Just Volunteers

[ Non Formal ] Education for Sustainable Development

Since its inception after World War I, International Voluntary Service (IVS) has represented a unique form of people action capable of creating strong connections between local action and global action, building bridges among the three dimensions that UN Secretary General considered crucial in his call for a Decade of Action. Born out of the conscientious objection movement’s work for peace, the world network of IVS coherently integrates today climate justice as an inevitable brick in building a sustainable future and creating a just and fair society. Addressing the unequal allocation of benefits and burdens by relating climate change to matters of justice and human rights can only be done by leveraging the interconnectedness of peoples and communities beyond territories and boundaries, stimulating transformational change through learning: IVS thus electrifies local communities and authorities and mobilises them around projects benefiting their environments and societies; but it also reshapes the prism through which volunteers themselves see their own home societies and the impact and consequences of their daily lifestyle on peoples and cultures thousands of miles away.

The meaningfulness of the concrete actions implemented in the field by IVS organisations to support the Sustainable Development Goals therefore relies as much in the concrete local impact of the activities as in the non formal education value of collective, volunteer work. The qualitative and quantitative data collected by CCIVS over the last 5 years reflects this unique capacity of volunteering as an intended, organised form of experiential learning and non formal education.

On one side, the content of more than 100 semi-structured interviews and focus groups with IVS hosting communities from all regions of the world resonate with the representative experience of an organic farm in Wales: “The technical result has been that we’ve been more productive over the last two years, the quality of the produce is better, the yield is higher. But the most significant change is the cultural aspect that has been brought to the organisation. It has contributed more diversity and made our work more interesting. As I said, it brings us together, but I think it also makes us realise that when people come in from the outside they appreciate how much of a community we have here, it makes us think about how important having the organic farm is, and it makes us realise that we are something special and a bit unique, that we do something together which is special and hopefully by sharing this we can make it something that other people might do and take away and get involved in their own communities”.

On the other side, the over 2000 surveys gathered from international and local volunteers before and after their service show a statistically significant increase in their feeling of possessing more technical and manual skills (+9.5%), as well as more knowledge and ideas (+6.7%), useful to protect and preserve cultural and natural heritage and diversity. They also believe more strongly that local knowledge can contribute to sustainability (+5%), and reportedly think more about the consequences of their daily actions on the environment, culture and society (+8.2%). Important changes between before and after the projects also concern the percentage of participants who believe they have a better understanding of more specific and interrelated thematic issues: from the Sustainable Development Goals (+15%) to Bio-construction and earth building (+10%); from Sustainable food production (+8.3%) to Carbon Offsets actions (+6.7%); from Global Warming and Climate Change: (+5%) to Water and Land Rights (+5%). Finally, statistics indicating medium to strong correlations
between the perceived meaningfulness of the work done and such diverse items as personal motivation, knowledge, active participation, but also trust, feelings of integration, inclusion and respect for other cultures, confirm the central educational role of voluntary work also for the development of soft skills and competences essential for promoting the kind of living and working together that can support sustainable solutions.

In addition to the considerable changes in the quality and extent of the participants’ understanding of crucial sustainability issues and in their feeling of possessing the necessary knowledge and skills to raise to the challenge, the impact research carried by CCIVS also reported important increases in the percentage of volunteers and community representatives who now feel *personally responsible* in their daily life to actively engage for the construction of Peace and the creation of inclusive societies (+20%), to actively engage to address the consequences of Climate Change and promote Climate Justice (+16.7%), and to actively engage for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (+16.7%).

CCIVS works with individuals and communities brought together by the shared believe that international voluntary service, generating global shifts in people’s mindsets while bringing local, practical impact, can be an essential answer to the *urgent and ambitious* action that the UN Secretary General called for: by working and learning together for social and climate justice, we are not ‘just volunteers’; we become, just volunteers.

Francesco Volpini  
Graduate Research Associate, Research Centre for the Local Public Human Resources and Policy Development (LORC), 龍谷大学 / Ryukoku University  
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