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Article — Digitized Version

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Maurach, Hedwig (1974) : The German volunteer service, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 09, Iss. 12, pp. 389-390, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02929400>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/139124>

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The German Volunteer Service

by Hedwig Maurach, Bonn *

The German Volunteer Service (GVS) is an institution whose cooperation in development aid applies especially to such programmes aimed at making a concrete contribution to the emancipation of economically and socially weak groups. Since 1963 the service has sent more than 4,000 volunteers to developing countries.

The GVS was established in 1963 as a non-profit corporation, members of which are the Federal Republic of Germany and the "Association for Learning and Helping Overseas". It is financed from the Federal Budget. The responsible body is a board of directors which is composed of representatives of the Federal Government, the Association for Learning and Helping Overseas, the political parties represented in the German Parliament and representatives of the volunteers; chairman is a personality of the public life in the Federal Republic of Germany. Task of the GVS is to send young specialists who have concluded their professional or vocational training to developing countries for a minimum time of two years.

Recruiting and Training of Volunteers

On principle everyone can become a volunteer who has concluded his professional or vocational training, has had some job experience and is at least 21. At present the age of the volunteers is on average 26. About 50 p.c. of the volunteers have a mechanical or technical vocation (mechanics, qualified specialized workers, technicians, engineers). The rest are mainly experts from the fields of teaching, health and agriculture. 40 p.c. of all volunteers are graduates from technical colleges or universities; 25 p.c. are engineers specialized in technics, the natural sciences or agriculture.

In recruiting volunteers the GVS employs the usual information methods in the Federal Republic in press, radio, vocational schools and organizations. After the selection has been narrowed down on the basis of the written applications, the remaining candidates participate in a one-day pre-selection session with tests, personal interviews and group discussions. The purpose of the selection procedure is to examine whether the individual applicant is suited to the tasks and the specific burdens and difficulties of the work as a volunteer overseas.

Training and Payment

The general aim of the training period is to acquire knowledge and — connected herewith — to exer-

cise the behaviour being necessary for the future task. The training has two parts: the first one is a preparatory course of 11 weeks in Germany and the second one is a course in the host country lasting between four and eight weeks; employed are methods of modern adult education which are based on self-responsibility of the future volunteer and the work group as a social form of education.

The living allowances of the volunteers of the GVS are not based on qualification, job experience or effectiveness in the usual sense. All volunteers receive the same pay scaled according to the cost of living in the host country, regardless of vocation and age. The allowance is high enough, on the one hand, to secure a certain standard of living; on the other, it does not bring the volunteer in too heavy a contrast with the social environment of the project, for this might complicate or exclude his integration. The total net income of a volunteer may be compared approximately to that of a young skilled technician in the Federal Republic.

Cooperation in Projects

Criteria for cooperating in projects are fixed in corresponding guidelines of the GVS. These criteria are no immovable fixed principles but represent the attempt to adapt the necessarily different project-work in different countries to certain guiding principles of development policy without narrowing the necessary latitude. These guiding principles for the cooperation in a project are:

The GVS desires to work first and foremost with those countries which belong to the "least developed countries" (according to the ECOSOC-list), which are willing to diminish existing unjust socio-economic differences and/or make efforts for a balanced economic and social development.

Cooperation of the GVS is to be incorporated into the development planning of the host country. The programme has to allow sectoral and/or regional concentration. The organization of the programme must take into account the vocations and the number of GVS-applicants.

Cooperation of GVS volunteers must be based on the request of the sponsors of development in

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the host country and on the approval of the country's government.

As a socially orientated special service, GVS prefers the cooperation in the social sectors like training and education, health-service and community development. In the framework of the economic sectors priority is given to participation in agricultural projects. In the other economic sectors (trade, industry and administration) GVS participates only if training, employment creation or social improvements are primarily aimed at. The project institutions of the economic sectors should be organized on a non-profit or cooperative basis and/or serve a wide distribution of property.

The possibilities of collaboration have to correspond with the professional offer of candidates of the GVS and to meet the requirements of a necessary concentration of the GVS-programme. By sending volunteers overseas the GVS tries to contribute to filling up real gaps. Precondition are visible intentions of the host countries to fill up these gaps by their own efforts. The cooperation of volunteers must not lead to the dismissal, supplantation or blockade of local labour. On the contrary, the GVS has to see to it that the tasks fulfilled or created by volunteers are taken over by domestic specialists as soon as possible.

Cooperation with Project Sponsors

As a rule the GVS cooperates with every project sponsor whose purpose and practical behaviour are compatible with the principles relating to social policy of the GVS, its guiding principles of cooperation and its special principles of cooperation with project sponsors. The GVS prefers the cooperation with those, especially domestic, project sponsors who are primarily engaged in the promotion of economically and socially discriminated groups of the society. The sponsor should have concrete targets for a cooperation with the GVS and the necessary organizational and/or financial opportunities. These concrete targets for a cooperation with the GVS should be fixed by the sponsor who should be prepared to discuss them. Predominantly the GVS wants to cooperate with those project institutions which

- are able to work in an exemplary way in a certain sector;
- have a multiplier effect;
- assimilate to their social environment;
- have evident self-help effects;
- give the volunteer a chance to take part – together with the local partners – in a learning process.

At present the GVS is working in the following programmes:

- Technical and manual programmes*, i.e. municipal or rural construction programmes, surveying, electrification, workshops, production cooperations, as well as the training of craftsmen and technicians, trade schools.
- Community development and social work*, i.e. programmes aimed at an integrated social and economic development of certain communities, promotion of the community spirit by practical cooperation, demonstration and advice in the fields of agriculture, home management, village crafts, youth work, nutrition, hygiene; in addition participation in the training of domestic specialists and work in the social welfare institutions.
- Health services*, i.e. preventative and curative health care, training and guiding of domestic personnel, collaboration in hospitals, dispensaries, maternity wards, etc.
- Schools and institutions of higher education*, i.e. practical and theoretical training in technical schools as well as at universities; instruction (mainly technical and natural science subjects, physical education) in primary and secondary schools, teacher-training.
- Agricultural development*, i.e. consultant services, cattle-breeding stations, settlement and irrigation projects, agricultural production cooperatives, agricultural schools.
- Trade, industry, and administration*, i.e. promotion of administrative facilities (for example regional development authorities) cooperating in the building up of cooperatives, in exceptional cases also participation in the promotion of manual skills and small industries.

Future Efforts

The governments of the host countries and the Federal Republic of Germany conclude a general agreement in the form of an international treaty to determine the legal status and support of the volunteers. Details of the volunteers' work are determined by a project agreement between the project sponsor and the GVS. Between 1963 and September 30, 1974, the German Volunteer Service has sent 9,181 volunteers to about 30 countries all over the world.

In future, the GVS will concentrate on an increasing collaboration of volunteers in the least developed countries, closer cooperation with the volunteer service of the United Nations and assisting the developing countries in building up their own volunteer and youth services.