

Impact study on Action 2 (European Voluntary Service) of the YOUTH Programme in Poland¹

By Dominik Mytkowski

The paper presents methodology and the evaluation results of Action 2 - **European Voluntary Service** the Youth Programme in the area of the Programme's impact on young people. The evaluation study has been commissioned by the Youth Programme National Agency in Poland. The order to conduct such evaluation study was formulated by the European Commission.

1. Evaluation

The basic purpose of the evaluation of the Youth Programme was to assess the extent to which the general objectives of the Youth Programme and the specific objectives of individual Actions have been achieved, and to analyse the impact of the Youth Programme on young people, organisations and broader social environment. Another purpose of the study was to formulate recommendations for the future editions of the Programme.

In order to investigate the impact of the Youth Programme on **young people** (youth) the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the estimated impact of the Youth Programme on young people with regard to its general and specific objectives?
2. What is the estimated impact of the Youth Programme on young people with regard to the annual priorities ?
3. What is the estimated impact of the Youth Programme on young people with regard to the multicultural learning, the acquisition of new social and personal abilities and skills enhancing personal development and employability of young people?
4. What is the estimated impact of the Youth Programme on young people with regard to an increased involvement of young people in social life and a decreased likelihood of being involved in risk behaviour?
5. What is the estimated impact of the Youth Programme on young people with regard to the access of all young people to the Youth Programme, organised, non-organised and with less opportunities?

2. Methodology

The research methodology was based on a model qualitative approach. According to a fragment of the *Analysis of qualitative data* by Miles and Huberman² "Qualitative study emphasises the 'experience gained' and is recommendable in recognising meaning which people associate with events, processes and structures of their lives (...) and in connecting these types of meaning with the social reality which surrounds those people". For the authors of this evaluation study to recognise "the experience gained" and to identify "its meaning" was the main task and the biggest challenge. In order to collect the fullest possible research material in each phase of research data collection triangulation was used.

¹ Based on: *Impact study on Actions 1, 2, 3 and 5 of the YOUTH Programme in Poland with regard to the preparation of the future generation of programmes in the field of education, training and youth. Final Report*, Polish Evaluation Society for Youth Programme National Agency, Foundation for the Development of the Educational System, Warsaw 2003

² Miles M.B., Huberman A.M., *Analiza danych jakościowych [Analysis of qualitative data]*, Trans Humana, Białystok 2000.

Triangulation is a research strategy involving reciprocal verification of data on two levels of collecting thereof. On the level of methodologies triangulation involves the use of varied, mutually complementary methods of collecting data; in the reported research focused group interviews, individual in-depth interviews and document analysis were used. The assumed research strategy allowed for the collection of the fullest possible information and in particular it allowed for a reciprocal complementation and verification of the collected data. The other triangulation level is used on the level of information sources and involves the collecting of information from various groups of respondents. This makes it possible to obtain information on the given subject from persons who possibly might have a different point of view in reference to the matter in question. In the reported research opinions of the Youth NA staff (Director of the Agency and co-ordinators of individual Actions) and the Programme beneficiaries (co-ordinators of projects realised by organisations and project participants) were collected. Interviews were also made with representatives of local authorities from the areas where the evaluated organisations/groups operate, and with representatives of national authorities responsible for designing youth policy on national level. Another important source of information were factual data contained in documents (annual reports and reports from project implementation). During the research no quantitative data were collected; the researchers used the material collected earlier by the National Agency.

Expert knowledge in the area of evaluation and extensive professional experience enabled the researchers to confirm the efficiency of using triangulation in the research procedure. Thanks to this the researcher obtains full, rich and varied information broadened by the context of the role which the respondent plays in the initiative subject to evaluation. Such information is interpreted more easily and thus, is more useful in the decision making process.

In the research the following methods were used:

- **Individual in-depth interview** with the Director of the Youth National Agency;
- **Individual in-depth interviews** with co-ordinators of individual Actions in the Youth National Agency. Four persons were interviewed.
- Two **evaluation seminars** on national level, with Youth Programme participants. During the seminars the following research methods were used:
 - focused group interviews;
 - discussions;
 - group work.

The topics of individual sessions included:

1. Impact of the Youth Programme on participants and beneficiaries.
2. Impact of the Youth Programme on participating organisations and wider social community;
3. What did you like about the Youth Programme?
4. What changes would you suggest in relation to the Youth Programme?

A total of 94 people representing 58 organisations took part in two evaluation seminars which were organised on 23-24 April and 8-9 May 2003.

There were 50 people representing Action 1, **28 people representing Action 2**, 33 people – Action 3 and 18 people – Action 5. The total number of people representing individual Actions does not make the total number of participants because 20 people represented more than just one Action, and 5 people stated that they participated in all Actions of the Youth Programme. The research group consisted of 52 co-ordinators, 34 beneficiaries and 8 people who declared that they were both co-ordinators and beneficiaries.

- **Case studies** of 16 selected organisations participating in the Youth Programme. In the case studies the following procedures were applied:

- document analysis (reports, reports from project implementation);
- analysis of websites of studies organisations (whenever it was available);
- individual in-depth interview with a president/leader of the studies organisations;
- individual in-depth interview with a co-ordinator(-s) of projects implemented by the studied organisation;
- focused interview / group interview with participants (beneficiaries) in projects implemented by the studied organisation;
- individual in-depth interview with representatives of local authorities from the area where the organisation operates.

In total, in the case studies 150 people were interviewed.

A report from each case study contained the following information:

- Details on the organisation;
 - Activities realised in the organisation with the support from the Youth Programme (a brief description);
 - Impact of the Youth Programme on young people;
 - Impact of the Youth Programme on youth workers, organisations and local communities;
 - Impact of the Youth Programme on regional policy;
 - Recommendations for the future generations of the Programme;
 - Action-specific recommendations from the studies organisation;
 - Details of the study itself (date, details of the interviewees, etc.).
- **Individual in-depth interviews** with representatives of the Ministry of National Education and Sports and representatives from the Polish Parliament (a Parliamentary Subcommittee for Youth Affairs) responsible for designing youth policy. Three persons were interviewed.
 - **Document analysis** (annual reports, reports from project implementation submitted to the Youth NA, etc.).
 - A competition for an **essay – diary** on the topic “My adventure with the Young Programme”. Within the evaluation research a competition for a short essay-diary on the topic “My adventure with the Youth Programme” was scheduled. The most interesting papers were to be awarded and published on the NA’s website. The authors of the diaries were asked to reflect on the following questions:
 - How did you become a Youth Programme participant?
 - What were your expectation concerning your participation in the Programme?
 - In what activities did you participate?
 - What is your personal benefit from your participation in the Programme?
 - Has your participation in the Programme had any impact on your community in which you live, learn, act?
 - Has anything changed in you life in relation to your participation in the Programme?

Apart from that, the authors were asked to provide the following details: age, status (pupil/student, young employee, unemployed), place of residence (region), living conditions.

Only 3 persons took part in the competition. Their works have been analysed as part of this report.

3. Results

3.1. Impact of the Youth Programme on young people (youth)

The Youth Programme has a particular impact on young people as far as a change of their attitude towards their community is concerned – young people are more encouraged to carry out activities for the benefit of their closes community and are more active in social life. Moreover, the stimulation of activity triggers greater creativity, with particular emphasis on the fact that most of the ideas come from youth themselves.

Participation in the Programme helps to develop attitudes of responsibility, enterprise, independence and resourcefulness. Young people become more self-confident and self-reliant. A change in attitudes also concerns the young people's relations with others – they become more open and tolerant. International projects are an opportunity for young people to see and understand the variety of European cultures, to overcome prejudice and stereotypes relating not only to foreigners but also to the disabled.

Participation in Action 2 – European Voluntary Service – apart from all of the advantages mentioned above, facilitates young people's social integration, encourages them to take active part in the life of their community. For many people their participation in a voluntary service project realised abroad is a chance to gain experience and knowledge which increase their employability and/or further educational opportunities sometimes in the country where the project was realised. Project implementation can be a basis for making international contacts and relations both in the private sphere and in professional areas. All project participants agree that voluntary work is a chance for intellectual development, gaining experience, learning foreign languages and cultures.

3.1.1. Encouragement of social integration and more active participation in community life

Both the volunteers themselves and the persons who trained them emphasised that participation in voluntary service projects develops one's sense of responsibility. For many participants it was a lesson on how to live in which they learnt to work with people and for people. On the other hand, it also offered them "satisfaction with being able to help others".

Participation in projects spurs young people into action that benefits their local communities. One of the volunteers said immediately after returning home: "Now I will help people from my town to do something interesting".

One of the examples of how to use ideas seen elsewhere is the work of a volunteer from Wroclaw who realised his Future Capital on a project that involved buying a climbing wall: "I saw something like this abroad. This was what the kids from our commune had been dreaming about". The commune authorities gave their recommendation for the implementation of this project, and the local school headmaster offered his support.

A co-ordinator of voluntary service projects from the Semper Avanti Association in Wroclaw said that voluntary service has changed the lives of the young people in her charge: "The well known pattern: school – work – home gets changed. Young people free themselves from the prevailing Polish cultural model, they realise that they can live differently. Volunteers do not think about getting a job because they know that there are other ways to personal fulfilment. When they return from voluntary service, young people usually do not want to return to the well know path – their ideas of life and themselves have changed, they've become free".

3.1.2. Improved employability

Participants of voluntary service projects have practically no professional experience, therefore the experience they acquire while working on EVS projects is perceived as a valuable item in the CV. For many participants, it is their very first work experience. One of the volunteers said that he wanted to

work with young people after graduation and that he hoped that his experience as a volunteer would be an asset to the prospective employers. Another volunteer added that voluntary service is an investment for the future, it is not a single chance but something that opens more doors.

Many volunteers take part in projects immediately after finishing high school when they do not have any specific plans for the future. One of the volunteers said: This is a chance for those who don't know what to do after leaving high school. Participation in voluntary service helps young people to define their interests more clearly, to choose a job or a field of studies and sometimes, as the volunteers themselves emphasise, simply to grow up. However, as one of the co-ordinators of voluntary service projects said, for many persons it is still too early to think about their future professional careers. They just expect that participation may be helpful later on.

Work as a volunteer inspires many participants to act after they have returned from the projects. One of the volunteers said: "Now I see new opportunities in Poland, of which I had no idea before". Sometimes the experience of voluntary service influences the choice of a professional career and becomes a starting point for the fulfilment of one's life plans. Some participants become more ambitious – they decide to finish school because they finally see a point in learning. Many of them go to study to the country where they have served as volunteers.

Nearly all volunteers who took part in this study emphasised that "voluntary service is a school of life". One of the co-ordinators of voluntary service projects added: "When they start, people are unconfident, but when they come back, they are happy and strong". This "personal strengthening" is also noted by a co-ordinator of voluntary service projects from the Semper Avanti Association in Wroclaw: "Volunteers return changed, with a new sense of being able to achieve something, with new self-confidence, with open minds and fresh ideas. Usually, those on short-term projects want to continue working on longer ones".

For a great majority of voluntary service project participants, this is the very first experience of professional work and the first opportunity to acquire specific skills. One of the volunteers said that "this was useful pleasure". Others saw their participation as a chance to test themselves or to get practical experience that they had no opportunity to earn before.

Some volunteers think about realising their Future Capitals. For example, one of the volunteers used his to make a video documentary on voluntary service which now serves as training material on voluntary service and is used by his sending organisation.

However, not all volunteers decide to realise their Future Capitals because, as they say: "We are not really able to use it – it is difficult to transform dreams into a project".

3.1.3. Intellectual development, experience, foreign language skills and getting to know other cultures

Respondents named the possibility "to acquire experience in interpersonal contacts" as one of the main benefits to be derived from participation in EVS projects. These projects usually involve intensive interaction and many emotional experiences. They also afford an opportunity to get to know different ways of thinking, opinions and lifestyles. One of the volunteers said: "When choosing a project, you have to be aware that you will get in contact with different people, and not all of them will be clean and perfumed. These people live differently, have different upbringing systems and different lifestyles. Whatever you say, it is an encounter of different cultures, which I had an opportunity to experience. You've got to remember that in order to understand the other side you always have to choose dialogue! While in Italy, I frequently thought in my Polish terms and I behaved according to my Polish upbringing. I forgot that what is "normal" for me is not necessary as "normal" for them, and vice versa! That's why you must not forget that you are in a different country and a different culture, and dialogue is the only way to go!"

Volunteers emphasise the educational aspect of their trips, the fact that they “expand the horizons of your mind”. This is how one of the volunteers summed this up: “You get to a higher intellectual level”. Working in one of the EU countries is also an opportunity to learn about the EU procedures from the practical side. One of the volunteers stressed: “I moved from [European studies] theory to practice”.

The main reasons why many volunteers choose to participate in EVS projects is to get to know other countries. This stems from the conviction that one can truly get to know a country and its people only by staying with them for a long time and through ordinary everyday interaction. This is what one of the volunteers said shortly after she returned from a long-term project in Italy: “I have always wanted to spend a longer period abroad, and I wanted this for the cultural experience that’s deeper than what tourist trips could offer”. All participants agreed that this was indeed “a cultural experience” which let them get to know a country “truly” “by becoming familiar with the mentality of its people, their habits, their greetings, their meals...”

For all volunteers, on both short-term and long-term projects, voluntary service is a perfect occasion to learn foreign languages in the “practical dimension”. This is true “breaking down of language barriers” because the interaction is focused on “communication” and not necessarily on “grammatical correctness”. Communication is the winner because, as the volunteers said: “One learns to use a language, to handle it”. Another volunteer added: “This doesn’t compare to any school”.

4. Recommendations for future generation of programmes

4.1. More precise rules of what voluntary service is

In the context of Action 2 the question of Youth Programme priorities comes to the fore once again. Some of the respondents doubt if they are actually applied to the selection of participants: “there are some priorities but in the end the best candidates are selected anyway, that is those who speak foreign languages and have good PC skills”. One of the co-ordinators said: “there is a priority but it’s difficult to put in practice because there is no money for youth training and preparation”. Considering this, the respondents suggest that the priorities be set “in a more reasonable way”.

The problem has been identified by the National Agency as well. According to the Action co-ordinator the priority calling for including youth with less opportunities “sometimes has a reverse effect on us as Programme managers because it is us who convince sending organisations: please, do not send AISEC people, a student from Warsaw who completed a traineeship or a course abroad is not a good candidate for a volunteer, he does not fit in this Programme. In response they begin to promote young people from broken families from regions with lots of former state-owned farms, want to send them as volunteers and search for suitable projects. So who do you think would be a better candidate from the point of view of hosting organisations? Surely, the one who is experienced and speaks foreign languages. So, the communication between sending and hosting organisations becomes difficult because it is difficult to find a hosting project suitable for youth with less opportunities (...) and it is the hosting organisations that selects volunteers”.

4.2. Better control over project implementation

According to some co-ordinators and also some volunteers, there should be better control over the implementation of voluntary service projects. It happens that organisations treat their volunteers as cheap man power and full-time employees. In such situations the volunteers’ possibilities to realise project objectives are limited.

There also should be better control over hosting organisations because sometimes volunteers are not provided with any assistance, there was a case when a volunteers had nowhere to stay. A representative of a sending organisation said: “such control should be really well-organised and efficient. Right now even negative evaluation reports have no impact on eliminating an unreliable organisation from the list of potential project partners”.

On the other hand, it is also important to increase the scope of responsibility of hosted volunteers “because now they can withdraw from the project without taking consequences of it”. To prevent this, an introduction of a legally binding contract and a money deposit requirement was proposed in relation to volunteers, “which would be a guarantee that the volunteer would not withdraw from the project just before it starts”. One of the organisations thought it would be advisable to introduce a possibility to “replace” one volunteer with another within the same contract, “whenever the volunteer is not suitable for the project”.

4.3. More homogenous rules of approving projects by National Agencies in different countries

According to voluntary service project participants the National Agencies from different countries should elaborate common standards of priorities. In Action 2 involving exchange of volunteers the general Youth Programme priorities should be compatible. A volunteer’s participation in a project should be approved and monitored by both national agencies: the sending and the hosting one. Sometimes it happens that the sending agency approves the application, but the hosting agency rejects it. This makes it impossible to send another volunteer in the same period of time. The Programme should contain an action scheme to prevent such situations. One of the proposed solutions included an option where an application is approved by the hosting agency and automatically the sending agency pays out a grant for the volunteer’s travel to the place of project implementation.

4.4. Better preparation of volunteers before their departure

According to representatives of several organisations, it is necessary to improve the process of preparing the volunteer to participate in the project. In their opinion, preparatory visits should be available to all volunteers who are to participate in long-term projects, not only to disabled ones.

A representative of an organisation which is very active in the field of EVS said that the National Agency should drop the exclusive responsibility to organise training events for volunteers and delegate some tasks to its Regional Centres.

Apart from that, it is advisable to consider a prolongation of the allowed age limit relating to voluntary service participants (up to 26 years) so that young people could be able to participate in projects after their graduation from a university instead of before or during the studies.

4.5. More support in formal matters relating to the volunteer’s departure

Sometimes it takes a long time before the selection committee takes its decision whether to approve or reject the project and sometimes the volunteer receives the notice of the approval of his participation in the project much too late. This results in a situation where a volunteer travels without a visa because there was too little time to arrange it and then he has to travel back home or prolong his visa, which in the end increases the project costs.

4.6. Updating the project data base

Representatives of organisations often complained about the out-of-date information available on the “SOS for EVS” website.

The data base should also contain more detailed project descriptions.