

The potential of conflicts in EVS

Conflict is a wonderful mystery. We all have some, we speak about them, study various strategies for dealing with them, we try to solve our conflicts in the best way, we even take part in training courses about conflicts without really knowing what they are, what are their roots and essence. We are somehow able to recognise when there is one. Once it appears it is very present, it grows, occupies all our thoughts and emotions and influences strongly our decisions, relationships and many aspects of our everyday life. While being involved in a conflict it is difficult to see things clearly. The usual tendency is to think: "You always put the toothbrush in the wrong place, it makes me angry!", or: "The coordinator is so ignorant, everyone in this organisation is the same, I hate this country!". But then, in a moment of insight, we feel that the truth is not so black and white.

One very reliable indicator of conflicts is our emotions. They appear mostly because of our expectations that are not met and because of our attachment to ideas, places, things and people that don't play our game. While leaving for an EVS project there can be many expectations, hopes and dreams. Some of the things we imagine will happen, some not. But the country's language or the cook in a local restaurant are not responsible for our expectations and so are not for our emotions if the reality is different from what we've pictured. We basically create our conflicts for ourselves in the moment when we allow harmful emotions to appear. No one else is involved in it. Objectively there can be situations where the food is really not so good, or where someone makes a real mess in the shared room still, it doesn't mean there has to be a conflict. We are the directors of our movies, conductors of our symphony.

EVS is a long-term learning project full of situations that can possibly shake our patterns, challenge our values, play with our attachments and thus create strong emotions. Because of being in an unknown environment, in a new culture among new people speaking a strange language there is a big chance of meeting aspect of ourselves, discovering our stereotypes, learning about our reactions, seeing ourselves clearly in a mirror with a new background. The shape of our personality becomes much sharper in the contrast of the new culture. EVS in this sense is extreme, somehow artificial and it is designed to be so for the best learning outcomes. With this in mind, we can be able to better recognise our demons when they appear and to tame them, make friends with them and turn them into helpers. The time spent in a new place is a great chance to transform weaknesses into strengths and to return with new skills.

Training the ability to recognise the seeds of possible conflicts and not letting ourselves being trapped in useless emotions is the real potential which EVS offers for learning from conflicts. Having this in mind we will be gradually able to better accept the natural flow of things, understand constant change as the nature of things and impermanence as the ultimate fact. Trying to fight the universe with our anger is a lost battle. It doesn't mean that we should ignore injustice or become insensitive. The difference is in the personal emotional investment. It is possible to have a conversation about the right place for a toothbrush with a lightness and grace. Being frustrated or angry doesn't help anyone of the involved. It only makes both weaker and the whole situation worse. And if the other person is really difficult and doesn't react at all it gives us the chance to be really fully enlightened.

EVS is a great time to experiment with such approaches, it has tools to support the volunteers in their personal development and is a safe place to explore and grow in various areas. What is needed is the awareness and insight. Having these it becomes easy to be aware of our shadows and thus becoming stronger, flexible and more resilient. Potential conflicts offer a beautiful area to become better people and to learn swimming in the river of life with grace and dignity while showing a good example and being useful for others.

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