How volunteering at Unesco changes lives

In international organisations such as Unesco, interns are welcome to work alongside staff on development programmes and special projects. And, fortunately for the agency, many young people are willing to do just that, offering their time in exchange for experience. So, what drives this motivation, and what challenges and lessons are learned along the way?

Photo by P. Kulapongse - a courtesy of UNESCO

Unpaid labour makes up a relatively sizeable part of the workforce at Unesco's Bangkok branch. At any one time, there are usually 15 to 30 young people volunteering for anything between a month and a whole year.

Apart from interns, there are other classified volunteers as well. Mostly female, they come in all ages, though most average in their late 20s, with a wide range of experience, educational backgrounds and nationalities, mainly Europe, North America and developed Asian nations like Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong. Unesco's director Sheldon Slaeffer hopes to see more interns from Southeast Asia, especially Thailand.

To be eligible, interns should be enrolled in university and be able to volunteer a maximum of six months. Although they receive no stipend, Unesco internships are well regarded by young people seeking international careers. The process for many begins at www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=2703.

However, opportunities as great as this come at a price with many volunteers learning unexpected lessons.

For starters, the work can be intense with volunteers investing both passion and energy to contribute to Unesco's mission. Just like paid staff, they find themselves working long hours in order to maximise success. The key motivational factor for volunteers is their sense of achievement and contribution to a great cause.

When asked about the biggest challenges, financial concerns and disappointment rank highly. All agree that longer stays amount to a better, more satisfying experience, as it takes time to get to know a project well. But long stints as a volunteer don't come easy or cheap. Apart from the cost of flying to Thailand, expenses include accommodation, food, a laptop, visas and even transport to and from work-related events, such as meetings and conferences, even when outside of Thailand.

Feeling unappreciated in the rush to get things done also affects motivation, though some volunteers feel more frustrated than others. "We don't expect payment, but more appreciation would be nice," one volunteer said. Being at the bottom of the hierarchy where credit for good work can be overlooked may result in diminishing enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is a volunteer's most essential attribute.

The rarefied atmosphere of international development can appear cold to new volunteers, especially when busy colleagues find it hard to meet their charges regularly. Boredom can afflict some, and the slow pace of turning consultation into action is an eye opener for those accustomed to quick decisions and action.

But it would be wrong to suggest that a mundane life at work totally overshadows the benefits. Most would agree with this sentiment: "I've learned a lot, I can't deny it. And Unesco does some really good work."
Besides, there is a great deal of appreciation about the opportunity to participate in projects unique to Unesco. "I can't get experience like this anywhere else," an intern said. "My friends back home are jealous of my position here."

Interns do appreciate that sometimes the most important work is not the most exciting.

Of course, things also depend on your luck. Some interns find themselves with a committed supervisor who can offer guidance and opportunities for growth, while others aren't as fortunate.

"I was lucky," says another volunteer. "I had a great supervisor who was willing to involve me a lot, and the job was right up my alley. I had a really great time."

The challenges for international volunteers are not limited to their workplace — life in Bangkok can be both a source angst and inspiration. The informal Volunteer Network in Unesco facilitates social networking and coordinates activities to help new volunteers learn more about their environment and organisation. Volunteers are quick to discover that Bangkok is perfect to build a great social and travel life. The longer the stay, the more involved a volunteer becomes, with some applying serious effort into learning the Thai language and blending into the local culture.

However, the experience of new volunteers can't really be predicted. The diversity of personalities, projects and expectations means that everyone's outcome and knowledge gained varies greatly. While some agree that certain aspects of Unesco's volunteer programme could be improved, there's always a steady stream of interns always up to the challenge.

In the end, few volunteers choose to leave early, and many more try to extend their stay. Ultimately, the experience earned and the very status of working for Unesco eclipses the hardships that come with volunteering. It was never meant to be easy, but interns earn satisfaction with the lessons learnt, and recognise the value of unexpected knowledge and insight.

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