

Laura Casas shares her thoughts on the true motivations of many volunteers and the non-profit organisations hosting them.

When I'm asked about my experience with European volunteering, I always say it was an opportunity. Those who go on asking will find out what I did, how I did it and why. If they don't ask, they'll probably stick with the pre-conceived and idyllic idea that we all have of volunteers as part of our collective imagery. And in all likelihood, this imagery has nothing to do with many of the motivations that lead us to take part in a work camp or to do European volunteering.

Nobody will feel dismay at this point when I say that, above all, my volunteering came from a selfish need. However, I would like it if we managed to leave aside the negative aspects behind the word selfishness. So, why was leaving home, my job and my comfort zone to go and spend a year working in community development projects selfish? Because deep inside, it all came from a totally personal need and interest: the need to leave.

Neither will it come as a surprise when I say that, on the other hand, that the first thing a non-profit organisation will do when deciding to participate in a project like this –receiving or sending volunteers and organising work camps– is to work out the numbers. The cost of coordinating volunteers, financially but also in terms of personal involvement, must be worth it for the organisation, in a world that, we all know, isn't floating in resources. It is true that hosting volunteers is enriching and also an intercultural experience, but above all it is a means of subsistence.

Therefore, there is a connection and a commitment on all sides: we need each other to meet needs.

When they ask me about my European volunteering experience, I'm always 100% honest. The organisation I was with didn't have much experience, but did have big will to work and to meet up to the expectations of each of the volunteers. This generated a considerable strain, because they weren't able to find an answer to each and every one of our concerns. They wanted us to be happy, also, because we represented an important inflow of funds and, if we left unhappy or didn't value the experience positively, they might be left out of the programme. And I don't find it outrageous that they openly talked about this.

My own personal need helped to keep up a project of community intervention and education in gender values. This contributed to get some knowledge into the schools and encouraged discussion in class on gender equality. Mine is just a small example that goes to show how volunteering is generated and motivated by individual needs that end up having a collective repercussion.

The motivation and mobilisation of volunteering, I think, are some of the things that continue to fascinate me today, but I also believe that we should stop looking at this exclusively as an altruistic act. We do it because there is something we find indignant, something eats away at our insides, we find something exciting or we simply feel curious about something new. And that is what pushes us to act, and is also the reason why volunteering today continues to be such a powerful and essential transforming strength. We do some things because we choose to do them, and this guarantees a high level of commitment and motivation.

We are talking of an imperfect sector. As all are. But one thing I am sure about is that, at the end of the day, even if the repercussion of the work done by a volunteer isn't immediate or tangible, it will be real. In my case, for instance, it got me going again to continue working in the non-profit associative world and to continue to volunteer during my free time. And here I am. And if my work can be any use to transform and revolutionise the realities we live in, from our own personal experiences, the repercussion of this will be real.