

GLOBAL VILLAGE

A Practical Guide for Local
Partners Hosting
International Volunteers



Hosting international volunteers is a special experience. By opening your projects to them you are fostering a Global Village, a temporary community where cultures, languages and ideas intersect. It brings new people, stories, and energy into your community and sometimes, a few surprises. Differences in habits, language, and expectations can lead to small misunderstandings.

This guide has been developed within the project »Mosaic - Mutual Understanding through Stereotype Overcoming, Cultural Awareness, and International Cooperation« and aims to provide practical support to local partners in welcoming and working with international volunteers.

It draws from real experiences collected by Zavod Volontariat and INEX and builds on the principles of Global Education, Intercultural Learning and Ethical Communication.

Its purpose is to:

- Strengthen collaboration between local hosts and international volunteers.
- Prevent and resolve conflicts effectively.
- Support inclusion, empathy, and cultural understanding.

You don't need to be an expert in cultures or psychology just open-minded and ready to learn together and we are here to support you.



VOLUNTARIAT
SCI SLOVENIA



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1. Global Education & Intercultural Learning

Workcamps are more than just projects, they are opportunities for learning and growing together.

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Global education helps everyone:

- **Understand the world:** Explore social, environmental, and cultural topics beyond your own experience.
- **Learn together:** Share knowledge, skills, and stories.
- **Build active citizenship:** Learn responsibility for actions, communities, and the world.

Intercultural learning happens naturally through daily life: living, working, and talking with people from different countries helps everyone see other perspectives.

 **Tip:** You don't need to "teach" formally. Sharing stories, showing how things work, or asking curious questions is enough to create intercultural learning.

2. Understanding Cultural Differences

Every person who joins a camp comes with their own way of thinking, working, and talking. Sometimes differences are small, sometimes they cause confusion. Recognizing and respecting these differences is essential for creating a positive, inclusive workcamp environment.

Common differences you might notice:

- **Language:** Some volunteers speak good English, some less.
- **Work pace:** Some are fast and focused, others take it easy and chat while working.
- **Time:** In some cultures, “at 9:00” means exactly 9:00; in others, it’s more flexible.
- **Communication:** Some are very direct (“This is wrong”), others softer (“Maybe we could try another way”).
- **Food:** Some don’t eat meat, others eat a lot; some don’t drink coffee, others can’t live without it.

Here are some ways to better understand and navigate cultural differences:

1. Remember that culture is more than nationality.

While people often expect cultural differences based on country of origin, volunteers also differ based on their education, age, personality, urban or rural background, or life experience. It is important to approach each volunteer as an individual, rather than assuming they will act in a certain way because of where they come from.

2. Support volunteers and locals in becoming aware of their own cultural habits.

Cultural misunderstandings often happen because people are not aware of their own “normal” ways of doing things. You can help by encouraging reflection with questions like: “What time do you usually eat dinner?”, “How do you show disagreement?”, or “What does being polite mean in your culture?”

3. Culture is like an iceberg.

Some aspects of culture are easy to see - such as food, language, or clothing. But many cultural values are “below the surface” and influence how people think, communicate, and behave. These invisible values include ideas about time, respect, hierarchy, or how emotions are shown. A simple explanation of the “cultural iceberg” model can help both hosts and volunteers become more open and curious.

4. Create space to share cultural habits and expectations early.

At the beginning of the camp, take time to talk about everyday habits and values. Discuss things like punctuality, mealtime customs, communication styles, and working rhythms. This can prevent misunderstandings later and help people appreciate their differences.

5. Make a visible space for cultural sharing.

You can create a “Cultural Differences” flipchart or wall where volunteers and hosts can write down things they found surprising, funny, or confusing (always in a respectful way). Use these examples during reflection sessions to promote discussion and learning.

6. Help everyone understand that misunderstandings are normal.

Even when people are respectful, cultural differences can cause small tensions or confusion. This is a natural part of intercultural exchange and not a failure. Encourage volunteers to stay curious, ask questions, and avoid jumping to negative conclusions.

7. Use regular group reflections to explore cultural experiences.

Daily check-ins are a great moment to reflect on cultural experiences. Ask questions like: “What did I learn from someone else this week?”, “What was surprising?”, or “What was challenging but helped me grow?” This supports continuous intercultural learning.

8. Encourage an attitude of curiosity, not judgment.

Instead of reacting with confusion or criticism when something seems unfamiliar, encourage everyone to ask: “Why might this make sense in their context?” or “What value is behind this behavior?” This mindset helps build mutual understanding.

9. Give hosts useful language to talk about differences respectfully.

Sometimes local hosts are unsure how to ask questions or raise concerns about cultural differences.

You can use phrases like:

- “In our culture, we usually do it this way — how about in yours?”
- “That’s interesting — can you help me understand why this is done like that?”
- “It seems we have different approaches. Can we talk about how to find a good balance?”

10. Be aware of common cultural contrasts, but don’t stereotype.

Hosts may benefit from learning about common cultural differences, such as direct vs. indirect communication, task-focused vs. relationship-focused work, or strict vs. flexible time orientation. However, these should be shared as general guidelines, not fixed rules. Each person is different, and cultural identity is only one part of who they are.

Example:

At a farm camp, volunteers wanted a detailed daily plan. The farmer said, “We’ll see what the weather brings.” Volunteers felt it was disorganized; the farmer thought they were impatient.

 **Tip:** You don’t need to “teach” formally. Sharing stories, showing how things work, or asking curious questions is enough to create intercultural learning.

3. Ethical Communication

Clear and respectful communication is the foundation of a successful workcamp. Many challenges that hosts face stem from differences in language skills, communication styles, and expectations. For instance, some volunteers may struggle with English, leading to misunderstandings, while hosts may unintentionally provide feedback in ways that seem direct or critical to volunteers from cultures where indirect communication is preferred.

Ethical communication is about more than clarity; it is also about being respectful, aware, and responsible. Listening actively, using honest and transparent language, respecting personal boundaries, and seeking consent before taking photos or sharing information are all important aspects of communicating ethically.

Tip:

- Hosts can support volunteers by giving instructions clearly and using multiple forms of communication, such as gestures, demonstrations, or written notes.
- It is important to check understanding by asking volunteers to summarize or repeat key points.
- Conflicts or sensitive discussions should always take place privately to maintain trust and respect.
- Separating work-related instructions from personal stories helps prevent confusion, as does structuring time for informal sharing during breaks rather than while giving instructions.

Example:

One camp experienced frustration when a local partner gave a long esoteric lecture that volunteers could not follow. By shortening instructions and moving personal stories to break times, morale improved immediately and the group was able to focus on their work.

4. Managing Work Expectations

Volunteers and hosts may have different ideas of “good work.”

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Common differences:

- Volunteers may want to try many tasks; the host prefers focus on one.
- Volunteers may not know how to use tools safely.
- Some may tire faster than locals expect.

Example:

On a renovation site, volunteers worked slowly because they wanted perfection. Tension grew until both sides talked and agreed that quality was more important than speed.

Tip:

- The best approach is to clarify expectations at the beginning of the camp.
- Explain the goals of each task, the desired balance between quality and speed, and demonstrate how to use tools safely.
- Providing guidance as needed helps prevent frustration and ensures safety.
- Rotating tasks and allowing breaks can also maintain motivation and prevent burnout.

5. Food and Daily Life

Food can be one of the most challenging areas in a workcamp because of cultural differences in dietary habits, meal timing, and cooking practices. Volunteers may have specific dietary restrictions, such as vegetarian, vegan, or halal diets, and may not be accustomed to certain local foods. Misunderstandings around meal preparation and cleanup, as well as shared kitchen spaces, can also cause tension.

Example:

On a renovation site, volunteers worked slowly because they wanted perfection. Tension grew until both sides talked and agreed that quality was more important than speed.

Tip:

- To avoid problems, it is essential to gather information about volunteers' dietary needs before the camp begins.
- Offering at least one meal that meets common dietary restrictions helps everyone feel included.
- Assigning responsibilities for cooking and cleaning in a fair and transparent way can prevent conflicts.
- Clearly communicating schedules for showers, meal preparation, and cleanup also reduces misunderstandings.
- Cooking exchanges, where volunteers teach a dish from their culture to the group, create opportunities for sharing and learning.
- Group reflection after meals allows participants to discuss differences in food habits and discover new cultural insights, promoting understanding and respect.

6. When problems appear

Small conflicts are normal, people get tired, miscommunicate, or have different habits.

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Signs:

- Someone is quiet, angry, or stops joining activities
- Complaints about “organization” or “respect”

Tension or gossip start

Tip:

- Stay calm; take a short break before reacting
- Talk privately; ask, “Can we talk about what happened?”
- Listen first; let the person explain feelings
- Explain your side with “I” sentences (“I felt confused when...”)
- Find a small solution together: “What would make it better for you?”

Example:

Volunteers were upset about unclear shower times. The host assumed they would adapt. After talking, they agreed on fixed hours and posted a schedule.

7. Understanding motivation

Volunteers join for different reasons, some to help, others to learn, travel, or meet people. Understanding motivation helps you organize work better.

Example:

On an organic farm, volunteers lost motivation when work became repetitive. The farmer added short discussions about nature and local traditions and then motivation returned.

 **Tip:** Explain why work is meaningful. Show tangible results, like a repaired wall, cleaned forest, or happy villagers.

8. Inclusion and respect

Volunteers bring diverse identities, beliefs, and cultural practices. Issues can arise if hosts are unaware of or unprepared for these differences. At one camp, a volunteer was uncomfortable with a religious practice at mealtime and chose to opt out after a discussion with the local partner. In another instance, hosts struggled initially to use the correct pronouns for a non-binary volunteer.

 Tip:

- Ask volunteers for their preferred pronouns and respect them consistently.
- Explain local customs and practices, but allow volunteers to opt out respectfully if they feel uncomfortable.
- Address conflicts calmly by listening to concerns and finding solutions that respect everyone's needs.
- Create an environment where diversity is acknowledged and valued, and where volunteers feel safe to express themselves.

9. Creating a positive atmosphere

- Start the camp with a welcome talk and share local traditions and expectations
- Hold short daily check-ins (“How was today? Anything to improve?”)
- Celebrate small successes, like a finished task, a sunny day, a good meal
- Invite locals for cultural evenings or music nights to strengthen connections

Example:

Volunteers and locals cooked together and taught each other songs. Even later problems were easier to solve because of strong bonds.

Conclusion:

Understanding and Respecting Volunteers from Different Cultures and Backgrounds

Volunteers come from many different countries, communities, and cultural backgrounds. Each person brings their own way of thinking, working, and interacting with others, shaped by traditions, education, family habits, and social norms. Because of this, it is normal for volunteers to behave in ways that might seem unusual, confusing, or even frustrating at first to local hosts.

For example, in some cultures, punctuality is very strict — “9:00” means exactly 9:00 — while in others, time is more flexible. Communication styles also vary: some volunteers are very direct, while others express opinions gently or indirectly. Work habits differ too: some people focus intensely on the task, others enjoy talking while working. Food and daily routines can vary widely as well. None of these differences are wrong; they are simply expressions of volunteers’ backgrounds and personal needs.

Some volunteers may belong to groups that require additional awareness and sensitivity:

- LGBTQ+ volunteers: They may use pronouns different from what you expect, or have specific needs around privacy, sleeping arrangements, or social interactions. It’s important to ask respectfully, use the correct pronouns, and create a safe and inclusive environment.
- Volunteers from very different cultural or religious traditions: They may have customs, rituals, or habits that seem unfamiliar. For example, they may avoid certain foods, dress differently, or participate in local traditions in a different way. Respect their choices without judgment and explain local customs clearly.

Understanding these differences is part of the intercultural learning experience that workcamps offer. Volunteers are not expected to immediately adapt perfectly to local habits; they are there to learn, share, and grow. As a host, your role is to create an environment where all volunteers feel respected, safe, and included, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or cultural background.

Tips for hosts to show respect and understanding:

1.Be patient:

Assume volunteers are doing their best, even if things are slower or different than expected.

2.Explain local customs clearly:

Help volunteers understand routines, expectations, or traditions without forcing them to change immediately.

3.Encourage questions:

Invite volunteers to ask about anything they don't understand. Curiosity should be welcomed, not judged.

4.Use inclusive language:

Respect pronouns, avoid assumptions about gender, and be mindful of diverse backgrounds.

5.Accommodate needs respectfully:

Provide alternative meals, quiet spaces, or private arrangements when possible.

6.Avoid quick judgments:

If a volunteer acts differently, consider cultural, religious, or personal reasons rather than seeing it as disrespect.

7.Reflect and learn:

Volunteers' different perspectives can teach hosts about new ways of thinking, working, or celebrating traditions.

By approaching cultural differences and diversity with openness and respect, hosts help volunteers feel welcomed and supported. This creates a positive atmosphere, strengthens collaboration, and makes the camp a meaningful intercultural learning experience for everyone. Because a workcamp is not only about finishing a project, it's about growing understanding between people who might not understand each other at first.

When hosts and volunteers learn to listen and cooperate, they don't just build paths, walls, or gardens they build peace.