



VOLUNTEER CHARTER AND SENDING ORGANISATION CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

***Short Term Volunteering for Long Term
Development***

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1. CONTEXT AND PROCESS OF CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

1.1 CONTEXT

Comhlámh, established in 1975 as the Irish Association of Development Workers, has been consistently examining the concept of volunteering overseas as an integral part of its work. As part of this process, Comhlámh has held a variety of discussion forums to examine the changing role of the development worker overseas. As a result of these discussions it was noted that there were a number of key changes in overseas development work, including:

- Greater amounts of finance available for development aid;
- Increased professionalisation of development work, and an increased reliance by agencies on local people to work in the field;
- Increased interest, but more difficulty in finding an entry point into development work, both nationally and internationally, for Irish people;
- An increased recognition of the need for accountability to the agency or community in which the development worker is based, and not primarily to the foreign donor government; and
- The dissolution of APSO (Agency for Personal Service Overseas), which was a key agency for sending people overseas and which provided the necessary orientation for volunteers before they travelled. Comhlámh also synthesised some key conceptions on volunteering in the development context in the light of the above mentioned developments:
 - Recognising volunteering in development as a continuum –overseas volunteers learn from their volunteering experience about the root causes of poverty and bring that knowledge home to educate others, often through activism and development education.
 - Volunteers act as learners as much, if not more so, than as teachers – in other words, that overseas volunteers approach their placements with the attitude of the apprentice and guest.
 - The recognition that international volunteering is built on a partnership between three key stakeholders – the host community, the volunteer and the sending organisation, and that this had to be reflected in any future policy dealing with the sector.
 - The importance of partnership between the host project and community and the sending agency to plan and design volunteering programmes so that they address the genuine needs and concerns of the host community.
 - Volunteering overseas can encourage and support a number of positive currents in Irish society: altruism and volunteerism in relation to development overseas, public support for development assistance, an awareness of poverty and marginalization and a demand for its remedy, and an apprenticeship system for Irish development agencies.

1.2 COMHLÁMH'S VOLUNTEERING OPTIONS PROGRAMME

The Comhlámh Volunteering Options programme was set up by Comhlámh in September, 2004 to work in more depth on the issues identified above. The project has the following key objectives:

- To promote informed decision-making by potential volunteers;
- To promote good practice by volunteer sending agencies;
- To encourage volunteer understanding of their role within 'development';
- To support volunteers on their return to internalise their experience; and
- To provide structured opportunities to use that experience to positive effect at home.

The programme developed five main elements to realise these objectives:

1. A web portal with comprehensive information on overseas volunteering opportunities (www.volunteeringoptions.org), to aid and encourage informed decision making;
2. A book, *Working for a Better World: A Guide to Volunteering in Global Development*, which provides comprehensive advice and information in hard copy, including a directory of placement organisations;
3. A series of Workshops exploring pre-decision and post-return options for short-term volunteers;
4. A Code of Good Practice for organisations and companies sending out short-term volunteers;
5. A Volunteer Charter providing a model of responsible, responsive volunteering for overseas volunteers.

This programme of work builds on the previous work done by Comhlámh on the issue of volunteering overseas. The process of formulating the Code of Good Practice/Volunteer Charter (COP/VC) consisted of a number of key events and elements:

1. A consultative meeting with sending organisations held on December 3rd, 2004 to research sector opinion on COP/VC content.
2. A consultative meeting with volunteers held on February 12th 2005 to similarly canvas opinion amongst ex-volunteers on COP/VC content.
3. The formation of the Volunteering Options Advisory Group (VOAG) drawing together a number of professionals from the sector to work on the text of the COP/VC, taking into account the opinions expressed at the previous two events.

The present document is the culmination of the projects work to date on the development of a COP/VC. Through this process Comhlámh was able to identify the areas of key concern for the sector and volunteers which were then synthesised into a number of core values which inform the content of the COP/VC.

The following section, however, will look firstly at why a Code of Good Practice and Volunteer Charter are of value to the different stakeholders involved. We will then go on to look at the Code's Core Values and each of the Principles of the COP/VC.

2. PURPOSE AND USES OF CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE AND VOLUNTEER CHARTER

This document aims to communicate the Code of Good Practice and Volunteer Charter to the sector, to potential volunteers, to donors and the public at large. We hope to generate interest in the COP/VC amongst agencies, an awareness that agreed and shared standards need to be set, and a willingness on the part of agencies to participate in a joint project to help achieve those standards.

The main purpose of the COP/VC is to set a standard for short-term volunteering in the developing world, for the use of sending organisations, volunteers and hosting organisations. In the more medium term we hope to increase information sharing and networking amongst agencies within the sector; to make the sector more aware of the issues raised in the COP/VC and ultimately to contribute to improvement of the volunteering experiences of future Irish international volunteers and the quality of life for host communities affected by these programmes.

The COP/VC is a means whereby potential volunteers can measure the quality of agencies as they decide which agency to volunteer with. The COP/VC can also help provide assurances to parents and guardians of younger volunteers that their loved ones are with reputable, reliable agencies who can be trusted with their safety.

Moreover, funders also can use the COP/VC to guide their funding decisions as those agencies that sign up to the COP/VC will be signalling to volunteers, funders and potential funders their commitment to providing good quality volunteering programmes. This will in turn assure funders that their money will be sensibly and effectively spent.

Through the COP/VC, host communities should become more aware of their rights, more involved in programme design and implementation, and in turn more responsive to the communities they serve.

The Volunteer Charter provides a model and guide for volunteers for responsive, responsible volunteering, to elevate standards and to recognise that responsibilities do not rest entirely with the sending agencies. The VC should also help to produce more sensitive, responsive international volunteers, reducing the potential for conflict and misunderstandings.

Finally, we hope that this joint endeavour will elevate the profile and quality of international volunteering within Ireland, increasing accountability and transparency in the sector to the Irish public. Ultimately, it should result in greater interest among the Irish public in overseas volunteering and in Irish involvement and commitment to international development.

3. THE CODE'S CORE VALUES.

A number of Core Values emerged out of the discussions and the considerations mentioned in the previous sections. These are as follows:

• *Partnership*

The Code reflects the need for a spirit of partnership between all stakeholders in international volunteering. This partnership must be constructed from an equality perspective – the equal partnership of sending organisations, host projects and volunteers. It should be a partnership based on respect for, and valuing, all those involved and their different perspectives and backgrounds. It is a partnership which strives to create a situation of mutual solidarity and cultural understanding.

• *Quality*

An effective partnership between the different stakeholders should encourage the mature growth of the sector. It should increase the professionalism of the sending organisations, providing accountability to the other stakeholders, local host groups and communities, funders and the Irish public. In the end, an effective partnership will ensure quality in all aspects of the sector's activities.

• *Security*

Central to a quality service from the sector is concern for the safety, health and protection of volunteers and host communities involved in volunteering programmes. Ensuring the security and welfare of these groups is essential if confidence in sending organisations is to be firmly established.

- ***Appropriate Volunteer Attitudes***

Volunteers are the essence of a good volunteering programme, and volunteer attitudes to their placement and their host projects and communities are crucial to its success. Volunteers should realise their main aim is to serve their host community and learn from them, rather than focussing on what volunteers can provide or bring to their hosts; the emphasis of the exercise being on the host rather than the volunteer.

- ***Valuing Volunteering***

Central to the principles behind the Code is recognition of the value of volunteering to the community and the individual. By working to improve volunteering programmes, with an emphasis on host project and volunteer participation in their design, programmes should benefit both these stakeholders more. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on organisations showing volunteers how and why they are valuable through providing more mechanisms for their feedback in programmes and in the organisations as a whole.

- ***Sustainability***

The use of international volunteers in development countries does not come cost-free. This is why the Code recommends that sending organisations fund volunteering projects adequately and build into their budgets extra monies that host projects can use to further their development and provide more and better services to their local communities.

- ***Solidarity***

Overseas volunteering gives volunteers the possibility to ‘make a difference’ at home even more so than in their placement country. For this reason the Code emphasises the role of training to ensure that volunteers see themselves as learners while overseas and teachers while at home. Volunteers increased understanding of the realities of developing countries, coupled with their increased involvement in educational and campaigning activities at home, should encourage, it is hoped, solidarity between the people of Ireland and the peoples of the developing world.

- ***Contribution to Development***

At the core of the Code of Good Practice and Volunteer Charter is a belief in and commitment to international development, particularly the Millennium Development Goals. The ultimate aim of improving standards of volunteer programmes and volunteering is to better contribute to the realisation of those Goals.

4. CODE IMPLEMENTATION

In 2005, Comhlámh and the Volunteering Options Advisory Group (VOAG) worked on the text of the Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter. In 2006 the emphasis is on how to ensure that the Code of Good Practice is implemented. Up until now a number of models have been considered by the VOAG.

These include: a sign up model, whereby organisations sign up to the principles but adherence is monitored only by the individual signatories through their internal monitoring and evaluation systems; self-certification, whereby organisations internally review compliance and report back to a central secretariat at agreed intervals; a peer review model, whereby a team of individuals from member organisations assess compliance; a social audit carried out by an external auditor on a periodic basis, who works with the organisation to assess compliance and make recommendations on how to achieve it; and external assessment, whereby a committee assesses compliance.

When analysing accountability in any situation, the following questions should be posed:

- a. Who is accountable;
- b. To whom (or what);
- c. For what;
- d. Through what mechanisms; and
- e. With what kind of accountability outcomes.

The process of accountability is defined as comprising four main stages, throughout which transparency is paramount:

- Agreement on clear roles and responsibilities of the organisation (and their personnel), with a compliance to agreed standards;
- Taking action for which the organisation is responsible, and evaluating that action;
- Reporting on and accounting for that action;
- Responding to, and complying with, agreed standards of performance and the views and needs of the stakeholders.

In particular, if a Code of Good Practice is to be successfully implemented:

- It should be based on extensive research, consultation and participation of all stakeholders;
- It must be owned by those stakeholders and not imposed;
- It should be backed by a system of staff development and training;
- It should have mechanisms for reward and sanction built in;
- Well defined and fair enforcement procedures should be in place;
- There should be periodic auditing and ‘certification’;
- It should not be so rigid as to constrain experimentation and learning, nor so monolithic as to force organisations to tailor their activities accordingly simply as a matter of course, with little consideration of its implications or real value.

The VOAG at a meeting on February 22nd 2005, made the following observations and suggestions regarding implementation:

- A need to establish some acceptable criteria for being able to sign up to the COP;
- ‘Principles’ need indicators: the inclusion of indicators rather than specific standards for the document;
- Organisations should share their resources on policies/standards;
- The need to examine the possible roles of Dóchas and Comhlámh as external auditors;
- Possibility of introducing a timeframe within which Code indicators should be implemented;
- Self-regulation feeding into the idea of a central organisation that monitors/promotes, rather than implements, the Code;
- The possibility of having an in-country group review as part of the process;
- In relation to donors asking agencies to sign up to an NGO-agreed COP, it was felt that this could be implemented in the monitoring and evaluation process;
- A further suggestion was the provision of a Quality Mark/Trust Mark of some sort to organisations that had signed up to the COP.

5. THE COMHLÁMH CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE AND VOLUNTEER CHARTER

Volunteer Responsibilities

Volunteers Agree To:

1. Inform themselves about all relevant issues relating to their placement.

By informing themselves fully volunteers will ensure that they are well prepared for their placement. It is recommended that volunteers familiarise themselves with their host country, its peoples and cultures, as much as possible before they go. Suggestions are to find books and other resources on it, monitor the news on that country, and meet people who have lived there or come from there if possible. Sending organisations should facilitate this process by providing volunteers with possible sources for their research, some basic facts and putting them in contact with ex-volunteers who have been there or, better still, have worked on that placement.

2. Familiarise themselves thoroughly with their role description before departure.

Written role descriptions go some way to dispel uncertainties volunteers have about what they will be expected to do on their placement. By familiarising themselves with their role description this can prompt them to ask further questions about it and about the reasons why such a job is necessary. Once again, contact with ex-volunteers who have worked on that placement will help volunteers prepare so that they can utilise their time overseas well.

3. Respect local customs and adopt the role of learners and guests.

A major motivation for volunteering, expressed by volunteers, is to ‘give something back’, to ‘help out’ people less fortunate than themselves. This motivation, however, can sometimes lead to volunteers being overzealous as they work to maximise their impact. Often they can come with a sense that they know best, showing little respect for local customs and knowledge. However, it is often the volunteer who learns more from the hosts, than the hosts from them. The principle in the charter aims to encourage the volunteer to be aware of their role as learner rather than just ‘giver’.

4. Act always in a professional manner and be flexible and adaptable while in their placement.

In our Volunteer Forum, volunteers pointed out that some volunteers take a less than professional attitude to their placement. They may turn up late, leave early, or behave in a manner more appropriate for a holiday than in providing a service to the local community. Furthermore, while volunteers may receive role descriptions, as often as not volunteers are expected to be flexible and adaptable in what they do while on placement, and in their attitudes to the local community and their colleagues. This principle aims to underline these points to volunteers.

5. Take due care with their personal safety and physical and mental health.

Health and safety issues are vital for volunteers. While the sending organisation can provide volunteers with guidance, it is the responsibility of the volunteer to abide by that advice and to use their common sense. Volunteers should find out about the local health and security situation as part of their general research on their host country. Some sending organisations may provide health insurance for volunteers but most will not. It is the responsibility of volunteers to check this out and take appropriate steps.

6. Channel the experiences and knowledge gained while overseas into Irish society.

As pointed out in principle 3 above, volunteers on overseas placements are in the privileged position of being able to learn about their host country and the experience of working in a developing country. This principle aims to encourage volunteers, on their return, to use the knowledge they gain to raise awareness in Ireland on issues affecting the developing world. Most

immediately, this can include being available for other volunteers. It can also include giving talks in their local areas, becoming part of support and/or campaign networks, and/or receiving training and participating in development education. Engagement with local media through writing articles or giving interviews is a further option.

7. Accept and sign a Code of Conduct embodying these principles.

Many sending organisations give volunteers a Code of Conduct to sign before going on their placement in an attempt to ensure that they are aware of what the organisation expects of them in terms of appropriate behaviour. This principle aims to encourage sending organisations to include the principles of the Charter within their Codes of Conduct and so encourage volunteers to follow them.

Sending Organisation Responsibilities

Sending Organisations Agree To:

1. Have volunteer programmes based on realistic aims and objectives with appropriate and useful volunteer roles.

In developed countries, including Ireland, there is a demand from the public for volunteering placements overseas. Sometimes it may be that volunteering programmes in developing countries are set up in order cater for this demand rather than fulfil a perceived need in developing countries. This principle aims to ensure that host projects participate in programme planning and development so that programmes fit with local needs and requirements and volunteers have useful, rewarding placements that actually address local problems.

2. Provide sufficient resources and support to run volunteer programmes in an efficient and sustainable manner.

Volunteer programmes should be designed to benefit host projects and communities. It is necessary, therefore, that budgets for programmes are sufficient to ensure these programmes are well run, including providing local well trained in-country staff. Budgets should also contribute extra resources to facilitate host projects' growth in a sustainable manner, thus allowing them to provide services to local communities outside of their volunteer programmes.

3. Provide marketing and imagery consistent with good practice, and clear expressions of organisational aims, ethos and values.

Good clear information is essential to allow potential volunteers to choose their placement. This principle aims to ensure that sending organisations do not make false claims as to the efficacy and effects of their programmes, or the extent to which volunteers can 'make a difference' to the lives of the people in host communities. By being clear about their aims, values and ethos, organisations will also help volunteers know that they are in agreement with them. Finally, it aims to ensure that host communities are portrayed pictorially in a positive manner consistent with good practice, such as the Dóchas' Code of Conduct on Images and Messages relating to the Third World.

4. Provide potential volunteers with free, fair and unbiased information on their organisation and volunteer placements. This principle encourages sending organisations to provide potential volunteers with lists of independent resources on volunteering overseas, such as the Comhlámh Guide to Global Volunteering or its website www.volunteeringoptions.org.

Another source would be unmediated access to ex-volunteers who had a placement with that organisation. In this way, potential volunteers would be aided in their decision-making and would be able to learn more about their host country and placement.

5. Use fair, consistent and transparent recruitment procedures. Here the Code of Good Practice seeks to encourage sending organisations to have standardised selection procedures, which are made clear to volunteers from the outset. Some of the content of interviews, for example, would be to explore individuals' reasons for wanting to volunteer. Other procedures would be to check references in a consistent manner, including any official checks that are necessary. Finally, another suggestion would be to provide feedback to those who failed to be selected.

6. Assist and provide for the varying support needs of volunteers.

This principle aims to encourage organisations to provide support to volunteers, such as one-to-one or group support sessions. The existence of these facilities should be made apparent to volunteers at the interview and induction stage. Provision should be made also for volunteers to refuse tasks if they feel they are unable to do them. Another recommendation is that agency staff providing support to volunteers should receive training.

7. Ensure that volunteers participate in appropriate preparation, training and induction.

This principle encourages organisations to review their training and induction needs and produce a training policy. Training can be provided in-house or by outside agencies, or a mix of both, and can also be provided in host countries and projects on arrival. Volunteers should be provided with a training schedule appropriate to their roles. In this way, organisations can assure that volunteers arrive well prepared to adapt quickly to their host country and their assigned roles.

8. Ensure the protection, safety and well being of volunteers and those they work with as far as possible.

Provision is made with this principle for the drawing up of policies ensuring the protection of volunteers from potential harm, and from potentially harming others. Such policies could include, for example, a risk assessment for volunteers in their placement, insurance guidelines, protection of volunteer data, child protection and anti-discrimination policies.

9. Provide recognition for volunteers

Without volunteers, sending organisations could not exist. Volunteers therefore should be recognised, both formally and informally, as being of value and importance. This could be done through an awards system, or through volunteer newsletters or local media coverage. Monitoring and evaluation systems, debriefing and exit interviews also provide volunteers with opportunities to make their views heard, and it's important too that these views find their way into policy and that this input is acknowledged. Finally, volunteers' service can be recognised by the award of a statement or certificate of service at the end of their placement or, if preferred by the organisation, some form of reference.

10. Provide ongoing monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are important to measure the effectiveness of the programme. To ensure it works all stakeholders should be involved with, and informed of, the M&E programme, and their roll in it, in advance. It is also preferable that the results of M&E are communicated to all stakeholders, to make them aware of any changes that might be implemented as a result of their participation.

11. Provide debriefing to returned volunteers.

The purpose of de-briefing is to focus on the personal dimension of the placement and give the person the opportunity to reflect on the experience and pass on their views in a useful way. It gives the organisation the opportunity to acknowledge the role of the individual and both give and receive considered feedback. De-briefing allows for closure, for "unfinished business" to be dealt with. The debriefing meeting can also be used to inform volunteers of opportunities in Ireland to continue their interest in development, such as through returned volunteers associations or wider networks such as Comhlámh.