Role of coordinating organisation

Starting with a quote is a cliché but in some cases it is useful. If you think about the definition above and if you already have some EVS experience, it is clear that a coordinating organisation (CO) can work in many ways and have many roles. These will vary in various contexts and realities of the given CO. However, the core stays the same and in a certain sense, a CO can be seen as a cornerstone of a project. And as any other cornerstone's role, CO's main role is to take care that the whole structure (project) will not collapse.

You should know that following lines were written under influence of my (our) own experience — that is a 10-year long experience of a CO that currently coordinates 30 international volunteers who came for a long-term EVS from 6 SOs and are received at 20 ROs that are scattered around Moravian-Silesian region of the Czech Republic. My (our) main experience is with a coordination of volunteers in our country of residence, our experience with coordinating volunteers that are sent abroad is much shorter.

Now that you know the context, let us get to the roles of a CO. I do not name them in the order of importance because I think that this can be different depending on an organisation. I describe the individual roles as I see them and try to list whatever may seem connected or relevant to them. I also try to list all the hints, tips, and tricks come to my mind in connection to them.

Administrative role

The role that comes first to my mind and maybe to minds of other coordinators is something I would call an administrative role. My understanding is that this role makes CO responsible for setting up a system of processes that will secure the administration of a project. This can include a large variety of things such as writing the project application, securing all of project's 'paper and electronic' necessities (ECAS, Mobility Tool, Grant Agreement, notification of changes to an NA, contracts with receiving organisations, sending organisations, and volunteers, etc.) as well as setting up proper communication channels, handling accreditations of ROs, financing (self-financing included), budgeting, and money-flow, rules of conduct of volunteers, oversight and monitoring of a project, promotion and PR, not mentioning any legal requirements of the hosting country (such as registration of foreign nationals, visa requirements, and various costs and fees connected with residence), and many others.

The minimum extent of activities connected with this role (and other roles as well) and their division between partners is defined by the Erasmus+ guide, EVS Charter, and Grant Agreement. A CO can decide to a certain degree which responsibilities it will take for its own and which it will delegate to other partners (all however in accordance with the above-mentioned 'documents'). The responsibilities that a CO will take will depend on its core activities, size, personnel, vision for the future, and others. It does not have to be stressed that the extent of COs activities in this role and its understanding of itself should be reflected in the project itself.

Now, how can it look like in reality? What can be all the options and possibilities?

Starting from the financial side of the project, I think that a good cooperation with the accounting department (or a gifted coordinator/accountant) is a necessity, especially if you receive more volunteers. If you have a higher

number of volunteers, it is worth thinking about leaving some responsibility to them and having them prepare documents for reimbursements. This applies especially if you need itinerary of their journey, information who travelled on the tickets, and maybe other information. A good idea can also be to set up some rules for reimbursements e.g. deadlines for delivering tickets to you, requirements on the form of documents, deadlines connected with the closing of the books, etc. These can save you a lot of time that can be invested for example in support of volunteers.

As for the 'paper and electronic' necessities of the project, there is not much to say. It is good to use check-lists for the important contracts and documents you need from other parties. It is easy to lose track of what you need from whom, especially if you have a higher number of volunteers. A proper filling system is also a must-have. What should be also mentioned is the necessity to keep track of difficult situations and changes. You never know how the things will turn out and later on you might need to consult with your notes. For the similar reason, it can also be a good idea to keep a communication log where you will write down all the important communication that happens over the phone or in person.

Focusing on the rules of conduct of volunteers, these are to a certain degree included in contracts. However, it can proof beneficial to have something in addition to that. We really liked the idea of 10 Commandments of a Volunteer. They are not (and could not be) forced by the contract however they represent certain morals/pieces of advice which if followed can make things easier. Some of the commandments can be *No question is a bad question*, *Never put yourself or others at risk,* or *Use your words well.*

Talking about monitoring and oversight, this can be quite connected with the support role which we will cover next. It is necessary to have awareness of what is going on. However better than going to 'inspect' or 'monitor' the project can sound too scrupulous. But if you connect the monitoring and oversight with evaluation and reflection, things get a bit different flavour and will not seem so violent. Having regular reflections and evaluations with volunteers made both by you and the task-related support personnel is a good way to cover these.

There would be many other things that could help you with the administration of a project (various databases, HR programmes, conscientious use of social media, etc.) but we will have to settle with those that were mentioned.

Supportive role

If the administration role is defined by setting up processes to secure the administration of the project, the supportive role is defined by supporting these processes and supporting people involved in the project. To a certain degree, the supportive role is connected with the oversight and monitoring of the project, meaning that if the support provided is adequate, the oversight and monitoring do not have to be solicitous. However, you should always meet the basic requirements.

As was already mentioned, the support is provided to various people involved in a project. I decided to focus on three areas and that is development and well-being of a volunteer, support of ROs, and crisis management, emergency situations, and mediation.

Development and well-being of volunteer — Regular reflection of experience, learning, and observations of volunteers is crucial for their development. The word reflection is quite suiting for this context. Imagine you would not look at yourself in a mirror in one year. After the year, it could be difficult for you to recognise yourself. Now imagine it being applied for changes inside of a person. Through this support you can be a mirror to volunteer, helping him/her to keep up with all the changes, understanding them and what they mean. This reflection is also important when it comes to checking on the well-being of volunteer and her/his participation in the project. Coaching skills can be quite useful for this type of support.

Support of ROs — As was written about reflection with a volunteer, the similar support is needed for the RO and the personnel that works with the volunteer most often (task-related support). It is important to reflect their experience, the way they work with a volunteer, and how they see their participation in general. A crucial top-

ic is also motivation, especially in the case of volunteers that need additional support or face bigger challenges than others. Support to ROs can be also in form of facilitation of accreditation process, help with administration, help with securing accommodation for volunteer, and others.

Crisis management, emergency situations, and conflict resolution – Crisis and emergency situations are something that occurs and usually requires the attention of you as a CO. It is good to stress both to volunteers and ROs that they can count on you in the case of crisis/emergency situations. The type of the support provided in such situations varies but usually, it is helping with translation and interpreting, communication with other parties, securing medical help (in more serious cases), and others. The special case could be settling conflicts between volunteers and RO or between volunteers. In these cases, knowing the basics of mediation, non-violent communication, and other various communication and conflict solving strategies is very useful.

There are many ways, tools, and methods how to provide a support in the above-mentioned areas. I will outline only some of them.

If you want to reflect the development of a volunteer or an RO, it is best to do it through dialogue, various coaching (or supervision) techniques, or experience activities. This would be suitable also for the reflection of ROs. However, from my experience, the support that I give to ROs most often is connected with practical questions and issues like accommodation, allowable costs, insurance, etc. It is good to provide them with a guide or support material similar to the one you are reading right now.

As for crisis management and emergency situations, these can be sometimes solved with a simple phone call and personal follow-up later on, and sometimes they require more attention. It is important to distinguish the proper approach but it does not have to be easy. If it is possible, it is good to have crisis management plans/outlines to follow when such situations occur.

As far as conflict resolution is concerned, you could use similar techniques as for reflection if it will suit the purpose. Some of the more important things that I try to keep in mind while helping to settle conflicts are: 1. It is not good to take sides and it is good to stay impartial if it is possible 2. The resolution should lead to the well-being of all parties involved, 3. 'Mediation' in bigger groups is tricky and it is good to measure one's own capabilities because there is a higher possibility of losing tracks of the purpose of the meeting.

One more tool or possibility concerning support are seminars (training courses) for volunteers and task-related support personnel. National agencies provide volunteers with their own seminars but if your budget allows it, it is a good idea to organise your own, especially if you receive a bigger number of volunteers. This can be very beneficial because depending on the structure and number of seminars, you can better prepare your volunteers, help them to bond at the begging of their service, reflect and motivate in the middle of their service, and evaluate and give feedback at the end of their service. As for seminars for the task-related support personnel, you can use them to share your knowledge of work with volunteers and in a multicultural context, support and empower them in their shortcomings, and as well motivate them.

Networking role

This role has much to do with establishing, keeping, and fortifying partnerships, as well as selection and matching of volunteers. Good and reliable partners are a crucial part of a successful project. If you receive volunteers from more organisations and place them to more ROs, it will be most probably your responsibility to secure all the work connected with it. Your knowledge of potential candidates and knowledge of your ROs will help you to make the selection and matching process rewarding in the long term.

Back to SOs, you should pick your sending partners carefully. You can achieve this through conversation, explaining how your project works, what are your expectations from your partner and the partnership in general, how the SO will prepare the volunteers for the experience, and how you will support the volunteers in the host country. In some cases, especially if you want to be sure about all the details of the partnership, you can make

a cooperation agreement. If you already have a good partner, work on the relationship and be a good partner to them as well, it will reward both of you in the future. In my opinion, it is riskier to send volunteers to new partners rather than receive volunteers from new partners.

So if you have a sending partner already, you need volunteers. SOs usually place calls for volunteering positions and here it is very important that the offered positions are described as precise as possible. Very important thing is, to be honest. Sugar-coating and glamorising the positions you are offering are not a good idea because the subsequent clash between the expectations of a volunteer and reality can have very negative consequences. The same applies for presenting potential candidates to ROs.

The selection process of volunteers is very important and you should require some 'documents' to back it up. A good procedure is to require an application that will answer all the questions you could have, reference letters, CV, and a motivation letter. After you receive these, an interview is in order. During the interview, be open, honest, and welcoming. Some of the candidates may be stressed, try to calm them down. It is a good idea to prepare some outline of the interview that will come from your requirements as well as from the information stated in the candidate's documents. A good idea is to ask about candidate's health condition. Some of the volunteers decide for the service even when suffering from serious maladies — you should be aware of these because they can play a big role during the realisation phase of the project. If you want to ask the volunteer about any illnesses, disorders, and such, do it considerately and tell them why you are asking that. The goal is not to discriminate but to be prepared for the eventualities and to measure your own capabilities. You should be able to provide a safe environment for everyone. From my own experience, the most important thing that volunteer has to possess is motivation.

Usually, volunteers apply for specific positions. If you think that they are suitable for the position, offer them to the RO and vice versa. If you think that they would do better somewhere else, do not be afraid to offer a different position. To successfully match volunteers to ROs needs very good observation skills and knowledge of both ROs and volunteers. A good intuition is also quite useful. Do not forget that you are matching not only a volunteer with a specific RO but also with people. If you think that the personnel at the RO and volunteer have 'incompatible' personalities, think twice before finishing the matching. If a volunteer and an RO are able to communicate in a common language, it is not a bad idea to arrange them an interview during which they can clarify their expectations and see if their cooperation would be suitable for them.

Conclusion

I believe that previous lines proved that the role or roles of a CO can be quite diverse. They depend on many variables and they can also change depending on a project you are carrying out. I think that I have covered only a small part of all the possibilities but I hope that you will find it useful nonetheless and that you will find the right balance of roles of your CO.

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