



Text of reference on « Voluntary Service » adopted by Cotravaux associations

Voluntary service is an exchange between an individual, or a group of individuals, and a local community. The volunteer or group of volunteers offers time, energy and effort to a project of benefit to a community, and via this project the community offers to the volunteer or group of volunteers an opportunity for experimentation, learning and personal and collective development.

Voluntary service implies a commitment :

- ⇒ which is reciprocal and formalised
- ⇒ of limited duration, but which is, within that period, a full-time commitment
- ⇒ freely chosen by both the volunteer and the local community
- ⇒ without motive of financial gain
- ⇒ to an initiative of a group of persons, organised by a non-profit making structure to whose values the volunteer freely adheres.
- ⇒ for the benefit of a community.

The act of volunteering extends beyond the boundaries of the period of voluntary service. To be a volunteer is to enter into a process that the member associations of Cotravaux and their partners accompany before, during, and after the voluntary project through the following actions:

- ⇒ A period of preparation and orientation before the project begins.
- ⇒ Supervision during the voluntary project.
- ⇒ Follow-up meetings upon the return from the voluntary project, with the aim of exchanging experiences and examining their value, and putting these experiences into perspective by drawing parallels between them and other forms of active citizenship in, for example, daily life, associations, trade unions and political or social movements.

Voluntary service is not an activity, but an approach

- **A**n approach to the individual, open to all at any moment of their life, regardless of age, origins, nationality, skills. It is one of the means by which any person, regardless of his or her status, can exercise their free will, make and affirm their choices, discover new domains of life, new activities and express his or her investment in society.

- **A**n approach to community education wherein two objectives are intimately mingled: that of the personal growth of the individual and that of the collective transformation of society. The volunteer is not the target of an educational product, but the key player in an associative and/or political project. That a group of volunteers live and work together in a short or long-term international volunteer project creates an unique environment whose evolution is particularly favourable for the realisation of this dual objective: a 'mini-society' formed of people of different social, geographical and cultural origins.

- **A**n approach to cultural understanding and learning from the other. Rather than a division into those who help and those who are helped, between those who possess knowledge and those who do not, there are instead individuals or communities, partner associations, who are ready to examine their own thoughts and methods in the light of that which the other person brings to them. International voluntary service cannot be defined without the concept of exchange.

- **V**oluntary service is neither a programme, nor a vocational training course, nor a means to replace paid labour or utilise volunteers as a form of cheap labour. Voluntary service is not a means to financial gain, either for the volunteer or for the host organisation. The relations between the volunteer, the project, and all those involved in the project are free of economic implications. The traces that the volunteer will leave in a local project in which he has taken part are as much immaterial and they are material. In the same way, the benefit that a volunteer acquires from his or her experience is not of a financial or material nature.

- **V**oluntary service is undertaken on behalf of a project which benefits a community and is supported by that community. Be it in France or abroad, the project in question is conceived by a group such as a town or district council, an association or a group of inhabitants. They have full control over the choice of project and the methods of implementing it. Whilst the projects have a long-term impact, the member associations of Cotravaux must be to them only transient partners. Thus, in other countries, it is local organisations, partners of the member associations of Cotravaux, who conceive, organise and supervise these activities. Partnerships and international relations are built on regular meetings and common projects and are reinforced through reciprocity, the basis for mutual trust.

Created in 1959, COTRAVAUX (Co-ordination for Youth Voluntary Service) is composed of 12 member associations :

Alpes de Lumière - Action d'Urgence Internationale - Concordia - Compagnons Bâisseurs - Espace Chantiers Environnement Local - Fédération Unie des Auberges de Jeunesse - Jeunesse et Reconstruction - Neige et Merveilles - Service Civil International - Solidarités Jeunesses - Union REMPART - Union Nationale des Associations Régionalisées d'Etudes et Chantiers (UNAREC)

In the context of 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers, the member associations of COTRAVAUX wished to affirm the values which for them underpin the concept of 'Voluntary Service'. This text, which is to serve as a reference for the member associations, was adopted by the General Assembly of COTRAVAUX in June 2001.