

European And External Affairs Committee

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Date: 16 June 2005

Time: 9.00 - 12.30

Venue: Committee Rooms 3 and 4, National Assembly for Wales

Title: UNA Exchange

UNA Exchange - Global Citizenship in Wales in Practice

1. Background

Established in 1973, UNA Exchange is a National Voluntary Youth Organisation (NVYO) that grew out of the United Nations Association (UNA) Wales, as a vehicle for promoting and increasing international understanding amongst young people. Voluntary service in the community was, and remains, the main tool for achieving this.

Our activities provide support to groups across Wales to develop their communities through the involvement of international volunteers, either as groups or individuals, over periods ranging from a weekend to one year. Working in partnership with community groups (all of our work is done through partnerships), each year we co-ordinate a programme of around ten weekend projects, 35 two-week projects and up to 12-15 individual year-long projects. The common factor in all our activities is that they bring young people from overseas – more than 30 countries at present – to volunteer alongside local people. Valuable practical work is carried out by the volunteers – this might be of an environmental (eg. improving footpath access), social (eg. assisting with summer playschemes) or cultural (eg. arts/festivals) nature, according to the needs of the community. At the same time, a process of exchange and understanding between the volunteers and local people is promoted and supported, to ensure meaningful relationships are developed during the projects.

While co-ordinating this programme of volunteering across Wales, UNA Exchange also supports young people (by providing preparation, placement and follow-up) from the UK to participate in similar projects overseas. Each year around 300 volunteers join projects in 40-45 countries worldwide.

2. Educational perspectives

International activities bring young people into real contact with the world which has an increasingly important impact on their lives. UNA Exchange believes that young people in particular must be given opportunities to have direct experiences with those from other countries and in other countries

themselves, in order that they can make informed choices as to how they lead their lives. UNA Exchange aims to help young people make those choices based on personal and positive experiences of others in the world. Through voluntary experiences in which they have been equal partners with a host community in Wales or another country, participants are able to form their own ideas of other people, cultures, countries and religions.

The international volunteering provided and co-ordinated by UNA Exchange is the core activity and working tool of the organisation, but maximising the learning and educational value is where we ensure a positive impact on young people and communities, above and beyond the practical work that is accomplished. We organise a range of supporting activities to develop the skills and understanding of participants, to build on their experiences and to deepen their interest in the world around them. Training, information and resources are provided for volunteer leaders, who are young people themselves, to support others to develop activities which raise awareness and understanding of other cultures. Themed activities and workshops are run with children, young people and the wider community.

In the past 12 months, UNA Exchange volunteers have delivered interactive, participatory workshops with more than 2,500 children and young people in almost all counties of Wales. Amongst other things, these have explored where our food comes from, how chocolate is produced, the cultures of West Africa and farming life in Southern India. Of key importance is the fact that the volunteers themselves are from other countries and thus bring important authenticity to these activities.

The experiences gained by those young people who participate in volunteering overseas – whether renovating bread ovens in France, helping with clean-up operations in Tsunami affected regions, or supporting people with disabilities in Japan – provide a springboard for their learning about themselves and the world around them. UNA Exchange encourages the constructive use of those experiences and a deepening engagement through a range of follow-up activities and support to take on more responsibilities within the organisation: leadership training, co-ordination of projects in Wales, other voluntary action, management responsibilities, engagement with other organisations, seminars and events in other countries and so on.

3. The Welsh context

The work of UNA Exchange is rooted within the policies and practices of the wider voluntary youth and development education sectors in Wales. UNA Exchange receives core support (currently £50,000 per year) from the Welsh Assembly Government's NVYO Grant Scheme. We take an active role within Connect Cymru which has devolved responsibility for the European Youth Programme in Wales, for promoting and supporting other youth organisations to use the Youth Programme and for introducing international dimensions to their ongoing work. We work closely with Global Connections (Pembrokeshire) and PEDEC (Powys) to develop and deliver development education activities (some of which have been supported by the Department for International Development).

The Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales sets a framework for youth work practice across the country. Its stated aim is to provide opportunities for young people that are Educative, Expressive, Participative and Empowering. It provides a framework on which we structure our work/activities, and a yardstick to ensure we are meeting nationally recognised principles and standards.

The Welsh Assembly Government's 'Extending Entitlement' strategy represents a commitment to investing in and providing the best possible services for young people across Wales. UNA Exchange, and international work with young people in the wider sense, plays a valuable role in the delivery of Extending Entitlement in terms of meeting the Ten Entitlements (concerning, amongst other things, the provision of opportunities and accessible services, the acquisition of skills and experiences, appropriate personal support, and experiences within international contexts). Promoting and supporting the inclusion of all young people, regardless of background, is an important principle in our work. UNA Exchange is now beginning to work more closely with the Young People's Partnerships (YPPs) which provide us with a structure to identify and channel priorities.

The recent report of the Russell Commission set a series of impressive and ambitious targets for the development of youth volunteering in the UK. We are keen to see the place of international volunteering – by young people from Wales going overseas and those from overseas volunteering in Wales – and the educational impact of which it is capable made meaningful and secure. We also note the need for capacity building in the voluntary sector in order to provide the increased range of opportunities, and the necessary support that that will entail. The Russell Commission recommendations offer great opportunities for developing volunteering as a vital and purposeful tool in citizenship training, and we welcome opportunities to support its implementation in Wales.

4. The European context

The European Youth Programme is the main tool for the promotion and enhancement of mobility amongst young people across Europe (it is also a highly visible action which demonstrates the development of youth policies and co-operation). A big advantage of Youth Programme activities is that they provide financial support, which ensures that we can support the participation of young people for whom economic barriers exist.

Since the mid-1990s, increasing importance has been placed on voluntary service as a vehicle for the development of a civic society: as one Action within the Youth Programme, the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme supports young people aged 18-25 to volunteer in another member state for between 6-12 months. UNA Exchange is an active player in EVS: to date we have co-ordinated the hosting of more than 50 volunteers from other European countries in Wales and we are currently the most active 'Sending Organisation' in the whole UK, to date supporting the participation of approximately 100 volunteers on projects in other countries. The outcomes and benefits of the long-term (EVS) volunteering projects complement the short-term activities of UNA Exchange: they offer a more intense, usually life-changing experience to the young person and at the same time enable the community to integrate a permanent international dimension into their activities.

The Youth for Europe (YfE) strand of the Youth programme supports exchanges of groups of young people on a bi-, tri- or multi-lateral level. UNA Exchange organises at least one multi-lateral project in Wales each year, involving groups of around 20 young people (aged 16-18) from four countries working on themed projects (eg. regeneration and development issues) which incorporate both practical volunteering and structured workshop activities. We also use YfE projects in other European countries to enable small groups of young people from Wales, particularly those with less experience, to participate in European projects.

We are taking steps to ensure participation by young people with less opportunities in the Youth Programme activities: specific support to access shorter-term (three weeks to three months) EVS projects, specialised Youth for Europe projects and, as mentioned above, financial assistance to ensure that economic factors need not be a barrier to participation. We also provide high levels of preparation and support to make sure that young people are ready for the experience, and able to draw the maximum benefits from it.

5. The Global context

Through the educational activities which run throughout all our volunteer projects, we aim to provide a structured approach to learning which makes global issues as accessible and relevant as possible. We are a member of the Make Poverty History (MPH) Coalition and are this year combining the key MPH themes of trade justice, debt relief and aid within our programmes. As a member of the Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, which is part of UNESCO, we are also concerned to build activities under the (wide) umbrella of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-15 (UNESCO is the lead UN agency for the Decade). The Millennium Development Goals also provide us with an agenda for awareness-raising campaigns and educational activities.

One of UNA Exchange's aims is to raise awareness and increase understanding of the world around us amongst the people of Wales, so that we are all better equipped to make responsible choices and decisions. We do this through practical actions which make sense to people in an everyday way. By involving people from other countries and communities, some of whom are themselves affected by the consequences of inequality and injustice, we bring a human face to complex issues. We try to demystify and (re)humanise global issues which can seem distant to many people, so that they can feel that this is their world and their actions – positive and negative - do make a difference. We believe (and the results bear this out) that our methods work and the people of Wales, especially young people, are very responsive to such efforts.

Sheila Smith (Director, UNA Exchange)

7 June 2005