

Reflections from Former Volunteers

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The following words may be useful for those contemplating voluntary service in the region. Vanja Nikolic has suggested "fifteen questions to ask yourself before volunteering" in a conflict or post-conflict region and Koen van Praet offers advice on how to avoid the risk of burn-out as a long-term volunteer. Much of this is not nearly as relevant as it was a few years ago but we leave it on the website as the reflections are still useful.

Some words from Vanja, 1999

"I would like to introduce myself and to write a few words. Vanja Nikolic (31yrs), from Osijek, Croatia, living in Zagreb. Involved in peace/human rights activities within Antiwar Campaign Network Croatia since the spring of 1992.

Before volunteering, I ask you to give yourself time to think and question why you want to do it and what your own motivation and expectation is. Working for few years in international volunteer's projects, I am more than sure that being clear and aware of your own motivation is of extreme importance. Also the expectations...

- You are not going to stop the war in few weeks.
 - Describe your own motivation without using the word "help". It is self-understandable that most people want to help: it is important to find out whom do I want to help? others, myself, the human race, my own ego?
 - Are you running away from personal troubles in your own life, by packing your bags and traveling to a war region?
 - Do you dream of yourself as a hero once you are back home?
 - Do you think that you are more clever, educated and "civilized" than those people in the Balkans, so you plan to go down there and tell them what to do?
 - Did you practice conflict resolution and mediation, so that you now dream about going there yourself and doing the workshops on how to solve conflict in nine steps?
 - Do you see it as a great adventurous "holiday"?
 - Is it a very good line in your C.V.?
 - Do you have some "on-side agenda" of your own... to use this experience for campaigning, research, etc?
 - Are you healthy and psychologically stable enough that once you get there, you can really be "of help", and not a person who will suck the energy of the team and of local people?
 - Are you ready to live in chaotic, hard, cold conditions, among people who are going through difficult times or even horror? Are you ready for culture shock, and are you ready (for non-English speakers) to not hear your language for all the time you are there?
 - Are you ready that maybe you are not going to be able to communicate daily with your family, relatives and friends back at home?
 - Are you ready that you will come to the region and find out that actually do not have a clue what's going on?
 - Are you aware of your own prejudices about people from different cultures and different countries, and do you have a coping mechanism to deal with them?
 - Think about how your actions can be of benefit, but also how much they can harm people in the war-region, too.
- There are so many questions to ask yourself before applying to go there. Be prepared that as much as you prepare yourself, you are never going to be prepared! :). This list of questions... its aim is not to stop you from applying: it is more for you to think and be aware of. Motivations for activism differ from person to person... and that's OK. It's a problem if you are hiding your own motivations from even yourself, or when you are not aware of your own motivations.

Why do I write this "black story"? I find it important, for the sake of the project, of the people from the region, and for your own sake. There is also another, excellent and positive side to the story. Yes, it is a place to learn, to grow, to feel useful and creative and constructive. It is place to make friends, to do and experience something great. It can change your attitudes and your life's path...

And, of course I do care for all the victims of the violence. And I do believe that small steps, grassroots initiatives, even though small are of extreme importance...."

With best wishes,

Vanja

Some words from Koen

Former volunteer Koen van Praet has provided some useful advice on a number of ways that volunteers can control the risk of work dissatisfaction, burn-out and the psychological impact of the post-war realities they are confronted with. In the end, says Koen, "the volunteer is also responsible for his/her own (un)happiness".

"Dangers when working in crisis areas, in post-conflict zones and in very fractured communities:

- Frustration and disillusion
 - The volunteer doesn't feel effective
 - The situation doesn't fit the expectations (most of the time this means: it was expected to be worse) Guilty feelings: Why do I have a good life? I do not work enough to make the lives of the poor better.
 - As a reaction on the frustration and the guilt one sees often a too close engagement with the work. For example:
 - The volunteer works without taking a sufficient rest (holiday or rest during the day), or isolates themselves by concentrating on 'their' work or project.
 - They do not take time to talk to the other volunteers
 - They may burn out
 - Things may go wrong because of exhaustion, bad preparation and also isolation from the others.
 - Volunteers can become emotionally numb: disinterested in the activities of other, disinterested in contacting family and friends at home, and in a situation of isolation where only the victims count.
- At this point the volunteer is in a dual relationship with whom he wants to 'help'. Simply put: there is nothing but the victim (or the work for the victim) and the volunteer. A dual relationship means that there is no space for reflection.

The result for the volunteer is that he disappears as an individual. What I mean by that is: the relation with the victims gets isolated so there is no space for reflection. This opens the gate to a massive identification with (a) one's work, or (b) the victim/poor he is working with/for.

I think that when one identifies with one's work one has just a 'normal' burn out. If the volunteer identifies with the victims then he will be confronted with the often existential questions they raise. Fundamental questions refugees raise are for example: What am I doing here? What was the value of my life up to now? What is my future?

If the volunteer has no answers ready to those questions then the risk of over-identifying with the refugee becomes very great. The symptoms and results of this can be:

- Depression, nightmares, emotional numbness
 - Aggression
 - Not taking days off, because the victim can't do so either, not eating properly (because neither can they), etc.
- The two most common ways that volunteers deal with this are:

- The "volunteer-for-ever": the volunteer who stays and stays and needs ever 'heavier' jobs.
- The volunteer goes back home frustrated and depressed, and may spread the word about how he/she wasted his/her time.

Avoiding and dealing with burn out:

Some necessities are:

- Preparation (focusing on and being aware of your own expectations)
- Having adequate supervision and/or intervention
- Questioning your own motivation as a volunteer
- Asking yourself, as a potential volunteer: do you have something to return to after the work here is done?

SOME HINTS:

- Look for something that is outside of your work with victims.
- Talk!!
- Write (a diary, or to friends)
- Take a free day.
- Don't spend your free time talking about the project!
- Make contacts outside the project

Anyway, have a good time and all the best to all volunteers. I wrote the above because I saw some good friends disappear in Croatian refugee camps."

Koen