

The Social Inclusion Challenge: 10 Opportunities for European Voluntary Service 2014-2020

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How can we make European Voluntary Service (EVS) as inclusive as possible? While European Voluntary Service remains a renowned example of high-quality voluntary service exchanges, the social inclusion challenge is more pressing than ever – the crisis is leaving its marks on Europe's youth.² How can we ensure that young people with fewer opportunities can also reap the full benefits of their EVS exchange?

The Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) crowdsourced >10 solutions among Europe's EVS experts: 75 EVS sending and hosting organisations formulated 10 opportunities for EVS. 10 ways we can tackle the social inclusion challenge! These 75 accredited EVS organisations from all EU member states and some other programme countries answered these three open questions:

1. Do you feel that EVS manages to include young people with fewer chances? (without a degree, without good job prospects, with lower social, financial or cultural capital, people with disabilities,...?) In short, is EVS social enough?
2. What are the main obstacles you see for including younger people with fewer opportunities in EVS? (from the point of view of hosting/sending organisation; of the young person; ...)

¹ AVSO represents all civil society organisations that run local, national or international voluntary service projects at the European level.

² See the official report from the European Commission at http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/social_exclusion_and_youth_work.pdf

3. If any, what are the improvements you suggest to (further) increase the inclusive character of EVS?

From their replies, AVSO distilled the following 10 challenges and 10 opportunities.³

1. Make (European) Voluntary Service part of the Youth Guarantee

The Challenge:

Youth unemployment is on the rise throughout the European Union. The Youth Guarantee⁴ proposed by the European Commission and adopted by the Council will be an important tool in fighting this regrettable evolution.

The Opportunity:

As non-formal learning experiences, European Voluntary Service, national Voluntary and Civic Service schemes, should be integrated within the national Youth Guarantee schemes at the stage of implementation. Voluntary and civic service increases skills, teaches responsibility and engagement and radically strengthens any youngster's employability. Furthermore, the integration of voluntary service into national youth guarantee schemes also constitutes a smart investment: it's both investing in the youth and society at the same time.

2. Build confidence by starting EVS@home

The Challenge:

Younger people with fewer opportunities often lack the confidence to start EVS: there is the language barrier, the challenge of living in another country, and they are often not familiar with what volunteering entails. In short, EVS is a step into the unknown.

³ The final responsibility for the ideas contained in this paper lies with AVSO.

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1829&furtherNews=yes>

The Opportunity:

Volunteers with fewer opportunities should be allowed to start their voluntary service close to home being involved, for a period of two months, for example, in activities of their sending organizations. This way, the sending organisations can prepare them thoroughly for what's waiting abroad, they have the time to pick up skills and their expectations of what's waiting abroad will be closer to reality. By breaking up EVS in two steps, younger people with fewer opportunities can volunteer abroad better prepared and more self-secure.

3. A framework EVS for secure planning

The Challenge:

Between the approval of an EVS project and the starting date, there is often a very short time span. Beside the strain this puts on the EVS organisations, this also clashes with the needs of younger people with fewer opportunities: their need for certainty and the necessity of adequate preparation.

The Opportunity:

Organisations with a long-term track record in EVS for people with fewer opportunities, should be able to have certainty and stability: that way they can plan ahead and offer high-quality social inclusion opportunities. Framework agreements over several years could be established between these organisations and the Commission's agency (EACEA), agreeing the number of EVS exchanges and the percentage of younger people with fewer opportunities. This would enable these organisations to work over a long term and to establish long-term partnerships. To ensure quality and control from the Commission's side, these multi-year framework contracts could be reviewed on a yearly basis and volunteers should have permanent access to an ombudsman at the local national agency.

4. Intensify the follow-up and create a snowball effect

The Challenge:

After a successful and enriching EVS experience, what's next? An EVS exchange should be a starting point for more engagement in society, for a different outlook on the world and better employability. However, if there is

no follow-up at all, the investments the youngster, the involved organisations and the EU have made, may go to waste after all.

The Opportunity:

The youngster, the sending and hosting organisation and the EVS programme should capitalise on successful experiences. For exchanges of younger people with fewer opportunities, a follow-up procedure should be put in place, with its own specific budgets. Furthermore, national agencies should provide EVS organisations with information about possible next steps for the young person with fewer opportunities. This way, EVS can be coordinated with national systems of education, training or employment (and, as suggested above, with national Youth Guarantee schemes). Last, but not least, a good follow-up may be the basis of recruiting more youngsters who face similar challenges!

5. Easier partnerships for better knowledge and support

The Challenge:

Both hosting and sending organisations are often forced to work with incomplete knowledge about how to work with younger people with fewer opportunities and don't even have complete knowledge about each other's skills and facilities.

The Opportunity:

Long-term partnerships should be formalised and encouraged. Partnerships between the sending organisation and social or health-care organisations can facilitate the recruitment of younger people with fewer opportunities and improve the support for these youngsters before departure. Partnerships between the hosting organisation and social or health-care organisations can facilitate the hosting organisation's knowledge about specific target groups.

6. Unlimited access to online language training

The Challenge:

The language barrier remains EVS's scarecrow: will I be able to express myself fully and interact with my environment abroad?

The Opportunity:

Give all EVS organisations unlimited access to an online language learning platform! Youngsters will be able to increase their language skills, upgrade their employability and build self-confidence. If learning sessions are hosted at the sending organisation, it will provide a useful, regular contact moment between sending organisation and the youngster.

7. Dedicated fund for exceptional costs for people with disabilities

The Challenge:

Hosting organisations are often reluctant to take up the challenge that hosting young people with fewer opportunities asks, also in financial terms. Until now, even exceptional costs have to be identified in advance, giving these organisations little flexibility to deal with unexpected challenges.

The Opportunity:

For exchanges involving younger people with disabilities, an emergency funding option should be opened up for any kind of extra effort that is needed to turn the EVS experience for people with fewer opportunities into a success. EVS organisations should be able to get access to this funding fast and easily.

8. Targeted communication to youngster with fewer opportunities and their environment

The Challenge:

Younger people with fewer opportunities are often not aware of the existence of EVS. And even if they are, they do not realise the potential benefits of EVS for their own future. Their environment might be suspicious about the benefits of EVS as well.

The Opportunity:

A targeted communication strategy should be developed. This communication strategy should be based on a careful analysis of both the communication channels and the argumentation needed. How can we reach younger people with fewer opportunities? And which type of arguments will make them interested in EVS?

9. Best-case practices toolkit

The Challenge:

The fear of hosting younger people with fewer opportunities is also the fear of the unknown. How will we integrate these youngsters in our daily activities? To what do we need to pay attention? What's good practice for hosting these youngsters?

The Opportunity:

In various forms, there are already initiatives, such as trainings for youth workers, in place to answer these questions. These could be complemented with a best-case practice toolkit for specific target groups. As well as good practices, this toolkit should have specific guidelines to prepare a specific strategy to include more young people with fewer opportunities. The toolkit will both be an inspiration and a reference point for EVS organisations.

10. Improve the EVS database's user friendliness

The Challenge:

The current EVS accredited organisations database is impractical when it comes to matching projects with volunteer interests and needs.

The Opportunity:

The new database on the new youth portal should be more dynamic by allowing hosting organisations to post specific projects, volunteer 'vacancies'. Sending organisations should be able to indicate if they have volunteers looking for a suitable projects and what their needs and interests are. This way, the database will become a tool for organisations to work more efficiently and deliver a better matching between volunteer needs and hosting organisation's capacities.

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