



***"Knowledge Mobilization in Youth Led
Groups"***

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1. Introduction

This project will research knowledge mobilization in youth led groups. A tremendous amount of literature exists about the potential of young people as volunteers and the rich contributions that they can make to organizations and more importantly community. The linking of community development and youth development offers tremendous opportunities but is not without its challenges.

The initial goal of this project was to create an online tool that would reflect best practices, research and innovative ideas around knowledge mobilization in youth-led groups. With the changes in funding for CVI this online project was not possible, this report has been developed to reflect our research and some innovative ways to approaches to knowledge mobilization.

This project focuses on youth and although we have not defined a specific age range the research looks at programs and research working with university-age volunteers.

2. Research Question

How to create a sustainable model to share leadership ideas, information and experiences in a youth driven project?

3. Methodology

A number of tools were used to collect data for this project. These included:

- A literature review
- Two focus groups with volunteers
- Online surveys of over 1,000 volunteers
- Six interviews with voluntary sector organizations working with youth

4. Literature Review

This literature review will provide a summary of research that is relevant to creating a sustainable model for sharing leadership ideas, information and experiences in a youth-driven project.

Relevant literature seems to fall into two major categories pertaining to the voluntary sector: leadership development in youth, especially teenagers, and organizational learning/knowledge transfer. There are articles outlining principles and best practices in both areas of research that will be summarized below. However, there appears to be little relevant literature that considers the “Nexter” generation of 19-25 year-olds, nor does there appear to be much that relates

knowledge transfer techniques in a youth volunteer setting for the Nexter demographic. Consequently, this review will take the approach of drawing on the most useful and relevant elements from both areas of study.

The review will cover aspects of the changing landscape of youth volunteering, knowledge transfer and how organizations can support knowledge transfer through youth leadership development, suggestions of best practices that can be used to encourage knowledge transfer among youth and specific steps or tools that can be used to facilitate the knowledge transfer.

The challenge and importance of capturing the knowledge of youth volunteers.

A number of sources demonstrate the problems faced by volunteer organizations that recruit young people at a time when these prospective volunteers are becoming harder to keep.

In *Best of all: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*, Linda Graff identifies key factors affecting the participation of volunteers:

- The number of volunteers is generally declining
- Young people may not have inherited the volunteer spirit
- Episodic volunteering represents the single most influential shift in the volunteer labour pool over the last decade
- Volunteers want positions that are easy to get into and out of.

Merrick Jones, in *Sustainable organizational capacity building*, reviews methods for promoting sustainable organizations. Citing earlier studies, he affirms that organizations survive and prosper in turbulent times only if their ability to learn from their experience exceeds the rate of change.

Studies also show that participation of young people in volunteer organizations is declining. According to the National Survey for Giving, Volunteering and Participating, only 29% of youth volunteered in 2000, down from a 1997 figure of 33%.

While this picture of youth involvement suggests only the difficulties faced by the changing nature of volunteer commitment, other information suggests great potential as well. In the paper "Reaching the 'Nexters': Youth Participation and the Strategic Application of Technology in the Non-Profit Sector," Derek Tannis writes that the youth between the ages of 18 and 25, termed "Nexters," are a socially aware, well-educated, technology literate and innovative generation whose participation will be integral to the development and sustenance of the non-profit sector.

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With the changing face of youth volunteerism, and increasingly episodic and transitory nature of volunteer commitments, the need for knowledge sharing among youth is much more acute.

Knowledge Transfer

There is a substantial amount of information about how organizational learning and the way that knowledge can be shared within an organization that is also referred to as “knowledge transfer”.

Nancy Dixon has written extensively on the subject, and has identified four key areas to consider when sharing knowledge within an organization:

- The specific population that the organization targets i.e., to be effective, a transfer system needs to be designed for a specific population that has a specific knowledge need;
- The specific benefit the target population receives from participating, and this needs to be direct and obvious to the target population;
- To identify who has specific responsibilities for knowledge sharing, since in most organizations, people are overloaded with tasks; and
- To identify what is ‘owned’ by the organization, and what is ‘owned’ by the individual

Fataneh Zarinpoush and Lesley Gotlib Conn identify five main elements of effective knowledge transfer as audience, message, messenger, activities and effects. They have developed the following checklist for organizations to make sure that they have incorporated all the elements:

- Have you developed a knowledge transfer strategy?
- Have you established a relationship with your target audience so that you can understand their needs?
- Have you planned a range of activities to transfer the knowledge in various ways based on the preferences of your audiences?
- Have you identified credible messengers to transfer the knowledge?
- Have you developed a method/system to receive feedback on how the audience received the knowledge and whether any changes appear in their behaviors?
- Are you prepared to use the feedback you receive to plan for the future?

The key elements of knowledge transfer outlined above are tools that are applicable within any organizations. The methods are not specifically geared towards peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, but can adapted to suit this need. Dixon in “What is True?: Looking at the Validity of Shared Knowledge” addresses the fact that sharing knowledge among peers is becoming a larger trend.

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Knowledge shared through an organizational hierarchy has an implied validity. Dixon understood that knowledge and learning gained from peers, or “local knowledge” needed to be judged by different criteria. She identifies three criteria by which local knowledge can gain validity as fit (“Is what the other person is offering a match for my situation?”); experience (the level and extent of experience attributed to the knowledge source); and relationship (the basis of their relationship to the source of local knowledge). Dixon goes on to suggest that though the criteria of fit, experience, and relationship will not replace harder criteria of data, expert opinion and scientific evidence, they are being given a greater prominence in organizational learning.

Facilitating knowledge transfer among youth

Studies of youth development suggest several ways to facilitate the sharing of knowledge among youth volunteers. The literature around youth leadership development points to some key issues that promote youth participation and set the stage for the possible sharing of information.

In *A Comprehensive Leadership Education Model to Train, Teach and Develop Leadership in Youth*, Ricketts and Rudd identify five dimensions of leadership, of which two are most relevant here for laying the ground work for youth sharing information with others: oral and written communication and intra/interpersonal relations.

Oral and Written Communication:

The authors support the view that communication is the “one all purpose instrument of leadership.” They state that oral and written communication skills are the media for sharing knowledge, interests, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and ideas in order to influence and ultimately lead others. Organizations should foster these skills among youth volunteers and encourage them to share their knowledge with others through this media.

Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Relations

Also stressed is the importance of fostering and encouraging intrapersonal and interpersonal relations (such as conflict resolution, stress management, teamwork, ethics, etc). The authors highlight the value to leadership that these relations have and their importance in preparing students to work with others in the most optimum way.

Barbara Oates' *Unleashing Youth Potential: Understanding and Growing Youth Participation in Philanthropy and Volunteerism* also presents some important best practices for organizations to implement. She speaks to the importance of a youth volunteer feeling invested in an organization, which is an essential precursor to involvement in knowledge sharing. When writing about youth participation Oates notes that Organizations need to “contribute to the creation

and optimization of the conditions that will unleash their potential in the community foundation movement and in other voluntary sector organizations.” (Oates 5) Some of the primary factors that Oates believes create and maintain conditions conducive to youth participation are: engaging youth as decision makers, being clear what the parameters of responsibility are, and creating opportunities for increased levels of responsibility.

Attracting and Keeping Youth Volunteers: Creating a Governance Culture that Nurtures and Values Youth a study by Rising Tide Co-operative Ltd. identifies three important strategies for organizations to attract and retain youth volunteers: educate them about the organization, provide training for the tasks that they are assigned, and mentor them. The conclusions of the study emphasize the need for older volunteers to mentor younger volunteers until they are fully integrated into the organization.

Genuine youth engagement does not just happen. Youth volunteers should be provided with the training, tools, guidance, information, support, mentoring and environment so that they can learn experientially and then be able to share the experiences with others.

What are some specific techniques and practices of knowledge transfer among youth volunteers?

Here we move from the broader approaches of fostering youth development to more specific best practices that are relevant to the model of knowledge mobilization in youth led groups. The three areas that this research is focusing on are; peer coaching or mentoring, succession planning by organizations, and harnessing technology as a media for knowledge sharing.

Peer coaching or mentoring

Coaching, Mentoring and Succession Planning is a study that looks at organizational learning in the cultural sector. The authors focus on the importance of peer mentoring and coaching as a means to transfer knowledge in an organization and suggest some useful guidelines for successful peer coaching relationships:

- Agreeing on the parameters of the relationship
- Agreeing on the logistics and format for conversations (frequency, length of meetings, finite number of meetings)
- That coaches must be committed
- That coaches do not have to be experts or advisors, for coaches are there to facilitate and not to direct decisions
- Agreeing measurable actions and monitoring the process

Succession planning

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Volunteering and Youth Development: Making a Positive difference, a guide to best practices published by Ausyouth, focuses on ways in which planning is required to ensure continuity and minimal disruption when volunteers move in and out of organizations. The authors outline the following as important factors in succession planning:

- An assessment of the key skills likely to be lost and require replacement needs to occur identified by reference to job descriptions, the selection criteria or training routinely provided
- An awareness of directions in volunteering and volunteer participation trends is needed to plan for organizational renewal and to optimize voluntary contribution
- An understanding of the needs, aspirations and life cycle stages of an organization's volunteers
- The development of a statistical profile from information collected from an organization's current volunteers
- Succession planning needs to become part of the ongoing cycle of recruiting, selecting, inducting, training, recognizing and retaining volunteers

The use of technology

In "A Comprehensive Leadership Education Model to Train, Teach and Develop Leadership in Youth" the authors discuss the convergence of communications, computers, and the media as a technological trend that must be addressed. Derek Tannis writes about ways to bring the fields of youth development and technology together in a way that is conducive to knowledge sharing. He has identified the following specific strategies for individual organizations:

- Develop a virtual community for youth. Incorporate online conversational tools and shared youth/adult responsibility for moderating discussions to support youth interaction, group decision making, problem solving, and reflection.
- Make website interactive and youth driven. Provide recruitment information, online forms, on-the-job training materials, and training-related activities. Allow youth to co-design the site and the materials, and be the webmasters of the site.
- Integrate youth-focused/developed digital media. Capture the different activities and perspectives of youth in the organization by incorporating youth-developed and/or youth-focused multimedia into the organization's website.

In this paper Tannis writes about an "extranet" as a broad term meant to encompass the multiple ways that an organization can foster and develop an online community. He outlines the value of this extranet and its ability to aid knowledge transfer in organizations in the following ways:

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- Means of increasing the amount of knowledge and skill sharing within and organization
- Supports the development, flow and creation of knowledge
- Means to provide youth with the opportunity to internalize the explicit knowledge of the organization
- Allows youth to externalize their own implicit knowledge and skills
- Develops new ideas and practices by comparing their ideas
- and experiences with other youth and adults
- Allows youth to learn through peer and adult modeling

A further use of technology is demonstrated through the use of new tools such as Wikis, Blogs, Podcasts and tools such as MySpace or YouTube. These tools allow young people to connect with organizations using tools and technologies that they are comfortable with. A number of the organizations we examined were beginning to develop electronic tools to allow volunteers to communicate, share ideas and information. Ryerson University has been experimenting with Podcasts to allow placement students to reflect on their experiences in the field. Much of the work involved in knowledge mobilization is effectively storytelling. These tools help young people tell their stories in a context that is both engaging and relevant. Santropol Rolant has already experimented with video documentaries to help volunteers share their stories and experiences.

What are some implementation guides and specific steps of tools to be considered?

The following is a collection of some suggested specific steps or tools to be followed or used for the promotion of knowledge sharing within an organization. These resources are not directed specifically toward youth knowledge mobilization, but can be adapted to serve this purpose.

From Nancy Dixon's *Common Knowledge*:

1. Select a unit or department that has an interest in knowledge sharing;
2. Conduct a knowledge assessment;
3. Establish the framework for knowledge transfer;
4. Identify an organizational goal and corresponding knowledge component;
5. Locate current informal systems that can be enhanced;
6. Identify resources;
7. Develop an integrated system for knowledge transfer

From "Knowledge Transfer Guide" from the Personnel Administration Office of the Alberta Government:

1. Create a "yellow pages" – searchable guide of who knows what and what they know
2. Exit Questionnaire – recording key contacts, stories, processes and

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practices

3. Staff-to-staff training – formal and informal training sessions
4. Mentoring and Coaching
5. Create a “Community of Practice” – bring people together without preconceptions about who should talk to whom
6. Create a place for staff to post questions they cannot find answers to

From “Knowledge Transfer” by Fataneh Zarinpoush & Lesley Gotlib Conn, Imagine Canada.

- Developing a new, or using an existing, web site
- Delivering workshops and presentations
- Producing information resources such as reports, fact sheets, and tip sheets
- Producing training materials such as manuals, tool kits, and “how to” documents
- Holding roundtables and discussion meetings
- Creating video or audio tapes
- Participating in seminars, conferences, and forums that are related to the knowledge
- Arranging field trips or on-site visits, and
- Using local media for interviews, announcements, or publishing articles.

5. Summary of Research

Interviews

Seven organizations were identified to examine youth knowledge mobilization strategies. The seven organizations were:

1. World University Services Canada (WUSC)
2. Katimavik
3. Santropol Roulant
4. Engineers Without Borders
5. Chantiers Jeunesse
6. QPIRG Concordia University (QPIRG)
7. Frontier College

An aggregate summary of the interviews is included at the end of this document.

In depth interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the organizations. The interviews focused on the involvement of youth volunteers and how knowledge and experiences were shared within the organizations. The results varied depending on the nature of the organization and whether the

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organizations were informal in nature (i.e. Santropol Roulant) or more structured (Engineers Without Borders). None of the organizations had addressed knowledge management in a formal manner but all of the organizations had practices, processes and ways of sharing information. Some of the highlights include:

Organization	Scope	Highlights
Santropol Roulant	Local	Very informal, debriefs held in the kitchen. Buddy system for new volunteers
Engineers Without Borders	National	Five day training for chapter leaders. Executive receive three day training session in the summer. National conference focusing on leadership.
Chantiers Jeunesse	Provincial - Quebec	Intense episodic experience for three weeks.
WUSC	National	Annual leadership meeting for one volunteer per campus. Formalized reporting and mentoring from outgoing executive.
QPIRG	Provincial - Quebec	Listserves to keep in touch with volunteers. Strong staff support on site.
Katimavik	National	Intensive experience for 9 months. Works through partner agencies in the community. Experimenting with MySpace pages for volunteers.
Frontier College	National	Staff support at most sites. Retreats for incoming and outgoing volunteers. Locally developed manuals and materials. Regional meetings in some provinces. Intranet and discussion groups for volunteers.

Focus Groups & Survey Data

A number of specific tensions were evident in looking at the research from our project. The focus groups were extremely insightful in creating dialogue about knowledge mobilization from a youth-led perspective.

Experiential vs. Historical

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Many youth who are volunteering do so to gain valuable experience and skills. Ninety percent (90%) of Frontier College volunteers felt that they gained organizational and communications skills as a result of their involvement with the organization. In many respects the volunteer's involvement is one of experiential learning, through the course of their engagement they are constantly learning and applying their skills. Most of the organizations examined do not provide a lot of staff support for the volunteers and as such the volunteers are left to their own devices and to learn from their own experiences. Although none of the organizations formally addressed this process it is clear that many varied tools are being utilized to facilitate knowledge mobilization.

In examining the data from our online surveys it became clear that many (22%) of our leadership volunteers felt that they needed more training for their roles.

Formal vs. Informal

As mentioned, there was clearly a great deal of diversity in how organizations trained, supported and engaged volunteers. Some of the organizations had formal structures like conferences and training modules whereas others relied on informal networking and exchanges to train and share information. Even within Frontier College programs there is a great deal of diversity, some of our groups have very formalized binders, manuals and guides while others rely on interpersonal contact (i.e. retreats, meetings) to share information and ideas.

National vs. Local

This tension is well known across the voluntary sector across Canada. Trying to balance the roles and responsibilities of a national structure with the needs of local volunteers is a consistent challenge. A number of the organizations noted this tension and attempted to bridge the relationship through events like conferences, training sessions and virtual networks. No knowledge mobilization strategy is going to be successful without local ownership of the volunteer program and its guiding mission and values. Events such as conferences and forums can attempt to address this challenge but they are extremely expensive and often only allow a few participants from each program(s). In a review of our data the key benefits of a national event seemed to be connecting individuals to a national network and providing inspiration.

Consistent Staff Support

The role of mentoring and coaching were discussed in the literature review. In many organizations this support comes from paid staff that provide support for volunteers. In our survey data the importance of this staff support was very clearly demonstrated by both qualitative and quantitative data. This staff support

is especially critical in organizations with a high turnover rate for volunteers; as volunteers leave and enter the organization staff provide a sense of organizational history and perspective. In many respects this staff support can avoid a process of “reinventing the wheel” every year or so. Unfortunately, staffing costs may limit direct support for youth led volunteer programs. Our research demonstrated that it was much more difficult to provide support from a distance rather than having staff in specific community.

Documentation

As mentioned, a great deal of knowledge mobilization is effective storytelling. One of the areas that was clearly identified was effective documentation. Examples include manuals, logs, and journals. Many of the Frontier College programs have developed program-specific materials that are short, simple and easy to use. Tools like this also need to be updated in a timely and simplistic manner. It was identified as critical that documentation reflect the local nature of the volunteer’s work.

6. Conclusion and Follow Up

The contributions of young people to the voluntary sector are immense. Through the course of this research project a large number of organizations and individuals have participated to help us capture the nature of youth knowledge mobilization. A number of specific strategies, approaches and ideas have been identified and explored. More importantly, the entire process of knowledge mobilization helps to tell the varied stories of these committed volunteers.

There a number of areas that may warrant some follow up in the area of knowledge mobilization in youth led groups. These include:

- How can technology(ies) aid (as described) in making knowledge mobilization simpler and easier?
- How can organizations working in separate domains share information, experiences and ideas more effectively?
- How can youth share their varied experiences across organizations?
- With the trend towards episodic volunteerism how can organizations harness the ideas and experiences of youth volunteers in a more effective manner?

“Man's most human characteristic is not his ability to learn, which he shares with many other species, but his ability to teach and store what others have developed and taught him.” – Margaret Mead

7. Resources

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APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

1: Determine contact person. Do they have 30 minutes to spare?

-Daniel Bouchard: Santropol-Roulant (**SR**)

-Laura McGrath: Engineers without borders (**EWB**)

-Béatrice Lecomte: Chantiers Jeunesse (**CJ**)

-Lynne Leblanc: **WUSC**

-Nathalie Cohen : **QPIRG-Concordia university**

-Sylvie Thériault : Katimavik (**K**)

-Mélanie Valcin : Frontier College (**FC**) (data not included in this report)

2: What are the different roles and positions that young people occupy in your organization?

SR: Founded by and for young people. Positions: cook, deliver meals, special events, bike workshop coordinators.

EWB: Staff, executive positions of each chapters, general members, professional members and overseas volunteers.

CJ: Some in QC others abroad: environmental projects, construction and social work + special events.

WUSC: special events, fundraising, sponsoring of refugees and advocacy.

QPIRG: work/study positions, board members, working groups.

K: Participation in youth volunteer-service programs (environment, social services, education, special events, art, etc.)

3: What kind of training do you provide?

SR: 1 hour orientation: mission, values, clients. Then, informal training though pairing with more experienced volunteers.

EWB: 5 day training for chapter pres. on leadership, group behaviour, public speaking, project mgt

3 day summer retreats for the exec members on specific content areas

Yearly national leadership conference for the exec member

8-month online training for overseas volunteers + 1 week training in TO

CJ: One weekend training prior to departure about how to prepare

WUSC: Annual leadership meeting for delegates, regional symposiums, local training and ongoing flow of information on different themes.

QPIRG: Training for the board only: mission and mandate, anti-oppression, how to be an employer, community organizing finance and consensus building.

K: 3 day training session, orientation from the partner organization. General skill development in: leadership, official languages, environment, cultural discovery and healthy lifestyle.

4: What kind of ongoing support?

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SR: Mutual peer volunteer support & informal staff support (conversations, chats)

EWB: Staff support – email, phone calls, newsletters, yearly chapter visit, feedback on monthly report of each chapter.

CJ: Guide for each group and support from partners abroad

WUSC: Ongoing local staff support

QPIRG: Access to a staff person, financial support, access to equipment and grants.

K: Ongoing staff supports

5: Average duration of engagement?

SR: Varies

EWB: Varies/we do not know. E.g. Executive members: 2-3 years, professional member: all his life, overseas volunteers, 16 months.

CJ: 3 weeks

WUSC: 6 months (college students) to 3 years (university students)

QPIRG: Board 1 to 3 years. Working groups: up to 8 years.

K: 9 months

6: Typical time involvement (weekly)?

SR: On average: 3 hours per week

EWB: N/A

CJ: 30 hours

WUSC: 1 to 2 hours / week

QPIRG: N/A

K: 35 hours

6A: Return rates

SR: No official numbers but some volunteers come back for 5-6 years.

EWB: N/A but they stay a long time.

CJ: 30% return rate

WUSC: N/A but strong connection with alumni

QPIRG: 1/3 people stay one year or leave, 1/3 one year or 2, 1/3 longer

K: N/A vols can only participate once.

7: Reporting / accountability mechanism?

SR: Informal mechanisms: chats in the kitchen

Formal mech.: Oral report from vols to the staff after the meal deliveries & weekly staff meetings where issues are brought up

EWB: Monthly report from the pres. of each chapter, end of year survey from executives, overseas members: contract plus final report.

CJ: contract and end of project report

WUSC: Mid-term evaluation and end of year evaluation, final written report

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QPIRG: Board is very accountable to the organization such as any board.
Working groups sign an accountability contract.
K: Commit to certain rules, no contracts.

8: Numbers

SR: N/A in a given year. Each day: 21 vols show up.

EWB: 2000 executives, 200 000 general members

CJ: 400

WUSC: 4000 to 10 000 volunteers yearly

QPIRG : 7 board members, 200 to 300 members, 3 paid staff positions

K: 1000 in Canada

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9: Systems and processes to track volunteer involvement (if any)?

SR: Tracking system: volunteer database (although not used to its full potential).

EWB: Online member accounts

CJ: Database

WUSC: electronic volunteer database

QPIRG: Work in progress.

K: Electronic database

10: What happens when people leave?

SR: They stay in touch (personal relationships) They stay on our mailing list.

EWB: Generally, they do not leave.

CJ: We thank them.

WUSC: Final report + they train incoming volunteers.

QPIRG: Old board members train new ones each year before departure. For working groups, it is up to them. No pre-established system.

K: This is left to the host organization.

11: How do you capture learnings, experience and ideas (if at all)?

SR: Stories and experiences documented in a year calendar & school papers and short films created by volunteer students.

EWB: Monthly online conferences, online discussion groups

CJ: End of project report

WUSC: Final Reports

QPIRG: Collecting archives (such as posters) as much as possible. No formal way.

K: Through learning activities, portfolios, end of experience assessment.

12: How are information and ideas shared amongst the volunteers?

SR: Informal chats

EWB: Monthly, online meetings

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CJ: Through the preparatory training

WUSC: Weekly meetings + newsletters

QPIRG: Board: minutes. Working groups: varies.

K: Informal chats, meetings, *use of My Space* for alumni.

13: How do you keep individual and group knowledge within the organization after departure (dealing with transient nature of volunteers)? How do you use this information?

SR: Informal sharing of experience through discussions and chats. Experience is used to improve the service.

EWB: Staff documents the experiences. Use the info for the future.

CJ: Volunteers end of project reports which are used in preparatory trainings.

WUSC: Newsletters. Constant use of this information.

QPIRG: Through archives that we collect. We use them for the future.

K: End of experience assessment with the host organization which helps to assess our activities.

15: How is this model sustainable?

SR: The individual is valued therefore he comes back.

EWB: Big investment in people!

CJ: Because it is a simple model and demands a short commitment. Not many obligation and great experience!

WUSC: Because of high energy of volunteers and because of university support.

QPIRG: Increasing accountability and training. Development of a longer term relationship with groups.

K: Fills a demand/need from youth and organisations

16: What could help you with this process?

SR: More time

EWB: Improvement of retention rates and improvement of tracking system.

CJ: Improve Volunteer retention

WUSC: More funding and more training for vols.

QPIRG: Increase accountability through the signature of contracts and more funding

K: More funding.