# How to run a volunteer initiative

Based on our experiences, we have prepared a detailed tutorial for running a volunteer initiative. It offers both general overview and practical implementation notes. We hope it will help make your project a success, and enjoyable for everyone involved.

The tutorial is split into 4 parts:

1. **Preparation**
   - Planning
   - Defining the profile of the volunteers

2. **Finding and preparing volunteers**
   - Some strategies for reaching young volunteers
   - The interview
   - Hosting new volunteers
   - The training

3. **Managing the field work**
   - 1st step – contact with the schools
   - 2nd step – registration of volunteers in the sessions
   - 3rd step – contact between the coordinator and the teams
   - 4th step – confirmation with the schools
   - 5th step – the session

4. **Coordinating, monitoring and evaluation**
   - Maintaining connections between volunteers
   - Monitoring and evaluation
   - Recognition

## 2.1.1 Preparation

Engaging young people in a long-term project that involves some investment in acquiring knowledge about specific and complex topics such as combating bullying, gender violence, dating violence and non-violent conflict resolution can be a difficult task. One thing that we have to keep in mind is that we have to captivate and engage volunteers using the right strategy.

There are several steps to take and we can't face them as a linear order but as a dynamic process. “We are talking about an itinerary that develops in a spiral way, where there isn't a first moment followed by a second, and so on. All the moments are interconnected.” (Aranguren, 2010, p. 39)
In a time when there is so much talk about the profile of today's young people who live from immediately and to connect to gadgets, askings them to connect with people and engage in long-term volunteering seems like something that goes against their “nature”. And yet we are proposing this in this toolbox. We do it because we know that this is possible and that it is a very adequate strategy for the intervention that is intended.

Getting their attention requires a strategy. For instance, we have to clarify with them that this is a kind of volunteering that is an opportunity for them to exercise their citizenship and to train personal and social skills, that will be useful to them in their life. It is a volunteering that encourages their autonomy and their critical capacity contributing to the empowerment of those involved. It is also an opportunity for them to create or strengthen their interpersonal relationship network.
In other words, we have to think of a strategy to reach them, knowing already that we want to involve youngsters that see volunteering as an action of social transformation and not a charitable action.

### Planning

If we decide to establish a methodology for coordinating volunteers, we must manage volunteering with the same degree of seriousness as salaried human resources. In that case, we will need to spend some time in the planning phase and it will not be a waste of time.

There are a few questions we have to answer before we start contacting the volunteers:

- Do all the people working in the organization know that we are getting ready to start a volunteering project, and everyone who gets directly involved with the volunteers know what their role is?
- What is expected of the volunteers in terms of work?
- Have we identified a good working environment for volunteers in terms of work space, equipment, etc.?
- Do we have a plan to look for volunteers?
- Do we have a strategy to identify candidates with the appropriate profile?
- Do we have a plan to prepare volunteers?

If the answer to these questions is positive you can start the search for volunteers.

## Defining the profile of the volunteers

Motivations can be diverse and all valid but we have to match the NGO and the volunteer expectation so that a commitment can be made that satisfies both parties. Volunteering programs are successful when volunteers do what they want. We fail when we assign functions that volunteers do not like and do not want to do. Therefore, in order to attract and retain volunteers, we must assign them roles that they wish to carry out.

As they gain confidence in the work they are doing, the volunteers can make suggestions about how they can change the profile they had been given in order to be more rewardine. That is, even if negotiated at the beginning, this profile must be adapted to new circumstances. Not everyone has a profile to volunteer in organizations that work with people. There are characteristics and requirements that must be it:

- Share the mission, vision and organizational values of the host entity;
- Take responsibility for the volunteer commitment established with the host organization;
- Consider training as essential for a good development of volunteer activity;
- Have the ability to work in a team;
- Have the ability to identify and combat their own prejudices;
- Have the psychological conditions necessary for the roles they assume.

In short, it is very important that the host organization defines its needs and to what extent the volunteer can satisfy them and doing so, also feels satisfied himself or herself.

## 2.1.2 Finding and preparing volunteers

### Some strategies for reaching young volunteers

Recruitment is the opportunity to show people that they can do something they want to do; something that will make them feel that they are learning and acquiring new competences and that will be simultaneously a citizenship action.

In the specific case that we are discussing here and in which we want to captivate young people who have a very specific knowledge on some issues like gender equality, human rights..., it is advisable to publicize volunteering in places where we can find these young people: universities, associations and youth centers.

One of the strategies, and if there is a university in the city, is to contact the presidents of various departments and arrange information sessions about the volunteering initiative you are going to create. These sessions can happen in the classrooms or in the leisure spaces of the university. In these sessions it is always very positive to use testimonials from volunteers who have already had experience in these areas and it is imperative to present the project in an appealing way. For example, we can play a “theatre of the oppressed” scene in the university bar simulating a scene of dating violence and if there are students who intervene trying to calm the “actors” we can talk directly to them to join the project. Similarly, we can contact youth centers and associations and schedule an information session.

In all of them it is important that you give examples of the activities and if you have some pictures or a film it will be very useful. It is also important that you show the youngsters the positive aspects of this kind of volunteering:

- the children and teenagers that are going to benefit from the volunteering through games will worship the volunteers just because they are older;
- they will have the opportunity to participate in a training about the issues of the volunteering;
- they can have some exciting experiences when they are implementing the games in schools;

- they will have a contract and a very close relation with an organizations very similar to that they will have when they will get a job (our experience is that are mainly the students that feel the motivation to join the volunteering).

It is important to announce the volunteering opportunities on the web page of your organization and other social networks. Additionally, it is needed to collect the information of potential candidates. We recommend using a registration form for collecting personal information, as well as information about previous volunteering experiences and their motivations to participate in the programme.

After you receive the applications you have to create your group of volunteers. This can be a hard situation because not everybody has the profile to do this kind of volunteering.

### The interview

The first thing to do is interview the candidates. In this interview it is necessary to check if the volunteer feels confident to carry out the tasks that imply handling and facing groups of 30 adolescents, as well as if they feel prepared to hear statements about dating violence, xenophobia, etc.  without losing calmness and assertiveness.

It is also very important to understand the volunteer's ability to responsibly assume the activities with which they will commit themselves to. After all, the most important thing we have to understand in this interview is not the technical skills for a task (as it happens in a job interview) but the ability and motivation of the volunteer to fit the role.

The interview must be conducted in order to know the person in front of us and not the professional. This is why it is more complex than a job interview and therefore it should take into account some aspects such as: the way the interviewee is received; the place should be nice; the atmosphere should be friendly, and the ability of the interviewer to detect interests and talents of the interviewee that might be of added value to the organization.

## What to do when someone does not have the right profile?

The first thing to do is to clearly explore with this person the most difficult aspects of the tasks; in this concrete case, dealing with difficult children and young people in playground and classroom contexts. This often leaves people less prepared and

motivated. But since this type of volunteering is very specific, it is normal at the beginning of the interview to explain that not all people have the profile to deal with complex situations such as those found in the sessions that the volunteers will energize. And that the interview will also serve for the interviewee and the interviewer to reach a consensus on this.

## Hosting new volunteers

The hosting of new volunteers has to be a moment that focuses on the clarification of objectives and expectations and not so much on the formal issues as the filling of forms. It has to be a time when the interviewer feels not as someone who comes to compensate for the lack of staff in the organizers, but as someone who makes a unique and special contribution to the organization.

This welcome can be made individually and we can present the team of the organization with whom the volunteer will have contact (even if it is only visual contact), present all the facilities and make them feel comfortable and welcome.

On the other hand, you can also organize a meeting with all the new volunteers. In this meeting we should use the methodologies that will be the basis of all voluntary work. For example, the presentation of each volunteer can be done through a group game and the whole meeting should have moments of activities/group games. You can use this meeting to give a name to our volunteering initiative by organizing, for example, a brainstorm. The purpose of this meeting is for the volunteers to get to know each other since they will work in teams, to become familiar with the organization that welcomes them; to know in detail all aspects of the functioning of volunteering. This meeting can also be very important for we to understand the training needs of the volunteers, especially on the topics they will address in the sessions.

## The training

In order to discover what content we are going to explore in training, we must answer three questions:
What information do they need to successfully carry out their work?
What skills do they need to successfully carry out their work?
What attitudes do they need to successfully carry out their work?

In this type of volunteering we strongly advise training based on non-formal learning methods because the partnership of this project is an unconditional

advocate of this methodology, but also because the voluntary actions we propose in this manual are based exclusively on non-formal education methodologies.

Attached you can find a pedagogical proposal that should be used at the beginning of the volunteering. But during the year (because the volunteer actions take place during a school year) you must provide more training moments. All the meetings you organize can be training opportunities: whenever you challenge the volunteers to test the group games before they use them at the schools, you are training their skills to face the teenagers and children and also their knowledge about the issues addressed in the games; when they share their experience and make a reflection in the group about the volunteering work, they are participating in a learning moment.

As Luís Aranguren points out: "We do not start from a figure of educator who knows everything and places his knowledge on volunteers, since in the educational process itself, trainers and trainees live the same educational experience. We are therefore faced with a process of permanent feature, in which each one is discovering, elaborating, reinventing and acquiring new knowledge, skills, experiences and dialogues that cross the path." (Aranguren, 2010, p. 26)

This is the only way this experience of volunteering reaches the dimension we want to give it, which is to help volunteers become active citizens who are more concerned with catalyzing new realities that are more fair and supportive than correcting a system that is wrong.

In short, the training that we propose is more focused on being able to think and to transform than to be able to make and to execute.

### 2.1.3 Managing the field work

The role of the volunteer program manager is to create conditions that encourage volunteers to want to do their work. Their task can be very simple or very difficult. Planning the work involving the volunteers is the first step that ensures that this role will not be so hard.

Once we have a group of volunteers that must be at least 15, we can begin their integration into action. At this stage we can define the commitment that each party takes (host organization and volunteer); we can define the operating rules of the group and we can plan the field actions.

### 1st step – contact with the schools

At this stage we must be sure that the school or schools we want to work with are ready to receive the volunteering work. Before we make the volunteer recruitment we must contact the school/s and present them the project. If they agree to make part of it we may ask the school board to sign an agreement with the roles of the school and the roles of our organization. The role of the school is very simple: there must be a representative that it will be our contact for the implementation of the activities. This person must contact the teachers and ask them if they want to receive the volunteers and at what day/s and at what time.
Then, this representative sends to the coordinator of the volunteers the identification of the teachers that are interested, their contact, their schedules, the class/es and degree/s and, whenever it's possible, the thematic they are interested in (bullying, dating violence...).

### 2nd step – registration of the volunteers in the sessions

Having the teachers' schedules, we must create a chart with the monthly proposals and send them to all the volunteers so they can choose the sessions.

This is an example of the chart:

| Proposal for January 2018 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School | Day/hour | Volunteers | Information | Notes |
| Name of the school | Wednesday, 12th January<br><br>From 12:00 to 13:00<br><br>Meeting point and time: NGO at 11:40 or school at 11:55 | The volunteers choose the session/s for which they are available and put the name in the corresponding box | Context: class room<br><br>Participants: 7th degree students; group of 26 persons<br><br>Name of the teacher: | The teacher asks for a session about bullying |
| ... | | | | |

From our experience, we should collect from volunteers their availability and schedule a number of monthly sessions appropriate to that availability.

There are some rules for volunteer's registration:

- Each session will have at least 2 registered volunteers and a maximum of 4 volunteers
- Entries are in order of arrival
- If a volunteer cannot participate in the session in which he/she registered, he/she must give at least 24 hours notice

**3rd step – the contact between the coordinator and the teams**

After the registration of all the volunteers we can say that we have the teams for the sessions and it's time to start contact with each team, one by one.

The first thing is to create a closed facebook group or other mechanism to make communication fast and easy. After this we can send them the proposal of the program with the name and description of the games we intend to use in that classroom or group (if the activity is to be carried out at the school yard). We may ask the team if they feel comfortable with the games and if they want to make some suggestions (new games, changes in the games we proposed). We also have to show our availability to clarify doubts about the way the games are carried out. Often volunteers give suggestions about games and that is important for their motivation and involvement.

As we mentioned before, with this volunteering, we do not only want to promote the citizenship of the recipients but also the citizenship of the volunteers and so it is important that they do not feel that they are mere executors of tasks but that they give effective contributions in all the dimensions of volunteering.

**4th step – the confirmation with the schools**

When we have the sessions planed and the teams ready it's time to confirm with the schools that we are going to carry out the sessions. It's better, at this point that we send by email the program of each school (1, 2 or 3 sessions) to the respective representative and that we also contact directly by email the teacher/s who is/are going to receive the sessions. In this contact sometimes we get to know that in this particular class there are problems of bullying, or domestic violence, for example and it's advisable that we adapt the sessions to that framework.

**5th step – the session**

All the sessions (at least the first ones) must be always accompanied by a social or a youth worker. Only when we confirm that the volunteers are comfortable with the issues and the methodologies we can let them go by themselves.

We have to make a flash meeting with the group just before the session starts. It can be at the NGO or at the front door of the school. The idea is to make sure everyone knows their role in the session.

Also we give them the name tag they should use when they are at the school. (In Portugal, we have to identify ourselves at the front door of the school and explain what we are doing there.)

At the reception of the school we explain which teacher or representative we are looking for and we wait for him/her to come or the employee tells us the way to get to the place where the session is held.

When the group enter the class room all the students are very curious about what is going on. Sometimes the teacher explains them before the session that they will have this activity but there some teachers that think it is better that they are caught by surprise because they will be more spontaneous in their responses and attitudes. We can discuss this with the teacher before the session.

Either way, the session begins with the presentation of young volunteers who must say their name, what they do (whether they study or work or look for work). The coordinator present him/her self and the initiative and the games may begin.

Some teachers (most of them) want to stay in the class room and may also participate but sometimes they prefer to live. Both option are acceptable and both have advantages and disadvantages.

The coordinator of the volunteers has to make an effort to let them energize the activities, intervening only when he/she feels it is necessary.

At the end of the session he/she should ask the volunteers how they felt, what they liked the most, and what could be improved, in their opinion. (According to our experience this is the right moment to do this because if we ask them to send their opinions later, they can forget to do it or even forget the suggestions.) He/She may also give his/her opinion and make them feel that we are not criticizing but improving their performance.

## 2.1.4 Coordinating, monitoring and evaluation

In addition to this monthly management that ensures the sessions that are, after all, the hard core of volunteering, it is necessary to keep the group together and give it the feeling of a larger group since the sessions are carried out by groups of 4 people, in the maximum and therefore it may happen that throughout the school year some of the volunteers do not cross each other.

### Maintaining connections between volunteers

First of all we have to publish at our social networks some news about the activities at schools. (Some schools allow us to take photos and others do not and it is necessary to clarify this previously.)

It is also important that we organize monthly meetings with all the group. In them, volunteers can get to know each other better, try out new games, improve those that are already being used in the sessions, and share the successes and difficulties they felt during the activities in the schools.

All of these issues are important but the most crucial is the sharing of successes and difficulties because it allows them to help each other solve problems. These meetings should be not to long (no more than one hour) and if it is possible, we should offer the volunteers coffee, tea, and a little snack because the best hour to do it as at the end of the day and some of them are coming from classes or from their jobs.

Sometimes the teachers or the school contact person let us know the impact of the sessions on the children and it is important that we use these meetings to share this with the volunteers.

If it is possible we should always make a summary of these meetings so everyone can remember the most important decisions or conclusions.

### Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring, we may say, occurs every time we finish a session and ask the volunteers to share what they felt, what they suggest to change. With this attitude we guarantee that we listen and feel how they feel.
But there is also need for some specific moments of evaluation. There are two main reasons to make the evaluation of the volunteers: helping volunteers maximize their potential and helping the organization better involve volunteers.

potential and helping the organization better involve volunteers.

Some aspects are essential for volunteers to feel that they are valued. That is: belonging; authority to think; possibility to assess what is achieved. For this it is important to be defined from the beginning and shared with the volunteers what we intend to accomplish, what specific steps or work we intend to carry out and how we will measure success.

The evaluation should take into account the personal growth of the volunteers and not just the accomplishment of the tasks.One way to assess this dimension of volunteer's growth is to compare their motivations and fears with the results achieved. We can do this at one of the monthly or bi-monthly meetings. For this, it is important that at the beginning of their commitment, each volunteer refers to these aspects in their registration form. Clarifying: every time a volunteer is inscribed, he/she must reflect and register his/her motivations, what he/she hopes to achieve with volunteering and what are his/ her greatest fears.

At the end of each scholar year the volunteers must fill out a questionnaire. In this questionnaire is intended to check if they feel that their motivations have been answered, if their fears have come true and if so, how did they overcome them. The questionnaire should also include a question about the skills that the volunteers feel they have gained.

During the final meeting, these aspects should be shared and discussed in the group. From our experience, all volunteers feel they have gained immense skills not only personal but also professional.

## Recognition

Volunteers need to feel that their dedication has been appreciated. This can be done in several ways. One is to invite volunteers to initiatives they might find interesting as youth exchanges abroad or in the country. It is also possible, for example, to inform those who are unemployed, of job opportunities. It may also be important to offer the NGO as a field of study for those who are studying at university because sometimes they need to do academic work based on social groups with which the NGO works: young people, women, roma people, etc. Provide volunteers with training to improve their skills is another example. Publicizing volunteering in social media is another.

And, of course, the mast formal of all: a diploma of participation in volunteering. This diploma can be delivered at a ceremony for which we invite the principals and teachers of the schools and whom we ask to talk about the importance of volunteering for the children and young people of their schools.

But the best recognition should be made on a daily basis by valuing them, making them feel important, showing interest in them as human beings. And this is also a way to motivate volunteers to continue doing volunteer work and thus become more active and committed citizens in the well-being of their community.

# 3. Facilitator's checklist

In this checklist, we will guide you through the steps necessary for running a successful project with a group of young people. We highly recommend to go read through the checklist in its entirety, because dealing with sensitive and emotional issues like bullying takes a lot courage and preparation.

The Checklist contains these steps:

- General recommendations
- Preparation
- Moderation
- Evaluation

Are you ready? Let's go!

## 3.1 General recommendations

Being a facilitator requires a good deal of awareness and consciousness. You must always be aware of the specific qualities and needs of your group. What is the members' cultural background, gender, age? What is their level of education, life experiences, general attitude? The steps needed for creating an atmosphere of equality and reciprocity may vary not only by country, but even by region or community. Just as well, there are differences in educational objectives, concepts, timetables, teaching techniques, classroom design or curricula.
We all work within educational and social norms of our society, and usually we take our way of interacting with young people for granted. Our own ethnocentrism, but also the question of “what is normal” is easily overlooked or forgotten.

Before you consider starting a project, you should familiarize with the educational approaches and attitudes of your organization and your team-partners. To create a well working team and develop your own skills as a facilitator, it is helpful to reflect different styles and practices again and again, in international as well as local teams and contexts.

In our opinion, the central concern is to initiate a non-formal educational process encompassing knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. This process begins with participants’ previous experience, knowledge and potential. Their ideas, reactions

and input will help you to search together for new ways of understanding.

Skills and values like communication, critical thinking, advocacy of human rights, tolerance and respect cannot be taught – they can only be experienced. Therefore, the exercises and activities should encourage young people to reflect, feel and act with their heads and hearts. For example, those without any personal experience of racism or sexism sometimes think that the subject is none of their business. From human rights perspective this position is very questionable, because everybody is responsible for creating and protecting non-discriminatory living environment. A successful non-formal learning activity could move youngsters to rethink their position and maybe even gather courage to change the status quo.

## 3.2 Preparation

The role of facilitators is to prepare, present and guide the exercises. This means you as a facilitator:

- help participants to find out what they already know (discover tacit knowledge),
- encourage them to continue learning, and
- help them to discover their own potential.

You are responsible for creating an environment in which participants can learn, experiment, research, and grow. This is a process of sharing, give and take between both the participants and the facilitators.

To achieve all this, careful preparation is crucial. It ensures that you feel safer during the workshop or seminar, and also able to dynamically react to the group dynamics and modify the planned activities if necessary.

### You and your team

To successfully run a workshop or seminar, there should be at least two facilitators per group (or more if the group is large). That way, you can share the responsibilities and support each other throughout all phases of the process.

Together, your first step is to agree on the objectives you want to carry out, and plan the activities. You have to be aware of your target group(s), your topics, your goals and your methods to achieve them.

Then, we highly recommend to try all planned exercises, and evaluate them.
It is very important to know your limits and competencies, as well as the opportunities and risks of the planned activities.

To better prepare yourself, try working through these questions together:

- Who belongs to your team?
- What are each team members' favorite activities or topics?
- What are the competencies of each team member? What do you bring to the table?
- Does everyone know how the activities work? Is everyone able to guide each activity?
- What time, space and other resources do you have to prepare the workshop/seminar? How will you organize things?
- What about diversity on your team? How are different variables like gender, cultural background, social situation represented in your team? How can this affect the planned activities?
- What experiences does each of you have that are relevant to the planned activities and topics of discussion?
- Both before and during the activities, how can you communicate your ideas and approaches to:
- your fellow facilitators?
- your participants?
- Imagine this situation: during an activity, difference of opinions arises between the facilitators. What do you do?
- In general, how can you deal with opinions you don't agree with during the workshop/seminar?
- How can you deal with discussions of experiences you don't yourself have?

## 3.3 Moderation

During the activities, it's your task to create a good atmosphere for discussion. That brings up one of the most difficult questions for a facilitator: how to deal with hateful, discriminatory and otherwise negative opinions?

Our recommendation is: give them space in the discussion. Obviously, negative comments should be clearly rejected during the discussion. On the other hand, nobody should be punished for participation. Remember, it's possible that this is the first time the speaker will encounter opposition to their opinions.

Discussing negative comments doesn't mean you have to agree with them. Narratives and bad experiences should be taken seriously, but discriminatory positions should be addressed and clearly rejected.

Rather than outright dismissing an opinion, it's often better to start asking questions: How did you come to this position? Can you imagine how your opinion sounds to someone affected by it? Could you explain your statement? Frequently, questions can initiate a process of rethinking for the speaker, and/or lead to a productive debate.

Your emotional reactions can help you to find words and redirect the discussion: “Seriously, this topic concerns me and I’d like to add something/ask a question.” This reframing can offer an opportunity to explain statements, qualify or retract them.

It's also important to offer counterarguments and additional information. (You should research these facts, as related to the planned topics of discussion, as part of your preparation.)

Everyone should get an opportunity to change their opinions. However, it's possible that you will encounter participants who clearly display hateful or discriminatory attitudes, who will not be persuaded in any way. At this point, it will be necessary to distance yourself clearly from their position and start no further discussion with them. Otherwise, the whole discussion will be directed by those people. However, you should carefully consider such a decision.

If there is no chance of less radical solution, it might be in the group's best interest to request the disrupting person to leave entirely. Excluding people from a voluntary learning context is a profound decision that also carries a risk of solving a social problem in a personal way. Based on the specific situation, you should carefully weigh the positive and negative impacts of such a step, as well as alternative options for action. Ask yourself: "What do I want to achieve with my workshop or seminar?"

## 3.4. Evaluation

After completing an activity, there should always a feedback session with the participants, as well as a team review between the facilitators.

Each of the games we've prepared for you has a section on participant evaluation – there you will find tips, example questions and other notes you can use.

As for the team review, you should reflect among yourselves on the whole process of the workshop/seminar, including preparation. Ask yourself:

- What went well? Can we repeat that?
- What could have been done better? How?
- What problems did we encounter? How could we avoid them in the future?

Evaluating your activities as a team allows you to learn from mistakes, grow, and plan for the future (yours or your project).

## 3.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed the Facilitator's Checklist.

We hope you now feel better prepared for your next workshop/seminar, be it your tenth or your very first.

Good luck with your projects!