



# Salesian Volunteer

## July 2016

Hernán Cordero first Ecuadorian volunteer in Africa 1991

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### Background

This is a capsulized summary of a global research by our former Salesian volunteers. The survey was taken by 438 volunteers from 28 different countries. These volunteers served in 66 countries between 1980 and 2015, which gives us an extensive data of the scope of our global Salesian volunteer programs.

I will now present the most relevant topics from this research. Although there are other topics I believe are important but because of the lack of time and space I shall exclude them from this document. The missing topics will be included in the final draft which is required to obtain a Doctoral degree from the Comillas University in Madrid Spain.

This research was possible with the support of our Salesian Mission Animation and Youth Ministry departments. I would like to acknowledge the collaboration of Fr. Martin Lazarde and the crucial information he shared for this investigation. I hope you enjoy reading the results of my research, which gives us a deeper sense of who our Salesian volunteers are and how we can accompany them through their vocational journey experience.

**This Research will answer the following inquiries:**

- Who are the Salesian volunteers?
- From where do they come?
- What struggles do they face?
- What are their formation needs?
- What did they gain from their missionary experience?
- ... and more!



Jaqueline Domezi - Angola 2009

### The Salesian Volunteer

The majority of our volunteers are young people between the ages of 18 to 24. I find that as these young men and women transition from finishing their high school or college education, and opt for a year of service for the following reasons: a sense of solidarity (31.7%), of religiosity (22.2%), to grow intellectually and expand future horizons (20.1%), as a vocational call to consider religious life (10%) or simply because they were inspired by a witness talk given by a volunteer (10%) and therefore they felt the impulse to volunteer.

Whatever it was that motivated their decision to become Salesian volunteers, the benefits they accrue are amazing. Upon the completion of their volunteer experience I found that these young men and women acquired: a strong sense of being, better self-management, skills developed that help them understand and adapt to their environment, how to work with others and a better relationship with God. In this research 93.4 % of the former volunteers shared that their volunteer experience helped them find the job they now have. Another important piece of data is 69% of the ex volunteers have attained a college degree.

Even though the volunteer experience provides many benefits in the lives of these young men and women, these don't come easy

as they are also faced with some struggles. Growth comes as one faces life's challenges. Our volunteers are forced to adapt to a new way of life such as: living in community, having to follow a schedule, and deal with different personalities within the community. Most notably, the culture clash that forces these volunteers to leave their own comfort zone. Many of these young men and women find themselves in another culture, experiencing different diseases to which their bodies are not accustomed; having to learn and speak another language, practice new activities foreign to them and meeting different people with different cultures, etc. All these "challenges" enrich the volunteer experience.

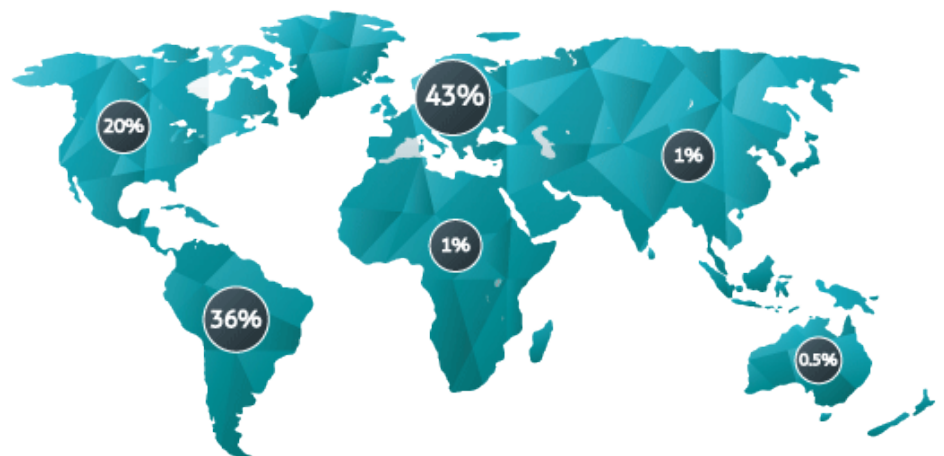
Considering that each volunteer leaves behind everything to serve, we must ask the following: Are these volunteers part of those whom we serve? or are they just people that "come to serve" us?



Francesco Prior - Angola 2004

The answer to this question can change the perception of how we see our volunteers globally; how we make administrative decisions and how we accompany them to support their journey.

If we consider our volunteers as part of those we serve, through this Research I want to know if their experience has helped their spiritual growth. Actually, 7.5% answered that they didn't experience spiritual growth at all. Some of the reasons, among others, were: they felt they were not accompanied, they had too much work and not enough time to reflect, and they didn't have good



Places where the volunteers come from





Katerina Mork - Angola 2009  
spiritual role models.

Another aspect that I questioned our volunteers about was their growth in sacramental life. I found that 19.8% felt that there was not any growth at all. One of the volunteers shared, “it was discouraging to see the internal interaction between the sisters and the brothers. I felt that I was about to lose my faith, witnessing how the church works within the system, the lack of transparency in the workplace, and the misuse of money. The environment among the volunteers was not the best either. The sisters did not invest enough time to build team work”. A situation like this could have been prevented or dealt with through good communication, discussing the different perceptions that might have surfaced. Although it was perceived that most of the persons interviewed did not have a clear understanding of what a sacrament is. So, are the volunteers part of those whom we serve?

In our present society, the new generations of young people seek

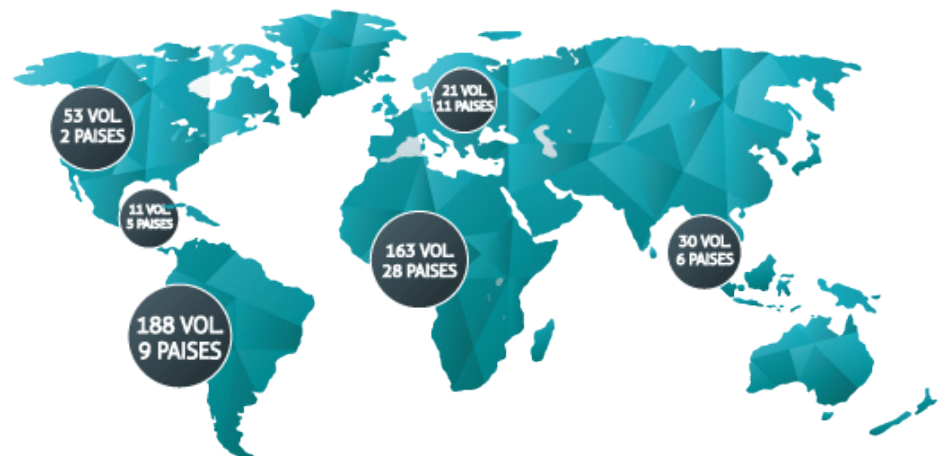
or expect an immediate satisfaction to their needs. Therefore, our volunteer programs could serve as an evangelization tool, where young people learn to live life in a counterculture environment that will prepare them to adapt to different ways of life or different work environments in the future.

Something that was perceived in the survey was that some of the young men and women are not Catholic; therefore it is important that if our volunteers are going to serve in a religious community serving our young people; they must adhere to the rules and guidelines in the community. This might seem unnecessary but being part of the community prayers, days of recollection, and community meals does make a difference. One volunteer shared, “...my experience living in community taught me that my faith is important, to express it and accept that I’m a son of God. Through

this experience I truly understood what is to be a Salesian because I used to believe that I was Salesian but not Catholic. Now I understand that without the church there is not salesianity, I understood Don Bosco’s vision to give myself to the young to live life”.

I do not mean that our organization must become exclusive, but that is important for the volunteers to have a clear understanding of our expectations within the organization. Many volunteers struggle in their service because they don’t have a clear understanding of what is expected of them before they start their volunteer service. Some even shared that they felt insecure about what their future might be like as a volunteer before joining the program.

In conclusion, the volunteer experience should challenge the individual to leave their own comfort zone. Leaving a normal life behind to become persons that are a point of reference in leadership



Places where the volunteers serve

## SALESIAN VOLUNTEER RESEARCH

and who serve their fellow human beings. Such is the case of our volunteers who serve in orphanages, where responsibility and reliability are highly valued and expected. In the schools, our volunteers are expected to become teachers who have to prepare lesson plans and teach; others are expected to lead youth ministry programs in our local parishes. Many learn to be patient as they work with our street children. Whatever the environment might be, our volunteers develop many skills that perhaps they did not even know they have.

Many of these skills would never have been developed in a world where youth are not trusted but once they arrive in our communities these young men and women find that they are trusted and encouraged to develop these skills.

Such experiences provide a way for our young people to become excellent Christians and good citizens. I can conclude that our volunteer programs form leaders for our society.



Cat and Dianna - Ciudad Juarez 2014



Tony Barrientos - San Francisco 2014



Formation for our volunteers

Although every volunteer program aims at developing a good formation program, such is the case in Slovenia and the Czech Republic in which a year of formation is required before entering the volunteer program. In this research I found important data that should be considered for future formation. Formation programs might prevent difficulties during the volunteer experience.

The following formation themes were obtained by asking the former volunteers to share what were some of their struggles throughout the experience. The following is a compilation of what was shared:

These struggles can be avoided or prevented through the right formation tools offered to our volunteers. However, these might not solve all the struggles the volunteers face in their experience. What I want is to provide tools for our volunteers to deal with the different situations they may encounter during their

Difficulties vs Formation

Difficulties		Formation
	Community life	✓ Clear expectation of the volunteer in a community ✓ Basic Faith formation
	Issues with SDBs, FMAs and others	✓ Communication skills ✓ Conflict management
	Culture clashes	✓ Enculturation formation ✓ Language classes ✓ Organization skills
	Youth Ministry work	✓ Job description ✓ How to work with difficult or at risk youth
	Nostalgia	✓ How to deal with feelings and homesickness
	Loneliness	✓ How to deal with feelings of loneliness

volunteer experience. Another aspect of formation is to teach the volunteers to self evaluate, how to reflect and mediate within a religious community, how to listen and be present.

A good formation program will not only help our volunteers to grow but also to do a better job in their work responsibilities. If we have formed volunteers, the difference we make in our communities will be greater. Even though we provide good formation,

there will always be individuals that struggle, therefore it is important to know and understand this fact as to not feel discouraged.

These struggles could feel as if the community has failed. When a volunteer decides to leave the program for whatever reason. This also brings growth. A former volunteer shares, "...through my volunteer experience I learned that I had a problem and that I need to seek professional help. I learned to be toler-

ant towards others. I learned to be empathetic and understanding even though I didn't finish my experience."

Another important factor is the accompaniment prior, during and after their experience not necessarily considering the results. A former volunteer expressed the following, "In spite of Fr. Eduardo's support, I still needed a hug from my mom or dad." What was important here is that the volunteer knew

that she could rely on Fr. Eduardo for whatever she needed. Accompaniment is to enable the volunteer to be accountable for his or her own decision and make a decision when the time is adequate, whether it is to leave the program or to talk to someone when there's an issue with someone in the community. Good accompaniment makes a huge difference in the volunteer's experience.



Fr. Lazarte accompany volunteers in Angola.

### The SDB as a key element

The key to success prior, during and after the volunteer experience has to do with the Salesian religious community and its members! Through this research I finalized the important factors of accompaniment and how the sdb can impact the life of our volunteers.

Our volunteer program has some cause and effects factors. One of the questions in our survey

concerned sharing what a major difficulty was during the volunteer process; before, during and after. A former volunteer shared, "A struggle with the whole process, when my family asked me not to leave...finding myself alone with no one to share my struggles with or simply being homesick... Coming back and missing my life back at the mission, feeling hopeless, not being sought after by the girls, not being able to sleep in the dark..." We might see some negativity, but if we see the silver

lining, "the process was not so difficult. Each aspect of the process was critical and I had to pay attention. I would like to emphasize the later because this really changed my life".

In conclusion, the volunteer program is a life changing experience where the volunteers find themselves out of their normal life and routine, developing a new vision based on an unknown reality but that is openly welcomed by finding themselves. It is a process that



Commissioning Mass Los Angeles CA. 2015

produces a transformation, which combined with good accompaniment, leads to personal growth.

The following information focuses on process before, during and after and its difficulties. To acquire a better analysis, I divided the data in three sections: prior, during and after.

### Prior to the Experience

Of the former volunteers that answered our survey, 12.9% shared that some of the difficulties they faced in the process were prior to the experience. One struggle was the thought of being in a unknown place, another was not being understood by the family, knowing if their work would actually make a difference and finally making the decision to go.

Uncertainty was one of the main struggles, “Getting used to another city and not knowing what to expect; I had never been away from home for such a long time”. “I felt such a deep uncertainty, so much that I couldn’t hide how I was feeling. It was hard to leave everything behind”. These struggles could be prevented and minimized if the volunteer is accompanied prior to entering the program. The person providing the accompaniment could listen to what the person is feeling and provide some guidance and comfort to the individual.

The second struggle is, not being understood by the family, “I didn’t have my father’s support, but the prayers and support of the religious community and its director helped me make the final decision”. This is a good example of how accompaniment helps the individual. The volunteer expressed how crucial and important the accompaniment of the community director was.



Futures volunteers from Spain 2016

We must consider that if the volunteer surfaced from



youth ministry, it makes the process less complicated because they already know whom the Salesians are and how they work. It's important to have a formation program in our youth ministries that invites youth to consider a vocational experience. "If a youth ministry program doesn't bear vocational fruits, it's useless". These are the words of our former Rector Major Don Pascual Chavez, speaking to Salesians in the San Francisco Province.



Rafael Belletti - Angola 2005

### During the Experience

In this section 34.8% of those surveyed, believe that the most difficult part happened during the experience. "Often times, you feel useless because you have to work hard with scarce resources or none. You have to be prepared, analyze what you have and what you can do with that". "I felt lonely because my work wasn't producing enough visual results". "I struggled emotionally, seeing the need of the people, the lack of faith among those I worked with, and the financial struggles".

If I summarize the answers, I conclude that during the experience the struggles were: community life, others, culture clash, society, loneliness and the most recurrent were the administrative struggles. Understanding for administrative struggles mostly because the volunteers didn't know how to do the work assigned to them.

In reference to community life, I can say that this is based on conflicts with members of the religious community. This research however, does not specify the community conflicts but that this could have been resolved through good communication. Thus formation in communication skills and conflict management are recommended.

Conflict among volunteers was also a difficulty. However, to prevent this it is important that assignments and structures are clear and established. Hence, once again the importance of good accompaniment and setting clear expectations.

Culture clash was among the previous struggles mentioned. I am talking about a complete change of culture, coming into a religious community, and finding that the volunteer has to move to another

country or continent. "This was the first time I was away from home, everything was new to me, the continent, the country and its culture. It took me a couple of months to adapt".

I could expand on this topic but this is not our objective. I just want to present some of the issues faced by our volunteers in their experience of service. In conclusion I suggest to the religious communities working with our volunteers the following:

1. Be conscious of those issues with which our volunteers have to deal.
2. Provide a clear job description for each volunteer.
3. Know and be willing to offer accompaniment to our volunteers.

These three key aspects could make a huge difference in the





Becky Lograsso - Bolivia 2014

lives of our volunteers. Once again I ask the previous questions at the beginning of this document: are our volunteers those whom we serve? Or those who just come to serve our mission? Whatever the answer might be, we must consider that our responsibility to our volunteers is to improve our process of accompaniment.

### After the experience

Of those surveyed, 52.2% are going back home to their way of life. One of our former volunteers shared, “Having to adapt to ‘my world’, a lack of understanding of what I experienced, indifference, facing a consumerist society in contrast to a society where everything counts, etc. I felt like an alien”. Our volunteers go through a deep transformation that changes the way they view the world and when they come back to their “old” life, they have a sense of hopelessness feeling that they cannot do enough to help those they left behind and this gives them a sense of uneasiness.

“It was almost impossible to put my experience into words. Some people ask you to give witness of your experience, without knowing they place such pressure on you,

without knowing that you are not ready to share. You leave a piece of your heart and this just makes it hard. I was afraid that I will forget what I learned, what I lived, and that ultimately I would go back to the same routine turning into the same person I was before I left to the mission. I isolated myself from others, I didn’t want to be seen as the ‘missionary’, I wanted to be unnoticed so that people wouldn’t question my experience. I had a hard time finding God at home, so clear and close to me as when I was in the mission. It has been a long process that I’m still dealing with”.

Reading some of these responses should question what we are doing to accompany these young men and women. How can their love for our Salesian mission enrich our communities? These young men and women go

through a complete change where life doesn’t have the same meaning, they feel abandoned, rejected by their society, misunderstood, they have a new vision and a new family (meaning the people they met during their mission work) that needs them. Many of our volunteers fall into depression as a result of this. But in spite of this, their experience helped them develop and grow as mature human beings.

As a result of this research, I concluded that another issue was to going back to their “normal life”. Many of them shared that their life was transformed in such a way that they could not adapt to their normal life. In analyzing this, I concluded that is not that our volunteers come from abnormal life to a normal life but rather that they come with a strong sense of empathy opposed to a life of ap-

athy. They have a strong sense of serving others, rather than ignoring others.

I pose the following question to our former volunteers; what hinders the continuity of our service to others in our home cities and where God continues to call us to serve? The mission experience did not end when we left the place where we served, rather it continues where we are.



Austrians Post Volunteers



# Salesian Volunteer

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research, please contact us at:  
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