It is important not to take any skills or knowledge for granted.



If the volunteers have limited social skills or language problems, it is also important to structure their free time in a way that the situation offers the volunteers what they need: friends, contacts in their own language, fun, and so forth. Peer groups can be very useful – you could introduce the volunteers to young people in the host country that share the same music taste, that have a similar background, that could speak the same or a related language etc. One important need the project should address is the need to belong and to be part of a group.

For the well-being of the volunteers, regular contacts with the “home front” could be crucial. This provides them with an escape valve to talk to someone they know, in their own language or dialect. It also shows that people back home are interested in what the volunteers are doing and have not forgotten them. It is also necessary to have regular meetings with a support person in the project in order to discuss the work, their living conditions, feelings and motivation. This is an important thermometer mechanism to check whether the volunteer is still keen on the project (see also Chapter 4.3 Ongoing support of volunteers). If motivation gets a bit low, more time can be put into fun or leisure activities.

Just in case, it is also important to develop an emergency procedure with the volunteer in case something goes really wrong: incredible homesickness, problems at work, accidents and suchlike. This can be a phone number, a sealed envelope with an extra amount of money, an emergency packet of cigarettes for a person that recently quit smoking etc. The conditions in which to use the emergency procedure should be known to all people involved (volunteer, host project, youth worker at home).

If language could be a problem, it is important to keep things very visual – instead of explaining a task verbally you can show it. Contact through working together on practical tasks works best. Free time opportunities should be provided in which the volunteer can do non-verbal things with others. Instead of going to the pub for a chat, you can go and play darts. Talking about your trip becomes showing the photo album. Talking to friends could be playing sports instead. However, through all these little active things the volunteer will probably learn a huge amount of

practical vocabulary. The volunteer should also be prepared for these ways of communication in the preparation process. Different interactive language learning methods are described in the *T-kit on Language Learning* (available to download at www.training-youth.net).

It is not finished yet

What counts for the “classic” volunteers probably counts double for the volunteers coming from a disadvantaged background. After the IVS it is not finished yet! One of the things every volunteer will bump into is the re-entry shock. The volunteer might have progressed or changed tremendously during the IVS, but mostly the home front has not. Back home the friends and family expect the volunteer to be the same as before and the situation often provides them with the same temptations as before (drugs, criminality, social problems, etc.). So it goes without saying that it requires decent preparation to go home again and face the old reality and the people that did not go through such an experience and evolution as the volunteer did.

It is important for the work with young people to make an inventory to see what they have learnt and gained during their period abroad in this voluntary service. It is beneficial to the volunteers’ self-esteem to see improvement and to talk about this achievement with other people, to express themselves. This gives social status and recognition to the volunteers, which before was perhaps not there. Another way to make the volunteers feel valued is to involve them in the preparation of future volunteers. This way you let the volunteers know that they possess something very valuable – an experience to share. The youth worker in the sending organisation back home is also vital in supporting the volunteer when the experience abroad was not felt as positive. The youth worker should be able to turn the volunteer’s experience around in a constructive way and combat the feeling of failure.

Returning home might seem easy, but often when dealing with young people from difficult social backgrounds, there are all kinds of practical challenges, such as obtaining housing support, unemployment benefits, social security etc. after having spent some time away from home, outside the system. Getting



back into the system might require quite a lot of help from the youth worker of the sending organisation (see also Chapter 5.2 Follow-up). Besides these practicalities, the end of an IVS and coming home is also a time to reflect on the next steps to take in the volunteers' pathways depending on the objectives that the volunteer or youth worker (preferably together) had set for the project. Perhaps they strived for more independence and the voluntary service abroad has been a successful test, so that the volunteers now feel comfortable enough to go and live on their own. If not, perhaps next time the volunteers could try a longer placement. Perhaps the volunteers are now skilled to find a job in the area of work done in the placement, or they start an education in this direction. Basically the volunteers go on to plan their lives – better.

6.2 Gender in International Voluntary Service



“What’s gender got to do with it?”

Statistically, more women than men volunteer. For example the European Voluntary Service – a programme of the European Commission (see also Chapter 2.3 Funding and budgeting) – registered in 1999 a significantly higher percentage of female participants (75%) than male ones (25%). There seems to be a trend for more women than men to join voluntary service activities in the western world.

It is not always easy to explain why more women than men seem to volunteer. Some traditionalists might justify this difference in terms of women's perceived “natural interest” in caring activities. Given the fact that most voluntary activities are in the social field and given the fact that many women in our society still play the role of primary carers (for example mother, housewife, nurse, etc.), voluntary work might be more appealing to women. Our view is that women's role as carers is an effect of socialisation and not a natural trait. However, caring and volunteering is still perceived as a feminine activity, so more women go on an IVS than men.

Male social representations of voluntary work are often less positive. Men attribute low social status to unpaid activities in the social and cultural field and this diminishes their motivation to join voluntary service activities. Besides this, many of the personal qualities that voluntary service programmes look for in their candidates are more often found in women than in men, again due to the socialisation experienced by both genders (for example interpersonal skills, co-operative working methods, etc.) Of course men can develop the same level of quality in their human relations, but in general the gap is still to be bridged by them in this respect.

The problem of recruiting male volunteers

The lack of male volunteers to run voluntary programmes and activities is felt by many organisations as a major shortcoming. Organisations working in the social field should be representative of society at large. By equal participation of both men and women in volunteering, the social sector can help to redefine a caring positive image of men and provide role models for other men who might feel reluctant to do so due to the lack of male examples they can identify with. Here are some suggestions that could help you in balancing the gender participation in your voluntary service.

- Ask your previous or current male volunteers about their motivation to join your IVS.
- Ask men outside your organisation what would make them wish to join an IVS.
- Use their answers to create a recruitment message that addresses their points and change your programmes accordingly.
- When presenting your programmes to a wider audience make sure you have a male speaker too.
- Use images of male volunteers in your publications (for example pictures of male volunteers doing traditional feminine activities, such as working with children or cooking, can help other males to identify themselves with these activities. Conversely, you can show your male volunteers doing more traditional masculine activities, such as building a wooden bridge in a forest, to attract others to join your programmes).



The problem of recruiting female volunteers

On the contrary, in some cultural contexts the difficulty is to recruit female volunteers especially for voluntary service abroad. Being aware of the particular difficulties that some young women may have to face to when deciding to participate in voluntary activities abroad can provide organisers with an insight into how to recruit, guide and support them. In the example of young immigrant women from Morocco the young women in question showed significant interest in joining the programme, but they were not in a position to face their parents' opposition. Their parents were not only negative about their participation but were also incapable of understanding what their motivation might be for joining the programme. Factors such as age, employment history and personality play a role in their determination to go against their families' wishes. Some suggestions to overcome these obstacles could be:

- Try to involve their families in the process as much as possible (for example involving an older brother or sister, or another relative open to your programme, could help the parents to change their minds).
- Be ready to clarify their families' doubts and dispel their fears by foreseeing them and responding clearly and directly to questions regarding for example separate male and female living quarters, regarding the type of supervision (and the sex of the supervisors), regarding possibilities to contact or visit their daughter, etc.
- Try to see whether or not some of your activities could become more gender oriented (for example certain activities could be developed in groups of only female volunteers).
- If you have been successful in recruiting female volunteers who experienced strong cultural barriers to join your IVS, ask them to help you to reach out to other young women in the same situation and use them as role models in your recruitment campaigns.

Gender and culture

Gender does not only play a role in equality of participation in your voluntary service programme, it also surfaces in IVS because of the potential cultural differences. Gender perceptions vary from culture to culture. Some cultures are very open when it comes to socialising between men and women while others tend to separate men from women in very rigid ways. A female or male volunteer coming from an open type of culture to

a closed type of culture, for instance, could experience particular problems in terms of adaptation and integration. Situations of this nature are usually intensified by the size of the host community. The smaller the community the higher the risk for "gender shock" (as for "cultural shock").

One way of dealing with this is to refer to gender issues during the preparation of the volunteers.

- If you realise that your volunteers are going to do their IVS in a country where gender relations are very different, make sure to have this as one of the elements of your preparation activities highlighting the potential points of conflict.
- It is more important to teach your volunteers how to find the right negotiation strategies to cope with the potential "gender shock" than to describe solely the cultural differences at stake. If you are a sending organisation, ask your host partner to advise you on the best strategies that your volunteers could use.

Sexual harassment – the darker side of gender relations

Sexual harassment is an important element to take into account when looking at the gender dimension of voluntary service. Experience and numbers show that women are its victims more often than men, and that the main perpetrators of sexual harassment are men. It is important to have a look at what is considered in your country or in the context of your organisation as inappropriate or illegal and what not. This could again be part of the preparation of the volunteers.

Some organisations see the sharing of the same living space by men and women as part of their working philosophy. However, the level of maturity of the people involved may not be sufficient to deal with the ensuing sexual tension. Organisations that promote voluntary work in group settings, where men and women share the same living quarters (for example a dormitory) could be the scene of sexual harassment. Men and women can, of course, share the same living space without it necessarily becoming problematic, but when young people are involved, this can create opportunities for sexual tension and sometimes harassment.

Whether or not your volunteers share the same living quarters, you should make sure that your organisation has thought about



sexual harassment and how to deal with it. Here are a few things for you to consider about mixed living –quarters.

- Make sure that male and female volunteers are conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of sharing the same living –quarters.
- Make sure that your staff or other volunteer support persons are aware of the potential for sexual harassment and violence in this type of placement and that they know how to handle these cases.
- Volunteer preparation activities for this type of placement should not avoid tackling difficult questions such as: What are your doubts and fears about sharing the same living quarters? How to deal with

sexual desire? What constitutes sexual harassment? What are the formal procedures for dealing with it?

- Facilitate the agreement of both gender groups on a common set of rules to be followed by all in the community for the entire duration of the placement and make sure that these rules are followed by all.

Discussing these issues requires from the organisers the openness of mind to admit that desire is an important dimension to take into account when men and women are brought together under the same roof. Confronting people with this reality does not impinge on their harmonious living; on the contrary, it increases their chances of managing the situation in a rewarding way for everybody.

“Gender discrimination” is not always a bad thing

Some voluntary placements may require volunteers to be either female or male, depending on the context and tasks to be executed. Although we tend to see men and women as equal and thus capable of doing the same things, there are circumstances where it might be justifiable to target specifically a female or male volunteer. This is not because the tasks in question are perceived as being either more or less feminine, or more or less masculine, but because there is a strong and legitimate reason to require a person of one gender to develop the work.

For instance, an organisation supporting women battered by their male partners that wishes to engage a volunteer to help them with their personal healing process, may have very strong and legitimate reasons for wanting a female volunteer. Due to the special situation lived by these women it may be advisable, if not an absolute criterion, that the volunteer in question be a woman.

A similar but opposite example could be given in the case of an organisation working with street gangs in a run-down neighbourhood that would like to engage a volunteer to help them with their outreach work. Street gangs are frequently male dominated and structured around “masculine” role models. Therefore, it would be legitimate for the organisation in question to argue that a man would be more suitable for the work on hand than a woman.

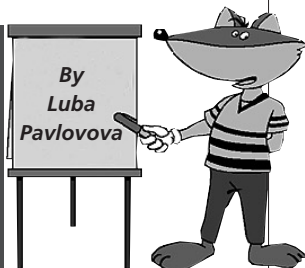
In both cases given as examples it would not be appropriate to accuse any of the organisations of discrimination, since they would only be trying to match the right person to the right job and the gender sensitivity of the work would plainly justify their choices.

6.3 Obstacles to mobility

One of the main objectives of IVS is mobility across borders, mobility to co-operate on international projects, mobility to live an intercultural experience, mobility to foster solidarity without frontiers. The freedom to cross borders to another country is one of basic conditions for running IVS activities. However, there are still obstacles to international mobility that you should surmount when organising your IVS.

The obstacles to mobility differ from country to country. The table below gives an overview

of different mobility situations (at the time of writing) according to the country of origin of the volunteer and the hosting country. Within the European Union, freedom to move around is nearly unlimited, apart from some administrative procedures. Between other countries the situation is often more complicated, especially for a stay of more than three months, despite the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on youth mobility (*R(95)18*) and on the promotion of a voluntary service (*R(94)4*) (see www.coe.fr/youth > policies). Additional useful information on mobility of volunteers within Europe can also be found on the following website: www.sosforevs.org > Volunteer’s mobility





Volunteer comes	from an EU country and has citizenship of this country	from an EU country, does not have citizenship of the country but has a permanent residence permit there	from a European non-EU country	from a non-European country
Country in which the IVS takes place				
EU country	EU law is applicable; for duration of the IVS longer than three months it is necessary to apply to the authority of the hosting country (need to obtain a residence permit)	Some specific conditions can apply; it is necessary to check these conditions with the authority of the host country	National law in the EU country governs it. Some EU countries have a specific agreement among themselves regarding mobility. Necessary to check specific requirements for short (less than three months) and long stay (more than three months) in their territory	National law in the EU country governs it. Some EU countries have signed bilateral agreements with non-European countries regarding the free movement of persons. Necessary to contact the authority of the hosting country
European non-EU country	National law of the country governs it. Necessary for presentation of medical certificate as regards infectious diseases	National law in the country governs it. Possible requirement of a visa, medical certificate as regards infectious diseases	National law of the country governs it. Necessary to check all specific requirements with the authority of the hosting country	National law in the country governs it. Necessary to check all specific requirements with the authority of the hosting country
Non-European country	National law in the country governs it	National law in the country governs it	National law in the country governs it.	National law in the country governs it.

What to think about when sending your volunteer abroad

• Visas

When running short- or long-term IVS activities, very often volunteers may need to get a visa to enter the host country. In general, visas for short stays (for example work camps) are valid for a maximum of three months. In most cases volunteers need to have a valid passport and fulfil some additional criteria (for example passport valid for at least six months, certificates of health insurance, etc.). Usually, they are asked to present a letter of confirmation from the hosting organisation and sometimes an interview conducted by

the embassy representatives could be held with them. Different countries also have different visa costs. Obtaining a visa can take from a week to several months, so start the procedures early enough. When running a long-term IVS the visa is a pre-condition to get a residence permit in the host country.

• Residence permit

One of the possible obstacles already listed in the table above can be the obtaining of a "right of residence" for the volunteers for the full duration of their IVS. A residence permit authorises a person to reside on the territory of the host country. It is usually required for a stay of three months and longer. It is important



to check in advance what kind of documents the volunteers might need in order to get this permit (for example a certified translated birth certificate, proof of sufficient resources, insurance cover, visa, letter of the hosting organisation, police check, etc.).

• Work permit

The IVS is not a substitute for work. However, in some countries volunteers need to get a work permit because these countries do not have a legal category for “volunteers”. In this respect volunteers could be considered as workers and the hosting organisation has to obtain working permits for them from the local employment authorities. Check before sending your volunteers whether they need a work permit in the host country, and if they do, where to apply and what procedure to follow.

• Social insurance schemes and additional insurance

The social insurance schemes differ from country to country. It is also important to find out whether the volunteers are insured or not under the social security scheme of the host country. In some cases volunteers must take out additional insurance (repatriation in case of illness or accident or death, third-party insurance, etc.). Some countries have signed bilateral agreements regarding medical treatment. Find out via your social insurance or through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what the situation will be.

• Taxation

So-called compulsory contributions, which include tax and social security contributions, could create a nasty financial aftertaste during or after your voluntary service. Some countries regard pocket money or board and lodging as taxable income. In this respect volunteers can be subject to deductions at source or after the voluntary service. The risk of double taxation (once in the host country and again in the home country) also exists, even though it should not. Contact your tax office to clarify what regime the volunteers will be under during the voluntary service abroad and after returning.

• Necessary medical certificates

When going abroad the volunteers may also need documents, which certify that they do not have any infectious diseases. Sometimes

it is enough to hold such a medical certificate, which is issued by a health institution in the volunteer's country of origin. However, some countries do not recognise such certificates and may ask volunteers to get an additional medical examination in the host country. Your IVS partner can help you by passing on information regarding the rules applicable in the host country.

• Unemployment and other benefits

Going abroad often has consequences for the different benefits that young persons may receive in their host country. When coming back, procedures to obtain the benefits again often have to be started from scratch. Therefore it is important to lobby your unemployment office or social welfare office about the benefit of an IVS and hopefully find some understanding in the system. In some countries there are even partnerships between the employment office and IVS organisations for giving unemployed young people a voluntary work experience abroad. In these financially challenging cases, when coming back from an IVS, there should be considerable support from the sending organisation in order to rearrange the life of the volunteer.

6.4 Crisis management

One of the main issues organisations have to face when organising an activity is the capacity to foresee disaster and manage it effectively should it occur. We seldom think that things can go wrong, however, crises do happen and being aware of that is the first step towards working out ways of preparing for and managing them. Our purpose is not so much to tell you how to prevent a crisis, since a crisis is in its nature unexpected. Instead, we will try to raise your awareness of the main elements that constitute a crisis and to give you some examples of successful strategies implemented so far by other voluntary work organisations to deal with crises. In this chapter we will look at crisis management both from a global point of view and from an IVS angle.

Some of the examples in this chapter may seem far-fetched to you (for example fire, flooding, drug overdose, etc.) but, unfortunately, all our



examples are based on true stories. Of course, in general, most voluntary service organisations show very small percentages of crisis situations.

Defining crisis

You have a crisis if the situation is:

- unexpected
- requires immediate attention
- is potentially serious and harmful to your organisation or the people related to your project
- causes or threatens to cause one or more of your partners, or your organisation, to stop their normal activities to respond to the situation

Note! As you can see, we are not talking about a misunderstanding that results in a problem or conflict, but an event that due to its proportions strongly destabilises the work of your organisation and forces you to stop your normal activities to respond to it. Of course, a misunderstanding, if not properly tackled, may lead to a serious enough problem to create a crisis in your organisation: for example a volunteer overhears his tutor saying how terrible his character is, the following day the volunteer refuses to show up at work, the tutor gets upset, the volunteer insults him, the tutor slaps the volunteer in the face, the volunteer sues the tutor for physical abuse, the project is closed down.

A few general features

It is often difficult to decide precisely on the contours of a crisis. A crisis may present interchangeable characteristics and you will seldom know when it all started, if there were indicative signs that you could have read, or how the incident will evolve. A great deal of your intervention will be in terms of making sure that a crisis does not put your organisation and the people you work for and with at too big a risk, and that you can keep “business as usual”. Of course, your response will always depend on the context and the resources that you have available.

Here are some examples of crises:

Case 1: a key staff member in a sending organisation ran off with the organisation's money. The bank blocked their account and a group

of volunteers that was supposed to leave for their host placements in a week's time saw their tickets cancelled by the travel agency for lack of payment. The sending organisation was unable to pay its debts and was forced to declare bankruptcy, closing down all of its projects.

Case 2: a major flood destroyed the site where a host organisation had its work camp. The volunteers were not injured but an emergency evacuation operation was necessary. The entire region was under water for three days and the work camp was in a rather inaccessible spot. The volunteers and their tutors remained in the camp without food and clean water for two days until a helicopter was able to rescue them. Alarmed parents and relatives invaded the offices of the sending organisations looking for news and some of them flew immediately to the country where the flood took place and demanded the host organisation's support with logistics.

Case 3: a volunteer working in a kindergarten is accused by one of the families of sexually abusing their child. The volunteer is arrested and although no evidence against the volunteer was found, the host organisation decided to stop all their IVS activities. The volunteer became extremely depressed and attempted suicide while in the host country. The family of the volunteer brought the host organisation to trial for emotional and psychological damages to their own child.

In some of the cases (natural disasters, riot, etc.) it is quite obvious that the hosting organisation cannot be held responsible, but the situation becomes a lot more tricky if there is reason to believe that the crisis stems from negligence and mismanagement from the hosting organisation or one of its collaborators (in the case of sexual abuse, fraud, etc.). In this case the organisation will get a lot of (negative) media coverage and they will be judged on the professionalism of their reaction. In general the speed of the reaction and the spreading of appropriate information to the relevant persons is crucial in dealing with a crisis. As a hosting organisation, you are responsible for ensuring the volunteers' safety in any situation and preferably the continuation of the IVS.

Preparing for a crisis – be sure to prepare well in advance!

Preventing a crisis is something that most of the time we cannot do because of its unexpected



nature; it is therefore best to be prepared beforehand on how to deal with it when it happens. An organisation can prepare its staff and volunteers by discussing potential problematic situations in advance. Below you find some steps that can help you be ready for a crisis, but remember, no management tool is a ready-to-use recipe, you must therefore adapt the steps below to your own organisational reality.

Step 1: create a special team to deal with crises

If you have a pre-determined group of people in your organisation to deal with a crisis, when it happens you will be able to respond a lot quicker to it. In this way you will avoid having to decide who does what, you just activate your crisis team. We recommend that you have in this team:

- a co-ordinator
- an internal and an external liaison person (i.e. one person responsible for keeping the organisation informed and another one in charge of all contacts with the outside world)
- a reporter (someone that writes reports on the crisis and makes sure that all documents are filed and easy to find)
- a media spokesperson (if necessary)

Please note that one person can have more than one role. Do these people need to have special skills to deal with different types of crises? Where can they get these skills? There is no point in putting together a team to deal with crises if you do not provide its members with the necessary training to do their job correctly.

Make sure that everybody in your organisation has the contact details of the team members and that they can be reached at all times. One more point: dealing with a crisis can be psychologically draining, thus, sometimes it will be good to give your team a break. Therefore, make sure that you have a back-up group of people to allow for rotation of team members when the crisis becomes too prolonged.

Step 2: create a group of external experts

Many times you will realise that you actually need outside expertise to deal with a crisis, (for example a lawyer, a psychologist, a conflict

mediator, a translator, etc.). We thus recommend that you try to secure professional contacts with experts in advance of a crisis (they can either be paid or voluntary). Distribute amongst your staff and key volunteers a list of the names and addresses of these experts and a description of each person's role and skills with clear instructions of how and when to contact them.

Step 3: create detailed contact lists

Many organisations find themselves in quite a bit of trouble when in the midst of a crisis they do not know how to get in touch with their staff, volunteers, their families, sending or host partners and other relevant organisations or people. To avoid this from happening to your organisation we recommend that you create contact lists for:

- staff
- volunteers
- volunteers' families
- sending and host partners
- emergency numbers of hospitals, police, fire brigade, etc.
- diplomatic contacts and other governmental authorities
- newspapers and other media
- sponsors of your programme

Make sure that your lists have notes on how and when to contact these people and that they are regularly updated. This is a must for your volunteers' list and sending and hosting partners. In a crisis situation, for example when a volunteer needs to be evacuated, the last thing that you want to happen is to find out that your volunteer is not living at that address anymore.

Step 4: create a communication protocol (a set of rules and procedures)

Who should contact the different parties involved? What are the preferred means of communication (e-mail, telephone, mobile, beeper, fax)? How fast must communication be? What should be the format and content of this communication? These are some of the questions your protocol should try to answer to. Make sure that someone is always available 24 hours a day to respond to a crisis.



Step 5: prepare a “crisis headquarters”

Select an alternative location for managing the crisis if your office is not adequate or available. This is particularly true in the case of a natural disaster that might make access to your premises impossible; during this time you must find somewhere else to do your basic tasks. This alternative office should have the necessary basic equipment (for example a telephone) and this should be prepared in advance.

Step 6: prepare a “media kit”

Many crises attract unwanted media attention. In these cases you should have information on your organisation ready to use: a media kit. Sometimes a situation gets out of hand because people in your organisation do not know what to say to the media, or because they give conflicting messages to different media. A well-prepared media kit can help you in making sure that whatever is said about your crisis is what you want people to know and not the other way around. Update your media kit regularly and address the specific training needs of your media spokesperson and staff, namely on how to deal with media inquiries. In this way you will be able to use the media to help you solve the crisis and not to make it worse.

Step 7: create a crisis plan

Make sure that you write down in a single document all the steps and procedures to be taken when dealing with a crisis in your organisation and distribute this amongst the members of your “crisis team” as well as staff or key volunteers. A crisis plan should be concise and easy to read and most of all, easy to find when needed.

Step 8: make appropriate copies of everything and store in a secure location

Copy the crisis plan and all the relevant contact lists and store a hard copy of these documents in at least one secure location in addition to keeping a hard copy in your office. It sounds like a lot of work but, once more, it is up to you to analyse your needs and adapt these suggestions to your organisation. But, remember, if your office falls victim

to a burglary or a fire, the chances of getting back vital information to keep on doing your work can be very slim. Having some fundamental files kept in a safe place outside your office can prevent you from a lot of hassle.

Step 9: get adequate insurance coverage

Having the right kind of insurance can save you a lot of trouble. Many insurance companies are used to provide services to IVS organisations and they will be able to help you to choose the insurance policy best adapted to your needs (for example work camp placements versus long-term voluntary work).

Responding to a crisis – what to do immediately after?

Very well, we looked at ways of preparing for a crisis but what to do when it happens? The following are some of the simple steps to take when dealing with a crisis.

Step 1: activate your communication protocol

Step 2: activate your “crisis team”

Step 3: designate the necessary external expertise to deal with the crisis

Step 4: get in touch with your insurance company

Step 5: document what is happening

Remember: having accurate records is the best way to respond to potential criticism and is crucial if you wish to evaluate your own response to the situation.

Step 6: update and co-ordinate the response

Identify people who should receive information on the crisis on a proactive basis. Do not let people come to you with questions about your handling of the situation; take the initiative of informing them of what you are doing and showing how professional you are.

Step 7: wrap up the crisis

Determine when the crisis is over and identify the follow-up to be taken. Do not forget to conduct a post-crisis evaluation.



The importance of the post-crisis evaluation

How can you make sure that you have learned from your crisis and that you will be able to prevent similar things from happening or, if they do, that you can handle them better and more efficiently? The answer to this question is simple; you must make sure that you evaluate your management of the crisis when it is over. The following is a concise but helpful checklist for your post-crisis evaluation:

- 1 How do you feel the crisis was managed? (extremely well, well, fairly well, poorly).
- 2 Did the members of your "crisis team" work together successfully?
- 3 Did the "crisis team" deal well with the internal and external contacts and external expertise?
- 4 Did the "crisis team" deal well with the media?
- 5 Was a consistent crisis report available?
- 6 Is there a complete crisis file?
- 7 Was there any point at which the crisis seemed to have changed for the better or worse?
- 8 Were there any areas where you felt that the management of the crisis could have been improved?
- 9 What procedures could you implement to incorporate these improved methods into future crisis management situations?