



Walking the M.I.L.E.

Measuring
Impact
Long
Medium-Term
Engagement of
and

M.I.L.E.

Walking the M.I.L.E.

Measuring Impact of Long and Medium-Term (LMTV) Engagement

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

Author

Francesco Volpini

Data analysis

Mauro Carta, Tariro Mhepo, Katalin Miklós, Francesco Volpini

Researchers

Célia Binet, Mauro Carta, Kiary Coronel Lobo, Elisa Gaddò, Wricha Ghimire, Yagadarshin Kannan, Baha Kesici, Fiorela Mastrokalou, Tariro Mhepo, Katalin Miklós, Piero Tapia, Nam Tonga, Alexandra Vasileiou, Marinela Ziu, Krista Zöhtsök

Editorial Group

Vicky Lovelock, Julieta Blanco

Layout

JavierLarios.com

Liked this report?

Visit our website: www.ccivs.org

This project is co-financed by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Council of Europe, and the Council of Europe cannot be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.





This publication is designed to be interactive. To help you move around easily, we've added buttons inside the document and menus. Just click on them, and the PDF will take you directly to the page you want. This makes reading and finding information much simpler! Enjoy our report



M.I.L.E.

➤ About the project	5
➤ Volunteers	19
➤ Communities	28
➤ Organisations	34
➤ Cross-cutting themes	40
➤ Conclusions & recommendations	48
➤ Annexes	54



Executive summary

5

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

- ↗ What is M.I.L.E.?6
- ↗ How the evidence was produced7
- ↗ What the research shows8
- ↗ Cross-cutting conclusions9
- ↗ Strategic recommendations10
- ↗ Youth as researchers10



What is M.I.L .E.?

M.I.L.E. - Measuring Impact of Long and Medium-Term Engagement - is a CCIVS initiative designed to better understand, strengthen, and advocate for the role of Long and Medium-Term Volunteering (LMTV) in the wider field of International Voluntary Service (IVS). The project responds to a shared challenge across the movement: LMTV is widely recognised as transformative and socially useful, yet its impact is often described through personal conviction rather than structured evidence. M.I.L.E. therefore aimed to build credible, field-based knowledge while embedding a decolonising perspective in both research practice and interpretation.

The project's overall aim was to assess and strengthen the impact of LMTV programmes promoting inclusive dialogue, exchange and collaboration.

M.I.L.E.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

*Three specific objectives
guided the work*

Developing

tools to better understand how LMTV affects volunteers and the communities involved;

Documenting

stories and testimonials that illustrate tangible outcomes and provide concrete evidence;

Applying

a decolonisation perspective to inform future initiatives and policy discussions in international cooperation and volunteering.



How the evidence was produced

M.I.L.E. used a youth-led participatory research methodology. Instead of outsourcing evaluation, CCIVS and partners trained young activists and former volunteers to become field researchers and co-analysts. The methodological foundation was laid during a training course on impact measurement and decolonisation tools, followed by a multi-country field phase of semi-structured interviews across three stakeholder groups: volunteers, local community representatives, and organisation staff and coordinators.

January

Online consultation to collect resources on decolonisation and impact measurement within the International Voluntary Service (IVS) movement;

March

Kick-off meeting introducing the project flow and the CCIVS decolonisation tools;

April

Training course to build research skills and co-design interview tools;

May - December

Impact measurement in action: field interviews and analysis, followed by a dissemination moment via CCIVS spaces and an online conference format.



Summary: What the research shows

Across stakeholders, M.I.L.E. confirms that LMTV impact is best understood as multi-level and cumulative:



Volunteers

LMTV is repeatedly experienced as a threshold space where people move from uncertainty or stagnation toward stronger autonomy, confidence, skills, and clarified direction. Wellbeing is not a marginal theme: emotional strain, isolation, burnout, and coping appear as recurrent elements of the long-term experience, shaped by workload and tasks, support systems, and placement conditions.



Community representatives

Hosting communities describe both “soft” and “hard” impacts - social cohesion, confidence-building, openness to diversity, learning gains, and in some cases measurable outcomes (e.g., education and health-related changes). Volunteers are often described as enabling activities that would otherwise not exist, especially where local institutions have limited capacity.



Organisations

Implementing organisations consistently describe LMTV as an integral part of their project and philosophy. Volunteers support program implementation and often stimulate innovation (communication, new ideas, proposal writing, and community engagement). At the same time, organisations highlight hidden burdens: coordination, safeguarding, accommodation, and bureaucracy - often carried by small teams.



Cross-cutting conclusions

Five cross-cutting insights emerge strongly

Autonomy is relational and structured.

Volunteers gain autonomy through daily responsibility and the ability to ask for support, but organisational scaffolding and community inclusion shape whether autonomy becomes empowering or overwhelming.

The strongest models integrate results into reciprocity.

The most robust LMTV practices avoid a false choice between “task delivery” and “mutual learning.” They combine concrete usefulness with a shared learning process, where local actors remain co-owners and volunteers are not reduced to tasks.

Decolonising LMTV requires systemic change.

Interview material repeatedly points to mobility asymmetries and unequal access. Many organisations value diverse mobility but face structural barriers: visa regimes, EU-centric funding architectures, and administrative burdens. Decolonising practice therefore becomes both an educational objective and an advocacy agenda.

Mental health is a programme design issue

Volunteers' vulnerability is shaped by support ecosystems, work task realism and adjustment, and the ability to request help without stigma. Hosts increasingly recognise duty-of-care as central to quality, but the research shows uneven capacity and gaps between screening/preparation and on-site reality.

Long-term formats create different mechanisms, not just “more time.”

LMTV enables depth of integration, trust building, and continuity - particularly in sectors where relationships and stability are essential. This is not automatic; it depends on care systems and co-creation design.



Strategic recommendations

The strategic conclusions consolidate recommendations under four levers:

Care

Formalise duty-of-care protocols, mentorship capacity, and realistic workload design as quality conditions.

Inclusion

Design intentional bridging mechanisms so communities and volunteers do not remain in parallel circles; build feedback loops that include community voices.

Preparation

Strengthen expectation alignment, contextual accuracy, and decolonising learning before departure.

Funding

Address structural imbalances in mobility access by diversifying funding sources, reducing hidden barriers, and investing in coordination capacity.

Youth as researchers

A defining output of M.I.L.E. is not only the findings, but the capacity produced: a cohort of youth researchers trained to conduct qualitative research with a decolonising lens, and a set of interview tools that can be reused and adapted by the network. The approach reduces distance between practice and research and provides a replicable model for evidence-building within IVS. In addition to implementing the research interviews themselves, some of

A methodological and political contribution

the M.I.L.E. trainees also directly took part in the difficult work of analysis, transforming field data into actionable evidence for improvement and advocacy. Leveraging the unique asset of its participatory research co-creation and analysis with and by youth, the project confirmed the importance given by participants and community members to the direction taken by CCIVS and its partners towards a youth-led, decolonized IVS as source of global education.



About the project

11

- ↗ Why focus on LMTV volunteering12
- ↗ The M.I.L.E. purpose and objectives12
- ↗ A decolonising frame12
- ↗ How the project unfolded13
- ↗ What this report contains14
- ↗ A note on the evidence14
- ↗ Methodology15
- ↗ A training-based start15
- ↗ Self-reflection as research training16
- ↗ Core research framework16
- ↗ A decolonising lens17
- ↗ Co-designing the interview tools.....17
- ↗ Practicing the method18
- ↗ From interviews to evidence18
- ↗ Field phase19
- ↗ What this approach does19



Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Why focus on long and medium-term volunteering now

Long and medium-term volunteering sits at a strategic intersection in IVS practice: it is long enough to allow deep integration, responsibility, and relationship-building, yet it often remains undervalued in public narratives compared to the shorter, more widely adopted format of international workcamps. At the same time, the sector is

facing increasing pressure to demonstrate impact, safeguard participants, and respond to critiques related to unequal mobility, representation, and “helping” narratives. M.I.L.E. emerges from this context as a network-led effort to strengthen both quality and legitimacy through evidence grounded in lived experience.

The M.I.L.E. purpose and objectives

M.I.L.E. was designed as a one-year participatory research programme coordinated within CCIVS and open to CCIVS members. Its main aim was to assess and strengthen the impact of long and medium-term volunteering programmes promoting inclusive dialogue, exchange and collaboration.

The project pursued three objectives:

Developing tools

to better understand how LMTV affects young volunteers and host communities;

Documenting stories

and testimonials to provide concrete evidence of outcomes;

Decolonisation perspective

to inform future initiatives and policy dialogues in international cooperation and IVS.

A decolonising frame

The decolonising objective of M.I.L.E. is practical rather than rhetorical. It asks how power appears in volunteering systems: who has access to mobility, who defines project goals, who interprets “impact,” and who carries the risks (emotional, social, institutional). It also recognises that decolonising IVS cannot be reduced to individual “good intentions” when structural constraints - funding architectures, visa regimes, and eligibility frameworks - shape participation and exchange. This report therefore treats decolonisation both as a learning lens and as a policy question.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



How the project unfolded

M.I.L.E. developed through a sequence that mirrors its methodological philosophy: learning first, fieldwork second, synthesis and advocacy last.

January

An online consultation gathered existing movement resources on decolonisation and impact measurement.

March

A kick-off meeting introduced the project flow and shared CCIVS decolonisation tools developed through earlier work (guidelines, self-assessment tools, a policy paper on decolonising funding mechanisms, and educational resources).

April

A training course in Germany built youth capacity in qualitative research and supported participatory co-design of interview tools, explicitly integrating impact measurement and decolonisation perspectives.

May - October

Trained youth researchers conducted and analysed interviews across multiple countries and stakeholder categories, generating the qualitative evidence base presented in this report.

December

Preliminary findings were shared through CCIVS spaces and a wider dissemination moment, building dialogue with partners and policy stakeholders.



What this report contains

The report is structured to make the evidence readable while preserving complexity, highlighting the voices of three main categories of engagement: volunteers, local hosting communities, and coordinating and implementing organisations.

First, it explores how volunteers perceive transformation, independence, wellbeing, learning, and developing critical awareness. Then, it reflects the views of local communities on co-creation, reception, change, and what is lost when LMTV does not take place.

Finally, it discusses organisational viewpoints regarding structure, sustainability, safeguarding, funding challenges, and power relationships.

The cross-cutting analysis brings together insights from all three perspectives - addressing autonomy at different levels, the balance between mutual learning and task-based activities, decolonisation challenges, mental health and support, as well as lasting value.

In the strategic conclusions, findings are transformed into practical recommendations aiming to enhance programme quality, boost recognition and advocacy, and highlight the enduring benefits of youth-driven research in IVS.

A note on the evidence

Anonymous and common

The methodology of the project was qualitative and participatory, designed to illuminate depth and patterns rather than focusing on individual cases. Its strength lies in triangulation across all regions of the world and engaging three stakeholder groups, as well as in the youth-led research process that reduces distance between lived experience and interpretation. It also openly recognises that qualitative multi-country research carries variability and translation effects; M.I.L.E. treats recurring patterns across diverse contexts as meaningful precisely because they reappear under different conditions.

The choice of not only anonymising the quotes - a standard ethical practice - but also removing detailed references to specific countries, cities, organisations, is intended to stress the fundamental understanding that LMTV impact relies on the reciprocal efforts to accept and overcome challenges as common, and to look for solutions together.



Methodology

Youth-led participatory research

M.I.L.E. is built on a simple methodological choice: to understand long and medium-term volunteering (LMTV), the project deliberately put the voices of those who live and host these experiences - volunteers, local communities, and organisations - at the centre. This required more than a standard research toolkit. It required a process that trained young people in the network to become researchers, and that treated the interview itself not as extraction, but as a structured conversation shaped by a decolonising lens.

15

Supported by the research experience of the network's experts and by CCIVS Youth Committee insights on IVS decolonising perspectives, the young participants autonomously developed three sets of guiding questions to establish a constructive dialogue with current and former LMTV volunteers, their local hosting communities and the coordinating organisations in 16 different countries. They personally interviewed over 50 volunteers, hosts and organisations, providing unique access to local insights in 14 different languages, and finally transcribing and analysing almost 600 pages of discussions on fundamental issues related to the implementation of LMTV activities.

A training-based start

Learning the method before going to the field

The methodological foundation was laid during a five-day residential training course hosted by SCI Germany in April 2025. The training gathered a diverse group of young participants from partner organisations across regions, supported by CCIVS and an international training team.

The training had three intertwined objectives:

- to strengthen participants' understanding of qualitative social research and impact measurement (interviews, observation, interpretation, evaluation);
- to equip them with decolonisation tools applicable to IVS and research practice;
- to support them to co-design and test the interview tools that would later be used in their home contexts.

The project did not begin with ready-made interview scripts. It began with a learning cycle: build shared concepts, test them in practice, and refine the tools collectively before collecting data in real projects.



Self-reflection as research training

Learning to hear change

One of the strongest methodological choices of the training was to start from personal experience as a way to understand how change narratives work. Participants were guided through structured self-reflection on their first significant IVS experience (fears, motivations, actors, changes, and triggers of change). This process helped them recognise how people naturally describe transformation and how memory, emotion, and context shape what is said in an interview.

- 16 This step also functioned as a bridge between practice and theory: the training explicitly linked personal change narratives to basic research design elements (purpose, intended change, actors, causal links) and to theory-of-change thinking.

Core research framework

Making implicit program theories explicit

Throughout the training, participants were introduced to key ideas used in the field phase: the importance of defining what is being measured, translating concepts into observable indicators, and recognising that impact measurement requires clarity about what change is expected, for whom, and why. This was framed through accessible exercises and references to theory-of-change approaches, encouraging participants to move from intentions to explicit causality links. In concrete terms, trainees were invited to articulate the perceived goals of the LMTV projects they chose for the interviews using a simple structure (“We want to... by...”) and to connect those statements to the interview topics they would later explore on the ground.



A decolonising lens

Embedded in
both questioning
and analysis

Decolonisation was treated as a practical and essential research dimension: participants explored CCIVS decolonisation tools and discussed how power dynamics appear in volunteering and in research itself - who speaks, who interprets, who benefits, who carries risk, and who gets access to mobility. A fishbowl debate format was used to surface diverse perspectives, including tensions such as white saviour dynamics, unequal funding architectures, and the structural barriers that limit participation.

17

Crucially, participants reported a methodological learning that decolonising perspectives are not only relevant when writing questions: they can and should also be applied during analysis, when interpreting what is said, what remains unsaid, and what is ultimately considered “impact”.

Co-designing the interview tools:

Three stakeholder
groups

The interview guidelines (Annexes I-III) were designed participatively during the training, using a World Café method and rotating groups to build and refine questions for three stakeholder categories:

- LMTV volunteers
- local community members / hosting communities
- organisation staff / project coordinators

This design approach ensured that the final interview tools were not only technically sound but also shaped by the lived experience of the network’s youth actors - many of whom are themselves former volunteers, hosts, or coordinators.



Practicing the method

Interviews as a skill, not a formality

Before starting fieldwork, participants practiced interviews in real conditions during the training: small groups prepared questions, assigned roles (interviewer, technical support, note-taker), conducted and recorded interviews, and then shared feedback in plenary. This step strengthened interview quality and helped researchers anticipate practical challenges: consent, language, group dynamics, follow-up questions, and how to create trust without losing structure.

18

A creative “movie genre” exercise then enabled participants to reflect on the interview process itself (roles, tensions, what was difficult, what was revealing) and to practice how evidence can later be communicated to different audiences.

From interviews to evidence

A shared analysis grid

The training also included hands-on practice in turning field material into structured evidence. Participants transcribed interviews and used a shared grid method to classify observations across themes (including negative impact / no impact / positive impact), compare interpretations, and draft preliminary conclusions. They noted that experience-based interviews tend to elicit emotionally charged examples (positive or negative), while neutral impacts are less spontaneously articulated - an insight that informed later analysis choices.

The “reduce - reuse - recycle” approach was then taken to refine interview questions after practice, recognising that not all questions work equally well in real conversations. The group also decided to continue refinement online for one week after the training to reach higher quality tools.



Field phase

Multilingual interviews across stakeholders

After the training, participants returned to their contexts and conducted semi-structured interviews in their LMTV projects, covering volunteers, local community representatives, and organisational staff. The M.I.L.E. dataset is therefore not only international in geography but also multilingual in collection - an asset for authenticity, but also a methodological constraint that required careful attention to translation and interpretation, both in terms of languages and social and cultural contexts.

19

The methodology is designed to illuminate depth. Its strength lies in how it connects three angles on the same reality - volunteer, community, organisation - while using youth-led participatory research to avoid purely external interpretation. It also intentionally foregrounds tensions (wellbeing, access inequalities, power dynamics, selection and gatekeeping) rather than only celebrating success stories.

At the same time, the project recognises typical limits of qualitative, multi-country work: variability in context, organisational models, and volunteer profiles; differences in interviewer experience; and translation effects. M.I.L.E. treats these not as reasons to dilute conclusions, but as reasons to be transparent - and to interpret recurring patterns as meaningful precisely because they reappear across varied settings.



Volunteers



Transformation

Agency

Critical Awareness



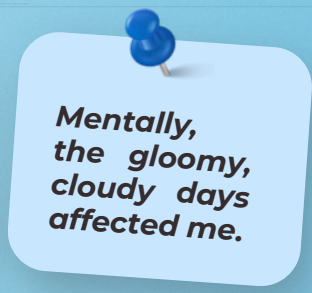
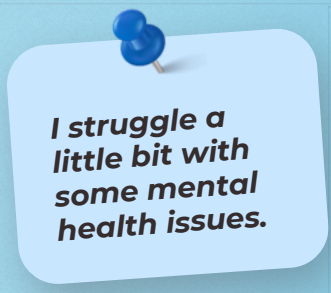
Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

- ↗ Identity before LMTV21
- ↗ Crisis, stress and mental health21
- ↗ Motivation and decision-making22
- ↗ Autonomy and initiative23
- ↗ Emotional intelligence and confidence24
- ↗ Personal growth and learning25
- ↗ Communication, teamwork and inclusion26
- ↗ Intercultural and political awareness27
- ↗ Belonging and meaningful volunteering28



Identity before LMTV

Across interviews, volunteers describe departure as a response to a “before” marked by uncertainty, fear, or stagnation. LMTV is repeatedly framed as a threshold moment: leaving a familiar environment becomes the condition for re-positioning one’s identity and possibilities. For many, the starting point is not heroic certainty but vulnerability and searching.



Crisis, stress and mental health

Mental health and wellbeing are not peripheral: they recur as a defining dimension of the LMTV experience. Volunteers describe depression, burnout, mood impacts linked to environment, and the emotional strain of adaptation and isolation. At the same time, the data shows that support ecosystems - peers, mentors, routines - can mitigate crises and enable coping.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Motivation and decision-making: meaningful work

Motivations blend self-development and social purpose: volunteers seek real-life exposure, meaningful work, and a structured way to test future directions. For some, the program's financial accessibility is decisive, while others explicitly value immersion and relationships with local people as a different form of traveling and learning than tourism. A recurring theme is that volunteering is chosen as a "serious" pathway into experience rather than a symbolic gesture.

22

I wanted to try something new, like totally different from my general life. So I have decided to send, to apply. And I came here.

Volunteering is a nice way to travel to a country and really get to know a lot of locals.

I didn't think I could afford to spend money to go abroad just for an international social sector experience. So, when I got this opportunity, I grabbed it to learn about a new culture, social system, and to gain experience.

I wanted to understand how NGOs work because I think it could be one of my future jobs or interests.

[We are doing] a lot. Ok maybe not a lot, but it's a lot of different things. We just help with whatever we can help. So, we help gardening, weeding a lot, they are building, so we are helping there, carrying stuff. What else did we do? There are a lot of, it's not really work, but we find this very interesting, there are a lot of investigators coming here, because this is a rainforest. So, that's very nice, I'm not a biologist or something, but it's interesting to see, we don't really, we just help them a bit, because they need to collect maybe leaves from trees or insects, and we can learn a lot from them, so that's nice.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Autonomy and initiative

Volunteers often report that autonomy grows through everyday responsibility: navigating new systems, managing routines, and making decisions without familiar support structures. These gains are not only practical but also psychological - many describe increased trust in their own capacity to solve problems. However, autonomy is not universal as a “before/after” effect: for some, it is continuity rather than transformation.

It's helped me to become more independent and resourceful as well, I'd say.

So now I found out what to do. On Monday morning, I'm searching some games. And we also have this big file of the games. And I have some ideas in the notes. And when it's about our planning, you know, I have an idea. What do you think? So I'm trying to be prepared in advance.

It made me face many challenges and made me realize that I can trust myself more and solve problems more easily.

I've been living alone by myself since I was 18, so I didn't feel that my independence has grown with the project.

Also (it doesn't) really has to do with the project, but for me, coming from [my home country], I was working, I earned my money, and now I came back here to, literally to the basics, like the shower is very basic. Everything is very basic. I achieved that. At first, I was like, oh, I don't know if I can live here, but after two weeks, it was fine. A lot of insects everywhere and stuff.

I hated cooking. And I really didn't want to be in the kitchen... but here I have to do the kitchens... I think I grow a lot.



Emotional intelligence and confidence

Interviewees frequently describe a shift in emotional awareness: living and working abroad amplifies self-observation, interpersonal sensitivity, and confidence in imperfect communication. Confidence often grows through repeated exposure - speaking new languages, leading activities, or simply being seen and heard. In some narratives, the emotional shift is described in highly transformative terms.

It's like my world has been colored.

Maybe more inner peace [laughs]. But no, nothing really physical as such, but just, you know, I think it's quite an achievement to actually just feel more content, more relaxed.

Public speaking was never my thing but I also practiced that here, I can talk to like 150 students very easily right now so am more confident than I used to be.

And now I know that I can manage, kids, adults, whatever, a group of twenty-three people, to be a team together, to facilitate amongst this group without any issue and enjoying it and being comfortable which is super nice, I say.

Now, even if I make mistakes, I just speak because I know the other person understands me.

I think perhaps my mind was quite busy before. So I was thinking a lot about home, a lot about kind of like how to, I suppose, like do a lot of productive things at home, and then now I'm a bit more chilled out, I think actually. Maybe a bit more social, confident.



Personal growth and learning

Personal growth is consistently narrated as both reflective and practical: volunteers learn about their preferences, working styles, and future orientations through daily experience. Learning is not limited to “skills”; it includes a redefinition of what matters, and a clearer sense of what one wants - and refuses - in adult life. For some, the experience unlocks a new professional horizon. For others, it simply shows them a different way of being and living together.

I thought when I left, I kind of didn't like human beings, thought we were stupid and everything. And I understand people way better now, and I like people way more now that I did before this project.

I feel learning is what drives me - when there is no learning, I tend to move on.

I'm reconsidering what I like to learn, how I like to learn, how I like to work.

I discovered Erasmus+ and the international project world, and I was like, 'This is what I want to do'

First of all, it was actually that I was able to speak English within my daily life. When I left, it was easy.

I just feel like I'm becoming, um, a real human being not just existing but living, enjoy.

I mean, maybe it's that nothing is permanent. Like nothing. Like bad times, good times. So you should know this in yourself.



Communication, teamwork and inclusion

Volunteer support systems are uneven across structures: host organisations and mentors are often described as close and present, while sending organisations appear distant in many accounts. Regular check-ins and clear processes correlate with perceived safety and satisfaction; weak communication correlates with uncertainty or disengagement. Teamwork during the project, with the local community and the hosting organisation, is a core condition for learning and wellbeing.

*I was sick every month. And like in this case they are paying attention every time "Okay. How you feel? You can stay at home if you don't feel okay." Like if you want some kind of medicine, I can take it from. So, yeah. I'm... **you feel that you're not alone as a volunteer.***

My supporting organization is not supporting me at all.

So we had onboarding training and that was really helpful to get to know where you have to work, the locations, the schools.

Both my sending and hosting organizations are very supportive.

Maybe in eleven months, we've talked four times. So, not much.

Like if I have some problem, I'm gonna say it to the coordinator, to my coordinator here, and not [back in my countr y].

I mean, like, we are good together. Because I have worked with everyone. Like, not at the same time, but I have worked with everyone. So, like, we know in advance what, whom, what you have to do. Because usually the one person is doing the energizer. Another one is doing the main game. And the third one is doing the reflection. So it depends on the week. And also if you have an idea about the game or you found something, it means that's your game. So you can play it. And we are helping. Like, some games need some materials. So we are helping to each other. We are also controlling the time. Like, if one person is a facilitator, another one controls the time. Yes, we are good together.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Intercultural and political awareness

Beyond cultural exchange, many volunteers report a politicised awakening: awareness of privilege, unequal mobility, and the risks of reproducing saviour narratives. Some explicitly name colonial history as a lens for understanding present inequalities. These reflections show LMTV's potential as a decolonising pedagogical space - when volunteers adopt humility, listen, and situate themselves as learners rather than rescuers.

I was a bit scared to be, you know, sometimes European people, they come to Africa, and they're like, oh, I'm going to teach them how to behave... or I'm going to save them, and I was so scared to be that kind of people.

In Europe, we have the colonialism, which is also very unfair.

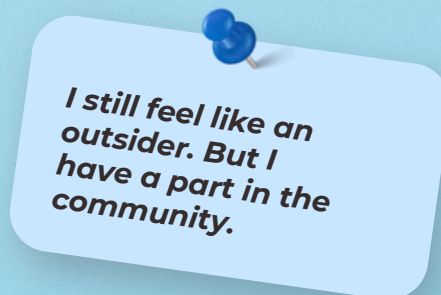
What I carry with me is the idea that if you want to help, you first need to ask what people really need - not just assume that your idea of help is what they require.

Don't go in projects to save people. Go and be part of an NGO with local people to really help others in [in the country] and not keep on pretending to help.

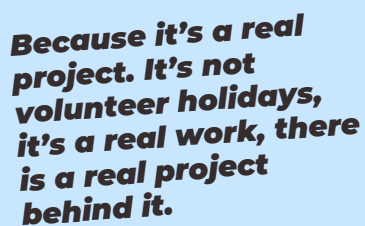


Belonging and meaningful volunteering

Volunteers increasingly define IVS as serious work and serious learning - not “volunteer holidays.” The experience is framed as a platform whose value depends on intentional engagement and responsibility. This post-experience definition often becomes more demanding and ethical than their initial understanding.



I still feel like an outsider. But I have a part in the community.



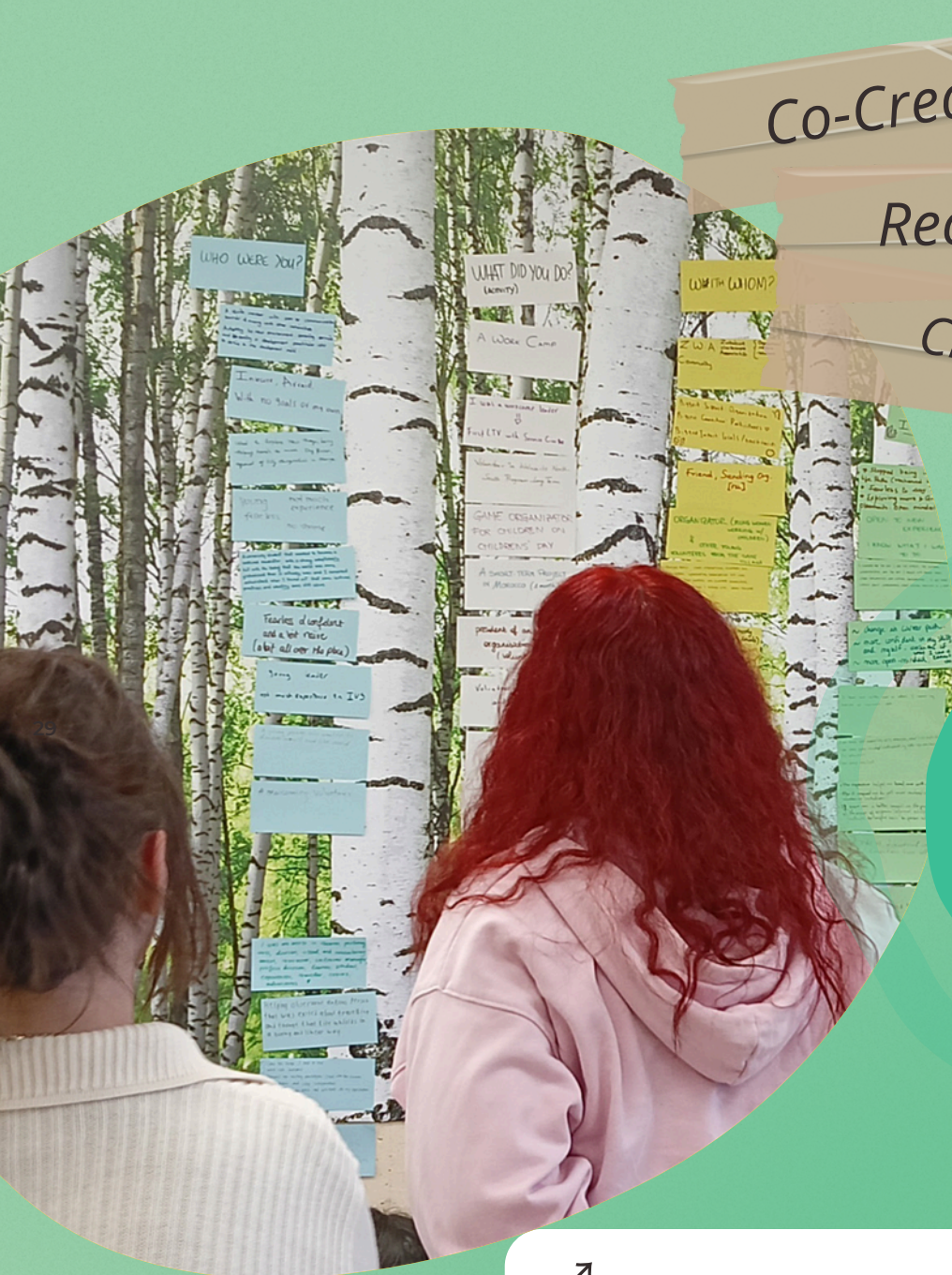
Because it's a real project. It's not volunteer holidays, it's a real work, there is a real project behind it.

Belonging is one of the strongest drivers of a successful experience: when volunteers feel accepted, their learning and wellbeing accelerate. Conversely, partial inclusion or isolation can undermine motivation and intensify stress, especially in small-town or closed settings. The interviews show that integration is not a binary outcome but a negotiated, uneven process.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Communities



Co-Creation
Reception
Change



Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

- ↗ Community self-reflection30
- ↗ Community involvement and co-creation31
- ↗ Adaptation and integration dynamics31
- ↗ Conflict and management32
- ↗ What would be different without LMTV32
- ↗ Diversity and intercultural exchange33
- ↗ Impact and change in the community34



Community self-reflection

Local community representatives describe their role as simultaneously practical and relational: coordinating, mediating, and safeguarding the volunteering experience while ensuring local priorities are respected. Their accounts position volunteers as contributors to community life, but also highlight that community actors often carry significant responsibility for integration and impact. The community voice is therefore not one of passive reception, but of active stewardship.

I am in charge of coordinating all the research and volunteering topics that are developed inside the [natural] reserve.

My role was, from beginning to the end... selecting volunteers, interviewing... dealing with logistics... explaining them about the cultural context as well.

Since joining, I've noticed that many things I used to be afraid to do in school come more easily now. Even if I still have that voice in my head saying, "What if I mess up?", nothing bad ever happens (laughs). So [hosting volunteers] really pushed me out of my comfort zone.



Community involvement & co-creation

Co-creation is visible across contexts but takes different forms: structured joint decision-making, shared implementation, and integration of volunteers into organisational routines. In several cases, local representatives stress that the most sustainable outcomes emerge when community needs shape the program, and when local and international actors work hand in hand.

Adaptation & integration dynamics

Local representatives describe adaptation as a predictable curve: early discomfort and misunderstandings can shift toward ease and mutual enjoyment when interaction becomes regular and supported. Integration depends strongly on preparation, clear expectations, and the host's capacity to guide volunteers through emotional ups and downs. Practical tools - such as orientation guidelines - are frequently used to reduce avoidable friction.

Our excavation director... asks for our opinion. In line with that opinion... a joint decision-making authority emerges.

When volunteers come to us, they become part of our team. They attend our team meetings, and I also have separate meetings with [each of] them.

The organisation and the community work hand in hand.

We made a strategy which was a guide... what to bring, what not to bring... whether there is cold... mosquitoes... humidity... whether you have to walk.

We have to be careful about all these ups and downs. I mean, emotions where the volunteers can go through in the first place.

At first when they came it was new for us... so it was a bit difficult. After we interacted, and talked to each other it was easier and fun for both parties.



Conflict and management

Most community representatives do not describe open conflict as common, but they do identify recurring tension points: parallel social circles, stigma or fear of foreigners, and mismatched expectations about work. These tensions are typically managed through mediation, role clarity, and informal boundary-setting. The presence of conflict does not necessarily signal failure; it often reveals where integration requires additional support.

What would be different without LMTV

When asked to imagine the absence of long- and mid-term volunteers, community representatives often respond with their strongest statements - ranging from service gaps to lost opportunities for learning, confidence, and exposure to the wider world. In some cases, the absence is framed as a direct deprivation for beneficiaries; in others, it is a loss of continuity and organisational identity. These responses make visible the silent infrastructure that LMTV presence provides.

32

There's another group... they get scared, like "they shouldn't come here," or label them as immigrants.

We also had some who didn't want to work - who just slept on the sofa.

It's all about building trust

During international meals... the volunteers stick together, and the villagers stick together.

If they weren't here, maybe we could never get a chance to see foreigners.

We're so used to working with them that I can't imagine our team without them.

I was afraid to speak, afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being laughed at - and that stops a lot of people from trying. We always try to say: "It's okay to make mistakes, we're here to help. We'll translate for you if needed." I know that if I had had this kind of support [the presence of LMTV] in school, it would've helped me a lot.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Diversity and intercultural exchange

Communities generally value cultural diversity as an opening of horizons, yet language remains the main barrier to deeper interaction. Several hosts actively build safe learning environments to prevent shame and to encourage communication. At the same time, the interviews reveal persistent structural imbalances about who gets to volunteer and, in some places, local anxieties that can lead to stigmatizing framings.

We respect and perceive their culture with curiosity. We learn from each other, different culture, language and learn together.

In our home, we have a very clear rule: no laughing or making fun of anyone's grammar or pronunciation.

The main problem is language.

The volunteers are definitely curious when they come here, so they ask a lot of questions about [the country]. Not just about how we speak, or when we say something and 'translate what they said' and things like that, but they are really interested in our culture, what kind of music we listen to, what kind of food we eat, really. I haven't really heard any prejudices from them, they really asked questions about [a minority] culture, for example. Since most of the schools we are working in have a high number of children [from a minority culture], it is always a topic of discussion how they are doing here. Obviously, they know from their own countries that things may be different there than they are here. But they are never prejudiced, always curious.



Impact and change in the community

Local community accounts highlight both “hard” and “soft” impacts: service delivery and institutional capacity, health outcomes, learning gains, and psychosocial change. In care and education settings, volunteers are described as enabling activities that would otherwise not exist; in health-related work, they are associated with measurable community outcomes. Several testimonies emphasise that long-term presence allows trust and continuity, increasing the depth of change.

34

All the other needs for play, creative activities, going out outside [the children centre], are covered by the volunteers.

They also help in the ICT department, they teach the local youths about IT and computer.

Support groups have become places of healing.

Definitely a sense of community. Here there's not much to do. There are no clubs, nowhere to just hang out. I noticed that people often stay within their school friend groups. And it's simply because there's nowhere else to meet new people. So [the organisation] provides a great opportunity to bring people together - especially those who have no place to go to make friends.

One of our volunteers is really loved by the kids [...]. Even when we go to schools, the kids wave to us. If they don't know us yet, they wave from a distance. But they're very sweet. I think it's interesting for them, and they're happy when they can communicate in English. Even more so when the volunteers try speaking [the local language], like “hello”, basic words. You can really see their eyes light up.

When a kid remembers a new word we taught and uses it later - it might seem small, but to us, it's a huge success. Like today, for example - we were at a school, and there was a girl who doesn't speak much English, but she remembered a word from earlier and kept using it all session. You could tell she was proud. That's a great feeling. So I definitely think it's really good that we're present.

After the international volunteers were introduced to the village, the women who once hesitated even to say their name have now become more confident through different training and workshops.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Implementing Organisations



Structure

Sustainability

Power



Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

- ↗ Organisational self-reflection36
- ↗ Expectations and bias36
- ↗ Organisational impact and change37
- ↗ Project management and safeguards38
- ↗ Funding architecture and structural constraints38
- ↗ Diversity and global balance39
- ↗ Conflict, challenges and emergencies39
- ↗ Selection, power and gatekeeping40
- ↗ Monitoring and evaluation40



Organisational self-reflection

Implementing organisations consistently describe themselves as small, multi-task systems carrying delivery, mentoring, logistics, and safeguarding responsibilities at once. They frame LMTV as part of their operational infrastructure and as a pathway to translate organisational values into lived intercultural practice. The intended change is articulated as bridging volunteer skills with local needs and building peace-oriented learning environments.

Expectations and bias

Across organisations, expectations focus less on nationality and more on engagement, participation, and readiness for the realities of the placement. Several coordinators explicitly avoid high expectations to reduce pressure and to keep space for volunteer growth. At the same time, interviewees acknowledge that stereotypes exist and that selection processes implicitly manage risks and assumptions.

36

The goals of the projects are mainly based on the values of peacebuilding, breaking down cultural barriers... and also stereotypes.

These activities are planned for bridging the skills of volunteers to the needs of the community.

We are everything, I mean we are a very small organization... we do everything we need to do, yes everything.

My expectations... are only that they get involved, be participative, give 100% to the experience.

No - everything depends on motivation. I try not to have expectations.



Organisational impact and change

Organisations describe LMTV as enabling core activities, expanding organisational capacities, and producing tangible outputs that would otherwise not happen. Impact is also described as innovation: volunteers can change communication practices, introduce new organisational directions, and even strengthen long-term sustainability through skills like proposal writing. LMTV is therefore narrated as both workforce support and organisational learning.

They always fill a lot of gaps.

This project is one of our strategic pillars.

In our organization, we don't have a communication officer... This helped the branding of [the organisation] and its social media image a lot.

[the communities] learn from the volunteers' approaches to communication and problem-solving. In the end, the outcome is a mutual gain: volunteers grow personally and professionally, while communities benefit socially and culturally.

We've got a volunteer... assisted us even with proposal writing to source for funds...

Without volunteers, we couldn't do the projects and wouldn't achieve the objectives we want.

So, imagine a small town where two to four international volunteers stay for a year naturally, local youth become curious: "Who are they? Why are they here?" Then they start interacting, organizing activities together, and eventually building friendships. The community, too, becomes curious and more open to learning from them while also creating space for volunteers to contribute. In this way, volunteers always help improve or even revitalize the image of the organization, its relationships with institutions, and its work with young people.



Project management and safeguards

Safeguarding is described as continuous work: clarifying roles, providing supervision, and protecting both volunteers and local systems from harm or distortion. Multiple organisations emphasise non-substitution, insisting volunteers should support rather than replace paid work.

We certainly do not leave those friends in the field [the volunteers] on their own.

These positions do not replace paid employees... Him and all the other volunteers support us.

First of all the volunteer is an adjunct. The volunteer is a helper... our volunteers will not take the place of a young person... who wants to work with us.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

38

Funding architecture and structural constraints

It is only partially managed because the amounts are very small each year. Consequently, we must find additional grants...

The funds come from the [cooperation agency]... it's a government-funded program.

There is a lot of bureaucracy... especially for small organizations... requires a lot of energy and time from field work.

Staff interviews show that funding structures shape organisational capacity and programme design: small annual amounts require continuous grant-seeking, while different funding streams (public programmes, fees, municipal support) create uneven stability. Bureaucracy is repeatedly described as a heavy load - particularly for small teams - diverting energy from operational work. Funding also limits who can participate and how global mobility can be balanced.



Diversity and global balance

Organisations consistently value global diversity and recognise that EU-centred funding and visa barriers narrow who can participate. Several explicitly state that hosting volunteers from other regions requires funding outside EU frameworks and that relying only on European volunteers limits the horizon of work and learning. Some also name privilege and reflexivity as necessary learning for ethical implementation.

In order to do so, we would need a fund outside the EU.

There is a clear difference between how international volunteers and [national] volunteers are received. Foreign volunteers are generally valued more, because their initiative is seen as remarkable. There's also a cultural perception here that "foreigners are better." So yes, [locals] tend to welcome them very openly.

Administrative issues exist too, like visas for "South" countries... Not impossible, but difficult.

Conflict, challenges & emergencies

Challenges are framed as expected: house dynamics, mismatched expectations, and emotional strain, with organisations highlighting mediation and early interventions. The data also shows that long-term placements can intensify workload when combined with language courses and commuting, making wellbeing a core operational issue.

Volunteers... have an eight-hour shift and then you have a language course and then you commute and then you, like, exhausted.

For example, one [volunteer] was very conflict-prone, often yelling. It didn't work out - we had to end the project.

This particular project is very difficult and there are periods when volunteers fall emotionally...

It's not mental health but depression... a girl who was in depression that we understood then, after she arrived.



Selection, power and gatekeeping

Selection emerges as a key lever of quality: coordinators prioritise motivation, attitude, language basics, and - critically - team compatibility for communal living contexts. Some organisations undergo selection through multi-round interviews and practical tasks. At the same time, selection can become a site of gatekeeping shaped by migration anxieties, raising a decolonising tension: programmes risk acting as informal border filters.

Now we do three rounds of interviews, we give them tasks - like "send a video where you facilitate a game," or something like that.

For us, definitely... 80 percent of our criteria is based on compatibility with the team.

We're always a bit worried: what if they just want to get into the EU, and they're not really here to volunteer?

During the year, it is through this weekly meeting... we are constantly in a state of redefining and feedback.

We have seen that the topic of [evaluation] forms has worked better for us because the participants open up more.

We do the baseline study... Then the mid-term... Then end-term... So you do a pre-and post-sur vey.

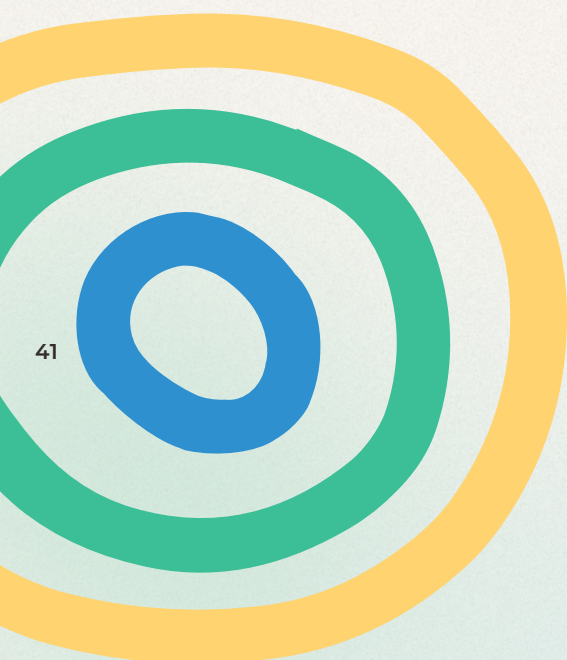
Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation is largely practice-based: weekly meetings, monthly reflections, reports, and participatory tools that surface issues early. Some organisations run more structured cycles with baseline/mid/end evaluations, while others rely on qualitative feedback and forms that encourage honesty. Across contexts, monitoring means both quality assurance and a safeguarding mechanism.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Cross-cutting themes



Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

- ↗ Autonomy across levels42
- ↗ Mutual learning or result orientation43
- ↗ Decolonising LMTV44
- ↗ Privilege awareness45
- ↗ Structural funding imbalances46
- ↗ Mental health and care47
- ↗ Long-term and short-term value48



Autonomy across levels

Across volunteer interviews, autonomy is rarely described as a single before/after leap. It is more often narrated as a gradual ability to hold complex emotions, manage everyday constraints, and still keep moving. In practice, autonomy emerges when volunteers learn to navigate the environment rather than to control it - and when they find ways to ask for support without feeling they are failing.



The first month or two is adaptation - they don't need to do anything major.

42

Most of the people I'm working with they have never seen a foreigner. And they have never been abroad and most probably they will never be... in this case I was really privileged to be able to come here.



At times, autonomy is also linked to recognising privilege and positioning oneself responsibly: some volunteers become aware that mobility itself is an unevenly distributed resource, and that choice is shaped by structural access.

Community empowerment appears when international presence strengthens local actors' confidence to act (rather than replacing them), and when people feel included as co-owners of change. When community members perceive the project as "for us" rather than "on us," volunteering becomes a platform for local initiative and aspiration.

In several contexts, empowerment is also described as a blending of roles: volunteers are visible, but they are not the only drivers - local leaders, youth, staff, and community members remain central.



Everybody understands their roles, we work as a team... when the volunteers come to work with us sometimes only the [skin] color will differentiate us but it's difficult to know who is a volunteer, who is a leader and who is who...

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Mutual learning or result orientation

Task-based and reciprocal models

Across sites, LMTV repeatedly sits between two logics: on one side, the priority of task delivery, filling a gap, ensuring outputs; on the other side, the emphasis on reciprocity, mutual learning and shared ownership. The strongest programs are not necessarily the ones that are not results-oriented - they are the ones that integrate results into a reciprocal learning process rather than letting tasks define the relationship.

Some organisations make this balance explicit: they want results, but they also want volunteers to be able to look back and recognise learning, change, and meaning.

Yes, we are results oriented... we normally have indicators that we use, we work with volunteers together, we walk with them, we have evaluations that we do in between, we share experiences, challenges and we continue learning.



It's a collaborative process. We have defined objectives, but activities are planned jointly with the volunteer, based on their strengths and interests, fostering mutual learning and ownership.

From the volunteers' side, reciprocity often appears as a shift from doing tasks to becoming part of a shared life. This is one reason why some programs explicitly defend the long-term format: it creates time for relationships and deeper learning processes, not only for outputs.

From local community voices, reciprocity is often narrated in simple, concrete terms: learning happens every time and it is not abstract - it is cultural, practical, relational.

Each time we get a new volunteer, we learn something new - like from you, about [your country], your language, your culture.

The dataset suggests that the most robust LMTV models are those that accept a dual truth: communities and organisations often need concrete support, and volunteers also need a learning journey that remains meaningful, ethical, and relational. Where programs become purely task-based, meaning crises and disengagement risks rise; where programs become purely playfields for experience-based learning, communities may perceive limited utility. The balanced model is co-planned: reciprocal learning is anchored in meaningful work'.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Decolonising LMTV

Multiple interviews across stakeholders confirm that mobility is unequal not only in theory but in the everyday architecture of programmes: who can apply, who can obtain visas, who can afford tickets, and who is structurally invited. Some hosts explicitly report an absence of volunteers from outside Europe and a few economically developed countries - not by choice, but by system design.

Mobility
asymmetries

We have, let's say, two people from Global South. One was living with us, the other one was there every day. And it was great.

During the time I've been coordinating I still haven't had the first volunteer from the global south, none, all have been from the global north.


I have learned more about the ethical aspect of communications on social media thanks to this volunteering, saw a big problem in the way some people behave abroad in posting pictures, also discovered that there are people posting pictures on Tinder with children in Africa, which is for me terrifying

In Europe as a continent, I don't know about every country, but my personal feel is that we don't, learn a lot about cultures and the history from Latin America, from Africa, from some part of Asia. So if we did have them, I believe we could learn more. For example, I know a lot about [this country] now, thanks to this person from [there], he was... having seminars about what's going on [in the country], why is it like that, he was cooking [traditional] food, we learned some [language], we learned about the culture. So I think that would help us realize that there's a whole world outside and that whole world has a lot of things going on that we're not aware about and a lot of things we could learn from. And so yes, that's 100% would be a big plus.




Privilege awareness

Decolonising learning is not presented as a fixed ideological position. It often emerges as a process of discomfort: volunteers confront the fact that their mobility is unusual, sometimes unattainable for local youth. This generates a reframing from helping toward humility, learning, and shared work.



In this case I was really privileged to be able to come here. To stay there for as long. To do these things. To have this experience.



Yes, when I arrived I really had criticism about my own country, and now that I discuss with people with a lot of different country, I say, okay, it's not that bad. I know how to appreciate some thing that I had, and things that okay, even if things go wrong, I'm still lucky to have this chance, because a lot of people would have my place. And also feel, sometimes I'm comfortable about it, that it's people like me, they are no different, like they also work on the same things, and they are even more like smarter than me, more experience, more motivated than me, and they don't have the opportunity to do things, just because of their country. And that sometimes I feel bad about it. I want to give them the opportunity, but I can't.



Structural funding imbalances

Host organisations describe how funding ecosystems reproduce the imbalance: projects are built around European mobility instruments, while participation from other regions requires entirely different resource routes. This is not framed as a moral failure of individual organisations; it is described as an institutional design constraint.

A key policy tension becomes visible: many organisations want diversity and more balanced mobility, but they face administrative realities that push them to limit participation. In some contexts, visa requirements are described not just as a difficulty but as a barrier strong enough to stop action.

- 46 The implication for decolonising policy is clear: a decolonised IVS cannot rely solely on goodwill, because the constraints sit inside the system: funding, visas, eligibility, bureaucracy. Decolonising practice therefore becomes both an educational goal and an advocacy agenda.

The biggest difficulty is financial support. There simply aren't funding schemes that allow organizations like ours to host volunteers from the Global South.

Right now... to host volunteers who require a visa... it's a lot of bureaucracy... we will not do it.



Mental health and care

Across volunteer narratives, wellbeing appears as both an outcome (greater calm, new coping) and a risk (burnout, depression, isolation). Importantly, vulnerability is not always “dramatic” - it can appear as repeated low-level stress, loneliness, or overload that accumulates over time.

Um, it's mental health thing... I had a lot of burnouts. Um, and my depression, because of that, deepened... I'm on medication and I feel now much better but still sometimes it happens.

We... worry a lot about - about mental health, about the accompaniment of the volunteers.

Host organisations often frame care not as optional but as part of quality implementation: anticipating emotional ups and downs, recognising risk factors, and building accompaniment. Some explicitly name mental health as a priority in volunteer management.

The community side sometimes frames wellbeing as a screening issue: isolation can become a risk when the placement is remote and the volunteer lacks prior experience of living alone. This highlights a care gap between selection, preparation and on-site realities.

If you are a person who has never lived alone and you have a case of depression, it can become a risk.

Taken together, the interviews suggest that care is not only a personal matter; it is a programme design question. Wellbeing depends on preparation accuracy, local mentorship, peer support, realistic workload, and the ability to ask for help without stigma.



Long-term and short-term value

Across stakeholders, long-term formats are associated with deeper relationship-building, language learning, and cultural understanding - simply because time allows gradual trust, correction of misunderstandings, and repeated shared experience.

Because when you work with people it is very convenient to have a long time to get to know them, to start learning the language and to actually connect with them.

After some time, we get to know you and trust you... The children are still alive, and I come back.

Trust emerges as the mechanism that turns volunteers from supporting characters into legitimate co-workers. In care and education settings, trust is described as something that is built through repeated daily practice, small responsibilities, and mutual learning.

From the organisations point of view, the long-term format is defended as necessary for educational continuity and sustainable outcomes: short stays can support activities and trigger local dynamics, but longer stays allow volunteers to understand the context and contribute in a way that does not reset each time someone leaves.

Because educational processes require continuity and adaptation. Volunteers who stay for [several] months are able to better understand the environment, build meaningful relationships, and create sustainable results for the students and school.

Also, maintaining a nonprofit organization is not easy, and this project has become a fixed point for us. We don't make a lot of money from the project itself, but our youth work is built around it. We also run trainings, and those trainings are about youth work, facilitation, and so on. We felt we needed a core activity that everything else could build on.

Overall, the evidence suggests that long-term volunteering is not better by default, but it is different in kind: it creates the conditions for deeper integration, trust, and continuity - provided that care systems and co-creation mechanisms are in place.



Strategic conclusions & recommendations

49

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations

↗ Strategic conclusions and recommendations	50
↗ Improving Quality	51
↗ Recognition and advocacy	53
↗ Youth as Researchers	54



Strategic conclusions and recommendations

Understanding impact

Across the three stakeholder groups, M.I.L.E. points to an impact profile that is best understood as multi-level and cumulative. LMTV produces value at the micro level (volunteers' identity, confidence, skills, wellbeing), at the meso level (organisational capacity, innovation, programme quality), and at the community level (service continuity, social cohesion, learning, and local empowerment). The interviews repeatedly show that these levels are not separate: the volunteer's transformation often depends on the quality of organisational care, and community benefits often depend on the volunteer's capacity to integrate and stay consistent over time.

50

A key conclusion is that long- and medium-term formats enable impact mechanisms based on relationship-building, trust, language progress, contextual understanding, and the gradual shift from 'doing tasks' to becoming a reliable co-actor within a local ecosystem. This is particularly visible in sectors where continuity matters: education, care, health outreach, youth work, and community mobilisation. When the LMTV format works well, it becomes a stabilising presence and a catalyst: it helps local actors to simply do more; it can strengthen local learning systems and open horizons, especially for local young people with limited exposure to international encounters.

The dataset also highlights that impact is not only made of positive outcomes. It includes tensions and risks that are structurally produced: wellbeing crises, isolation in rural placements, mismatches between expectations and realities, and unequal mobility access. These are not marginal findings. They are part of the real impact landscape and must be treated as signals for improvement and advocacy rather than as inconvenient exceptions.

Finally, the research reinforces that the most credible impact narratives are those that treat LMTV as reciprocal rather than charitable. Communities and organisations describe the volunteer contribution as valuable, but the strongest learning comes when LMTV is framed as shared work and mutual education - where the volunteer is not a solution and the community is not an object, but both are active participants in a shared process.

Voices from volunteers, communities and organisations



Improving Quality

The interviews provide a clear message: quality is not a single intervention. It is a system. Four levers repeatedly emerge as decisive: preparation, care, inclusion, and funding.

Preparation

Quality begins before departure. Preparation is not only logistical; it is relational and ethical. It should ensure that volunteers understand: the context they enter, the purpose of the project, their role boundaries, and the reality of daily life (including isolation risks, transport constraints, and communication conditions). Preparation also needs to include a strong component on intercultural understanding and decolonising awareness - especially around privilege, saviour narratives, and unequal mobility.

Recommended improvements

- » Set clear, realistic expectation documents jointly signed by the volunteer, the sending organisation and the host.
- » Use pre-departure briefings that include 'hard truths' (workload, living conditions, cultural norms, emotional strain).
- » Include an explicit module on reciprocity and decolonising practice (learning posture, consent, avoiding extraction).
- » Use scenario-based preparation (common crises: conflict, loneliness, health, language barriers).

Care

Wellbeing is not a personal issue in isolation: it is programme design. Organisations already recognise this, but M.I.L.E. indicates that care must be treated as a core quality dimension - not as an informal and punctual attention. Volunteers' emotional vulnerability, especially in long placements, requires predictable support ecosystems.

Recommended improvements

- » Build an explicit care protocol: regular check-ins, clear escalation pathways, peer support, emergency contacts.
- » Train mentors and coordinators in basic psychosocial support, boundaries, and referral practices.
- » Ensure workload realism, privileging integration tools such as language learning over tasks implementation during the first period of volunteering.
- » Make culturally safe and structurally normal to ask for support, not a sign of weakness.



Inclusion

Inclusion is not guaranteed by international presence. Several interviews show parallel social circles, limited local mixing, and occasional community anxieties. Inclusion needs intentional design: spaces, routines, shared activities, and meaning-making.

Recommended improvements

- » Create structured bridging mechanisms: local buddies, community-hosted moments, joint events with mixed roles.
- » Avoid tokenism: ensure volunteers are not only present but meaningfully connected to community actors and local youth.
- » Include community feedback loops: enable community members to give input on volunteer integration and usefulness.
- » Track inclusion, and not only outputs, as an indicator of success.

Funding

The strongest structural constraint is the mobility architecture itself. If global balance is desired, quality cannot be separated from funding systems. European mechanisms enable many projects but also create uneven access and EU-priority flows.

Recommended improvements

- » Diversify funding sources that enable balanced participation from all regions of the world
- » Reduce hidden barriers such as fees and documentation burdens.
- » Invest in coordination time and capacity: quality requires staff time for training, care, monitoring, mediation.
- » Strengthen advocacy to address visa, eligibility, and funding asymmetries as policy issues, not organisational failures.



Recognition and advocacy

Finally, M.I.L.E. data suggest three advocacy messages that can resonate with donors, institutions, and internal partners.

First

LMTV is a public value mechanism, not a niche youth activity. It contributes to social cohesion, inclusive education, community health outreach, cultural dialogue, and youth empowerment. Its strongest impacts appear where continuity and reciprocity matter, and where projects are embedded in local ecosystems.

Second

LMTV is a learning system. It is not only what volunteers do; it is what communities, organisations, and volunteers learn together. This is especially significant in a decolonising frame: LMTV can serve as global education when it is designed around reciprocity, respect and shared agency.

Third

The main barrier to a more equitable and decolonised LMTV is structural, not motivational. Mobility is unequal. Funding is unequal. Administrative access is unequal. Institutions and donors who value global balance should recognise that this requires systemic investment: supporting balanced cross-regional mobility, simplifying access pathways, and funding the coordination work that makes volunteering safe and meaningful.

Advocacy recommendations:

- » Position LMTV as a long-term investment in youth work and social resilience.
- » Frame decolonising volunteering as policy work: funding architecture, visas, mobility equity, and recognition of local knowledge.
- » Promote quality standards that include duty of care, non-substitution safeguards, and community co-creation.



Youth as Researchers

A defining contribution of M.I.L.E. is that it did not only 'include youth'; it positioned youth as researchers and co-analysts. This created unique access to authentic testimonies and enabled conversations that often require peer-to-peer trust. Youth researchers were not only collecting stories; they were learning how to listen, how to interpret complexity, and how to translate lived experiences into evidence.

The training-based methodology created a coherent research cycle: learning, tool co-design, testing, refinement, field interviews, and shared analysis. This highly contributed to the operational objective of reducing the distance between research and practice. It also strengthened the quality of interviews because the questions were not imposed from outside; they were shaped by participants' knowledge of the IVS ecosystem and refined through real-world testing.

54

Just as importantly, this approach aligns with the project's decolonising objectives: it redistributes knowledge production power, reduces extractive dynamics, and treats interpretation as a shared responsibility rather than a top-down judgement.

Ultimately, the key legacy of the M.I.L.E. experience is capacity. The project leaves behind a network of youth actors trained in qualitative research and decolonising perspectives; a set of interview tools that can be reused and adapted; a replicable methodology for participatory impact research within IVS networks; and a strengthened narrative base for advocacy grounded in field voices. If institutionalised, this approach can support regular cycles of evidence-building across projects and regions, improving both quality and legitimacy of IVS advocacy.



Annex I

LONG AND MEDIUM TERM VOLUNTEERS (LMTVs)

QUESTIONS FOR THE LONG AND MEDIUM TERM VOLUNTEERS (LMTVs)		
QUESTIONS FROM SELF-REFLECTION ACTIVITY		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you do / What are you doing (in your project)? - How were you before starting the experience? (what did you use to think / how did you use to feel / what did you use to do?) - With whom did you do / are you doing your LMTV project? - What has changed? - Why did you think it changed?
PERSONAL LEVEL	Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was your motivation, and did it change during the year? - Why did you decide to do volunteering? And why abroad? - After coming back to your home country, did you keep on volunteering at the local or national level ? Did you follow-up with your project? How? (to be asked in case the LMTV has already concluded the project).
	Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think that you gained more autonomy? - How did you spend your free time? Did you develop new hobbies?
	Emotional intelligence / Emotional Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How satisfied/content/happy have you been in your project? - Is there anything that gives you gratification/satisfaction in your project/experience? - Did you have pre-departure fears ? If so, were they accurate? If so, how did you overcome them ?
	Self-awareness and confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Would you say you gained confidence? - Did you experience a feeling of empowerment? - How comfortable were you in asking for support?
	Personal growth / Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did you become more open-minded? If yes/no, why? - How was your learning process? - Did significant change occur? How did it happen? - How did you cope with travelling? - Can you identify the best and worst moments? - Are you the same person, now that you have finished your LMTV project? (to be asked in case the LMTV has already concluded the experience). - Did your ambitions change? - Can you identify any achievement?
PERSONAL LEVEL	Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did you experience any crisis during your IVS project? If yes, what was your biggest crisis? How did you deal with it and who did support you? - Did you have any problem/challenge? How did you solve it? - If you have to start now, what would you do differently? - How did you manage the living and logistic situation?
	Sense of initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What were your contributions to the project?
	Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is IVS for you? Did the concept of IVS change after your project? - Would you recommend the experience ?



INTERPERSONAL LEVEL	Communication	- Did you face language barriers? If yes, how did you come through?
	Adaptation	- How was your relationship with your coordinator? Your mentor? Project management? - How was the project coordination? - How frequently were you in contact with your sending organisation? - Are the voices/opinions/suggestions of the volunteer taken into account (by the organisation or/and community)? - Did you feel involved/included in the project?
	Teamwork	- How were the teamwork dynamics? - How was your relationship with the other actors of your IVS (tutor, mentor, coordinator, etc)?
	Conflict management	-See "Problem Solving"
SOCIO-CULTURAL LEVEL	Intercultural awareness	- After this experience do you see your country with a different perspective? - Does your perspective of the culture change? How and why? - Did you have to break stereotypes? (on your own culture and country) - How did your perception of your home country change through IVS? - Is there anything untrue that people here believe about your region? - Would you live here permanently and why? (this question was designed for LMTV from Global South in the Global North, but it can fit to any volunteer in any project, too)
	Social Inclusion and Integration	- How was the adaptation process to physical surroundings? - Did you introduce your culture to the local community? - How did the local community receive you? - Did you experience a cultural shock? - Do you have a better understanding of the project and the local community? - Do you miss anything about your country of origin? If you do, what do you miss the most?
	Solidarity	-Did you get support from family friends and other volunteers?
	Political awareness	- Are you more aware of social (in)justice? How about privilege? - Do you think people here have the same opportunities as you? Did your perception of a sustainable lifestyle change during your stay here? (this question was designed for LMTV from Global North in the Global South)



Annex II

MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

QUESTIONS FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY	
QUESTIONS FROM SELF-REFLECTION ACTIVITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your role in the project? - What does the LMTV do in the project? - How was the LMTV at the beginning of the experience? - With whom does the LMTV work? - What has changed in the LMTV and in the project? Why?
ADAPTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Were changes made by the local community during the project?
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the level of engagement of the local community in the creation of the project? - Did you have the opportunity to “co-create” the project with the organisation? - Are the activities community-driven or aligned to the project? (Explanation: with this question we want to know if the LMTVs are asked to only perform tasks which are useful for the community, or if they can also benefit through a mutual learning process during the project) - Was there a chance for the LMTV to receive feedback from the local community members? - Were there any adaptation and integration problems for the LMTV? - How do you empower the local community to receive the LMTV? - Does the local community learn / benefit from the interactions with the LMTV?
DIVERSITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do the local community members perceive the cultural diversity of the LMTV? - How do you manage language barriers? - What would the benefits of having LMTV from other world regions be?
IMPACT AND CHANGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How helpful and impactful is the LMTV in your project? Any impact on the development of new activities / additional outputs? - Does the international LMTV broaden the horizons of the members of the local community? - What is the most significant change that you saw in the community (generated by the LMTV)? - What would be different without LMTVs in the local community? - What is the impact of the LMTV in collective activities? (activities which involved the LMTV with the local community members)? Are there differences when compared to the activities performed by the LMTV alone? - Does the local community regularly host LMTVs?
CONFLICT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Have you ever experienced conflicts between the members of the local community and the LMTVs? If yes, how did you manage them?
AUTONOMY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Do you remember any substantial contribution to the project made by the volunteer? If yes, what was it? How did you react?
EXPECTATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What were your expectations and were they influenced by the place the LMTV came from?



Annex III

MEMBERS OF THE ORGANISATION

QUESTIONS FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ORGANISATION	
QUESTIONS FROM THE SELF-REFLECTION ACTIVITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What is your role in the project? What does the LMTV do in the project? - Why did you plan these activities for the LMTV? - What is the intended change → for the LMTV; → for the local community
EXPECTATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What were your expectations and were they influenced by the place the LMTV came from?
IMPACT/CHANGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Did you see significant change in the LMTV? If yes, what is the most significant change that you saw in the LMTV? - How is the impact of the LMTV project in the organisation? - Would you say that there is an impact according to the place the LMTV comes from?
PROJECT MANAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How do you make sure that the project doesn't impact the work of the local community? - How do you manage the accommodation of the LMTV? Are there any differences related to gender or to the place the LMTV comes from?
FUNDING SYSTEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Where do the funds for the LMTV project come from? - How do you determine the allocation of funds for LMTVs from the Global South? - Do you have any system / strategy for this? - How do you use the income from the extra fee in LMTV projects? - Are you struggling to receive long term volunteers from the Global South?
DIVERSITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Would it be beneficial to have more LMTVs from different world regions in your LMTV project? - Are projects more/less effective when they host LMTV from other world regions? (for example: LMTV from the Global South in Global North projects, or vice versa) - Are you only receiving ESC? What impact do you think it makes when you do not host international volunteers from other world regions? - What is the missing element of having LMTV from the same world region? - What is the purpose of having LMTV from the Global South in projects in the Global North (and vice versa)? Do you do this only to have cultural diversity in the project?
CONFLICT / CHALLENGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Did you experience any challenge between the organisation staff and the LMTV, due to intercultural differences? - How do you manage emergencies? - Have you ever had LMTVs who stopped their project? Why has that happened?
NEEDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Why do you think the LMTV is needed? - Are there different needs according to the place they come from?
PURPOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the LMTV project mainly result-oriented or did you plan a mutual learning process in the project?
SELECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Does the LMTV project involve only one volunteer? - Was the selection process oriented according to demographic criteria (such as gender, geographical criteria...)? - Did the project require specific skills, experience, knowledge?
MONITORING AND EVALUATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What are the criteria for monitoring your LMTV project? - How do you monitor the project? - How do you evaluate the success of your LMTV project?



		Volunteers	Community	Organisation	Pages
Albania	Peace Volunteering Network Albania	3	0	0	21
Colombia	WeCollab	2	1	1	58
Estonia	MTÜ Noortevahetuse Arengu Ühing EstYES	1	1	1	20
France	Solidarités Jeunesses	2	1	1	29
Germany/ India	FSL India	2	1	1	42
Greece	Elix	1	0	2	41
Greece	SCI Greece	1	1	1	66
Hun gar y	Egyesek Youth Association	4	2	2	108
Italy	Associazione Joint - ICYE Italy	2	1	1	47
Italy	CCIVS	1	0	0	7
Kenya	Center for International Voluntary Service (CIVS Kenya)	1	1	2	46
Nepal	Volunteers Initiative Nepal and NVDA	1	1	1	25
Peru	Brigada de Voluntarios Bolivarianos del Perú (BVBP)	1	2	1	12
Türkiye	GSM/RinON	1	1	1	46
Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe Workcamps Association	1	1	1	26
	Total	24	14	16	594





<https://ccivs.org/project/mile/>

M.I.L.E.



Co-funded by
the European Union

