

Life stories

Experiences of volunteers in the field



Collaboration



LEARNING



VOLUNTEERING



Mutual support



EU Aid Volunteers
We Care, We Act



EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE FIELD

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EU Aid Volunteers
We Care, We Act



Year 2020

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A warm thank you to the hosting organisations for providing training and support, and making the EU Aid Volunteers part of the team.

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Thank you for being part of social change



Solidarity between people, organisations and countries is more necessary than ever. The global health, social and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 has shown us that collaboration and mutual support are crucial if we are to create fairer and more resilient communities and societies.

This has been the objective of Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- since its creation in 1983: the construction of societies where people's lives are central, based on the values of peace and human rights, through cooperation and solidarity among individuals and peoples.

To do so, we have relied on citizen participation, without which real change cannot occur. One of the forms of this social engagement and participation, both in Spain and internationally, is volunteering.

Through our EU Aid Volunteers projects, we promote volunteering as a form of social mobilisation to provide support to humanitarian aid projects in the field. The aim of these projects is to ensure a dignified and violence-free life for the people and communities with whom we work, with particular emphasis on women's rights.

The following pages contain stories from participants in the EU Aid Volunteers initiative who have supported our work, in which they speak of life experiences, learnings and mutual support. We would like to thank them for their commitment and dedication, because only with solidarity shall we succeed.

To you, the reader of this publication, we welcome you and thank you for being part of the social shift towards fairer and more caring societies.

**The EU Aid Volunteers team from
Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL-**

Stories from the field: volunteering, learning, solidarity

Marta Colombia

The Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- team in Colombia gave me a warm welcome in cold Bogota. Colder than I expected for these latitudes. The word 'team' took on a broad and profound meaning in Colombia. As well as working together every day, the team brought friendliness, mutual support, making plans together and salsa Fridays on the office radio.

After a week of adaptation and jet lag came the necessary clash with reality. Alongside my colleagues, I attended the first event organised by the Commission for the Uncovering of the Truth, established in the Peace Accords. The subject was sexual violence against women and the LGBTBI community during the armed conflict, and the event involved heart-breaking personal accounts, tributes and tears - emotions that will accompany me for the rest of my volunteering assignment. "It is one of the crimes most denied by those responsible, who will recognise a thousand murders before a rape," one of the Commissioners, Aleja Miller, explained at the event.

In almost all the activities we run, regional customs and symbols are involved. Colombia is a large country which is very close to the equator. This means that the weather does not vary much depending on the time of year, but rather depending on the altitude. Its landscapes, from the snow-capped peaks of the Andes to the warm pacific and Caribbean coasts, are as varied as

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Why did I choose Colombia? Because it always seemed to me to be an exciting country. It's a very interesting place to work since the signing of the Peace Accords, with a very active and committed social fabric.

its people. An incredible wealth of cultures and characteristics.

Volunteering in another country involves being deployed in the field, but it also often involves spending days in the office, like I would do in my home city. Visiting the projects being run in rural areas or remote or smaller towns means you get to know the heart of the organisation, that is, the people who bring the projects to life. This volunteering assignment gave me the opportunity to travel around the country and to get to know it from a different perspective.

When I think of all the experiences I shared, it's impossible not to smile. This volunteering assignment left me with beautiful memories that I know I'll treasure for the rest of my life. If I've been able to contribute even half the amount I've learned as an EU Aid Volunteer, I'll be happy. I hope that sharing my experience and knowledge at the professional and personal level has helped the Movimiento por la Paz - MPDL team in Colombia.

"Visiting the projects being run in rural areas or remote or smaller towns means you get to know the heart of the organisation, that is, the people who bring the projects to life"



Marta Nocete,
Spain, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Colombia.
June - October
2019.

Irene Guatemala

My time in Guatemala felt like a tumult of hazy events. They came one after the other, as if I had never finished arriving in this beautiful country that exudes joy as soon as you enter it. The last of these was my return home. I did not let the sense of uncertainty dominate my time there, I tried to channel it with as much serenity as I could. I tried to inhale deeply that characteristic air, knowing that soon I would be saying goodbye to Central America. I tried to open my eyes more, to laugh more, to listen better.

The little I experienced will remain with me forever. I am left with the strength of the women who defend with their bodies the earth's mountains and rivers from the megaprojects of extractive industries. I was inspired by the words spoken from the heart and through tears; how the "sisters" of the communities in resistance self-organise in order to challenge an unjust and unequal system that they have had to endure first-hand; their constant high spirits in the struggle; and the courage with which they denounce the plundering of natural resources that, in the past, belonged to no one.

The tremendous pressure faced by human rights campaigners in their communities can lead to them becoming hesitant and afraid. Sometimes, as a last resort, they disappear without a trace and flee to places far from their homeland. Some have even been killed in the fight for the territory. They have been threatened, criticised, damaged, dispossessed and humiliated. It is the sacrifice they have made in the hope of achieving the long-awaited peace. Their voices remain in the echo of the thundering noise of the trucks filled with materials that they extract from the mountains, and that fill their homes with dust and misfortune. They remain in the beds of the rivers that are emptied by huge machines, and in the communities devastated by water shortages.

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What is most surprising is people's complete unawareness as regards the importance of their work in the conservation of ecosystems, of life on the planet. I wonder what will happen when they are no longer there. What happens to the territory when we no longer protect and inhabit it?

Looking back, those months seem like a distant, distorted dream. Like they never happened. Now, there is too much noise and too much silence at the same time. Confinement gives me the space to view the world from a distance, like an attentive spectator. I think of the women in the rural areas, of all those women silenced and forgotten in time, of the stories that we will no longer tell. The memories and knowledge that cease to exist every time the courtyard of a village closes, saying goodbye to those who left forever.

They did not appear in books or in the news, and yet they are full of the wisdom of those who have lived. Like silent guardians, they protected the secrets that the earth holds. I think of all those women who did not have time to assert their rights, and of the ones who do so despite this fact.

Thank you to the wonderful women from the Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- team in Guatemala for their welcome. My experience on the EU Aid Volunteers initiative has left me with a mixture of sensations: the profound memories of what I experienced and a longing to one day return.

"I am left with the strength of the women who defend with their bodies the earth's mountains and rivers from the megaprojects of extractive industries"

Irene Herranz,
Spain, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Guatemala.
February -
September 2020.



What will the assignment be like? Will the project be interesting? Will I get on with the team? What about the people? Will I be able to integrate well in a country with different customs and outlooks and, above all, in a conservative city such as Oujda?

No matter how many times you've been in the field, how many countries you've worked or volunteered in, how far away they were from home, both geographically and culturally... every time you set out, the nerves hit: a mixture of worry, doubt, restlessness, but also enthusiasm, curiosity, impatience, the desire to get moving, to arrive and finally begin the new experience. And you feel alive. Who could have imagined that this mess of emotions, expectations, doubts and fears would have to deal with a microscopic and invisible virus capable of calling everything into question?

Oujda is the largest city in the Oriental region, a rural area of Morocco just 15 kilometres from the Algerian border. Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- runs a project here to support the process of the democratic participation of civil society, with a particular focus on promoting the participation of women and young people. It conducts several field activities with the local partner ACODEC, in Oujda and various rural municipalities in the region.

I arrived in Morocco on the 15th of February 2020 and begun to make careful progress within the project and to find my bearings, but COVID-19 had other plans. I had just finished settling in in Oujda when I received news that, for reasons of safety, we had to leave for Rabat. Then, all of a sudden, and before we'd had time to reach Rabat, word arrived that we had to isolate with immediate application. I felt a mixture of frustration, bitterness, disorientation and confusion.

It's a challenge on every level, an opportunity to test yourself

Who could have predicted that my deployment to Morocco would turn out like this? EU Aid Volunteers, in the era of COVID-19, seems like something from a fantasy novel. Before setting out, I had many questions, the usual ones you would have before going to a country which was new and unfamiliar.

Not only because of the project, for which field activities had been suspended, but also because I saw crumbling before my eyes what is usually an essential and hugely rewarding part of this kind of experience: contact with the people, learning about Moroccan society, its traditions, culture, customs, thoughts and feelings, their values and approach to life, how they view it and live it.

What was I to do? It felt surreal and there was no past experience I could look to for guidance, given that it was a completely new and unprecedented situation. However, I had to come up with something. I couldn't give up. I had to find ways not only to survive but to live and to do it well, getting involved and finding fulfilment, so that each day I could be an active force rather than a passive spectator.

Now, after almost two months of isolation, I feel relatively fulfilled. Of course, there are battle scars, moments of sadness, annoyance, exhaustion, despondency, a drastic decrease in motivation and concern for my relatives who are engaged in their own battle against the same enemy. However, I managed to implement active and productive life strategies which meant I continued to learn each day, that my curiosity and desire to learn could be fulfilled and remained more alive than ever.

I try to use this strange situation to check in with myself more, to be more present in the here and now, with more awareness of and attention to what is happening, to thoughts, sensations and desires. The slow passing of time is, by the way, a very healthy and pleasant thing.

Accustomed to a fast pace, there is now more time to connect with yourself, to get to know and understand yourself a little more.



As for the project, the process of adapting activities to the new situation has been interesting and stimulating: devising and experimenting with different ways to reach beneficiaries without disrupting the work that was in process. It has also been exciting implementing new actions, specific to the current situation, such as identifying the needs of the people most vulnerable to the COVID-19 crisis and acting accordingly.

It's a challenge on every level, from the personal to the professional, an opportunity to test yourself, to explore your own resilience and to increase it, to discover resources you may not have known you had. Moreover, it's a wonderful opportunity to move beyond ourselves and our little units, to finally realise that we are not separate entities, that we are connected to everything and everyone and that we need that whole in order to function; that the actions of each individual have consequences in the collective and, therefore, in oneself, because we are the collective; that a change, or indeed a new direction, is necessary for our own survival.

It's not as if this wasn't evident before but, apparently, we were unable to stop, look and act for ourselves without an external entity making us do so. People are saying that we won't go back to the "normal", to the way we were before. Well, good: the previous "normal" was unfair, imbalanced, and unnatural.

It is my hope that the foundations will finally be laid for the transition from a worldview which focuses on the individual to one which is global, cooperative and united; that this "crisis" - a word that comes from the Greek term krino, meaning to separate, discern, evaluate - will take on its original meaning and be used as an excellent opportunity for reflection, evaluation and discernment, and become the necessary precondition for an improvement, a rebirth, a flourishing to come.

Viviana Scozzaro,
Italy, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Morocco.

February - August
2020.

What have you given me, Guate?

When you travel to a continent as diverse as Latin America, the new social reality is like a tropical storm that breaks and subsides over the course of just a few minutes.

First you see these great black clouds approaching, ominous and worrisome, like the news and preconceived ideas with which we are assaulted before crossing the ocean; then the rain falls relentlessly, heavily, and with no mercy for those who do not run for shelter or have not been paying proper attention; then the sun comes out and the calm arrives, but the atmosphere has changed and it takes time for your wet clothes to dry. You squint at the sky and that dazzling sun, wondering if what you've experienced is real, but wow, it definitely is. Like that storm, Guatemala doesn't wait for you to take shelter and watch. It hits you fast and with blunt force, so you'd better keep your eyes open.

My EU Aid Volunteers assignment centred on the capital: Guatemala City. Life there is wild and you live day to day, the very definition of an urban jungle. The city stands tall like an asphalt animal, taking on the form of a snail: a multiform jumble of areas and colonies for the novice, with almost every street containing a different universe. At night, I was often surprised to see the expanse of lights that climbed the hills fading to darkness in certain parts, like a brazen black hole hiding the informal settlements, the very mention of which produces a strange expression on the faces of people who are familiar with them.

Inequality is the enormous elephant in the room. There are tremendously wealthy areas, full of amenities, hotels, shopping malls and residential areas under lock and key 24 hours a day, with private security, swimming pools and parks. The flip side of that is equally difficult to take, with areas where violence doesn't hide, and people walk the streets in search of something to help them survive one more day.

My name is Mario Marty. I'm a journalist, videographer and communications volunteer with Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- in Guatemala under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative. I finally arrived on these distant shores at the beginning of February. However, the health crisis created by COVID-19 drastically altered my experience, despite the short time that had elapsed, granting me the opportunity to learn a valuable life lesson.

However, as often happens in these situations, it's easier to find a genuine smile in the man pushing his fruit cart along, or in the woman who announces to you from her stall that the cheese you like has arrived again.

My volunteering assignment in Guatemala ended as quickly as the country's COVID-19 crisis began. Overnight, after months of looking sideways and with some scepticism at what was happening in Europe, the borders closed, masks inundated public areas and queues formed at supermarket entrances. The mission had been prepared in advance, implementing remote work and self-imposed confinement. You could see the tsunami coming.

The phone rings. It's an unknown number. Turns out it's the Spanish Embassy. The last flight from Central America to Madrid is in just a couple of days. There are no goodbyes, no hugs, no kisses. So many things to say that remain caught in that limbo between the mind and the lips. There's time for nothing. Or almost nothing...

There's time to remember, that's always the case. Like that storm, Guatemala vented its fury, soaked me and disappeared. My mission companions, from whom I learned so much during those two months, remain.



They, *guatemaltecas* -women from Guatemala - are an extraordinary group of women. They decided to stop looking away, to combat the paralysis of a society anaesthetised by fear, and to dedicate a part of their lives for love of their people. Theirs is a true patriotism, far removed from flags and vacuous symbols. They taught me that although Guatemala is hurt, it's far from dead, because people like them won't allow it.

In another clear example of this, my EU Aid Volunteers assignment allowed me to learn more about the lives of the people who struggle the most, those who suffer the most from the bitter persecution of the system. The women human rights' campaigners, especially those who defend the territory against the impunity of the extractive energy industry, endure fury and violence as they stand in front of the trucks who take their resources. Hearing the stories of some of these women was certainly painful; a reminder of what we once were and have ceased to be, but which in them remains ingrained in fire and blood. They are the last bastion that connects us to a world that we continue to inhabit, but which we have already ceased to feel.

Through them, Guatemala will prevail. This is what I was thinking about as my plane took off and I watched that landscape of fuming mountains vanish. Good luck, Guate. We'll see each other again.

"Volunteering has allowed me to learn more about the lives of the people who struggle the most, those who suffer the most from the bitter persecution of the system"



Mario Marty,
Spain, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Guatemala.
February -
September 2020.

Marianna Jordan

The desire to work in the humanitarian aid sector

Just one month after I arrived in Jordan as an EU Aid Volunteer with Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL-, when I was beginning to get used to everyday life in the small and cosy fifth-floor office between roundabouts two and three in Jabal Amman, the COVID-19 crisis hit, bringing with it isolation and notice of repatriation. The impact was like when you go outside for a walk and all of a sudden it starts raining.

Jordan was one of the countries with the tightest restrictions in the world, applying the National Defence Act and imposing a full curfew for four days. All shops were closed, including pharmacies and grocery stores, and you weren't allowed out on the street except due to force majeure. The capital, Amman, fell into total silence, something hard to imagine when I think of the noise that normally dominates the city that I'd just come to know.

These measures didn't last long. On the fourth day, I was surprised to see buses full of bread, water trucks and gas canisters passing by to distribute their loads among the people who were starting to run out of food at home. On the fifth day, the government gave permission to walk outside to stock up in the shops near your home. Soon, the full curfew became a partial curfew. Every day at 6 p.m., a siren sounded throughout Amman for ten minutes, signalling that you could no longer go outside.

Although these measures have managed to limit the spread of the contagion, they have had devastating consequences for Jordanian society and the refugees it hosts. The Movimiento por la Paz team in Jordan carried out a quick needs assessment of the beneficiaries in the towns of Zarqa and Mafraq, where we work with local partners.

The situation was found to be serious. Based on a sample of 300 surveys collected, the majority of families



had no sources of income during confinement because they'd been working on the informal market.

Like other organisations, Movimiento por la Paz redirected some of the project budget in order to respond immediately to the crisis and distribute hygiene and food kits, as well as staple foods for babies, following the needs assessment with the beneficiaries. Much remains to be done to reconstruct the livelihoods lost due to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

The days were intense, not so much because of the workload, but rather because of the thoughts that go through your mind. Despite all that has happened, I've been able to continue the project online and my experience in Jordan rekindled my desire to work in the humanitarian aid sector. I've learned that you can also contribute from a distance and that our role as aid workers is more essential than ever if we are to emerge from this global crisis.

“Like other organisations, Movimiento por la Paz redirected some of the project budget in order to respond immediately to the crisis and distribute hygiene and food kits”

Marianna Mazzoleni,
Italy, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Jordan.
February - July
2020.

Maud Colombia

Since June 2019, I have been working as an EU Aid Volunteer in Tumaco, a city in Colombia's Pacific region, in the southwest of the country. I am working with the NGO Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- and participating in a comprehensive protection project for women human rights' campaigners. We support the campaigners and their grassroots organisations, assisting them in their social processes and collaborating with them in the creation of protection and organisational strengthening plans.

For social, cultural and historical reasons, the community network is particularly important in this part of the country. There is a culture of 'open doors', with a thin line between the private and the communal: there has always been strong support and solidarity between neighbours. Unfortunately, as a result of the armed conflict, mistrust and the breakdown of the social fabric have affected social and community dynamics. In this context, the role of these human rights campaigners is essential. Since they are people who are recognised in the neighbourhoods and they speak up for the communities, they contribute to keeping the social fabric - weakened by the conflict - alive, organic and effective.

What does it mean to be a human rights campaigner during the COVID-19 crisis? It means looking out for the community, being aware of its needs and the risks to which it is exposed, and making its voice heard among the institutions, as well as perhaps the social organisations present in the region. It means dealing with armed groups who are seeking to control the territories, speaking out without putting themselves at personal. It also means being frustrated by social isolation measures and not being able to sufficiently support your community and feeling powerless in the face of the situation. It means coming up with new ways of working so that you can support your community in an innovative manner.

A crisis represents an opportunity to learn from our mistakes

As we are already aware, there are as many confinement stories as there are people confined by COVID-19. I invite you to read these words and learn about the reality of confinement for human rights campaigners in Tumaco, 'the pearl of the Pacific'.

At Movimiento por la Paz, we ask ourselves this question: what is the best way to support the work of the campaigners and their social processes in this very unusual period? We are monitoring the situation continuously and keeping in contact with the campaigners we support so that we can assist them in their work. Psycho-social support by phone, reporting incidents, advocacy, health promotion campaigns, virtual training, delivery of hygiene kits... Due to the consequences of the pandemic in vulnerable sectors, we have had to adapt our actions to the needs that have arisen. Finding the right way to support the campaigners and to adapt our work to the crises that the pandemic has brought, in a way that is sustainable over time and that does not merely involve short-term support, has been - and continues to be - challenging.

As an EU Aid Volunteer, participating in this process of assessing how best to support the people we assist in this very particular period has been exciting and challenging at the same time. A crisis brings danger and has damaging consequences... and yet it also represents an opportunity to learn from our mistakes and to reinvent ourselves. My hope is this: that despite the difficulties we are facing with this crisis, we will be able to learn from this opportunity and find ways to create a new future together.

“What does it mean to be a human rights campaigner during the COVID-19 crisis? It means looking out for the community, being aware of its needs and the risks to which it is exposed, and making its voice heard among the institutions, as well as perhaps the social organisations present in the region”

Maud Bailly,
France, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Colombia.
June 2019 -
August 2020.



The ability to adapt to new challenges

Jordan is a country that has been surrounded by geopolitical and social conflicts that have gone unresolved for decades. Although the country itself has managed to maintain peace in some shape or another, it must not be forgotten that it is a direct victim of these conflicts, since it takes in thousands of people who seek refuge there. The country has an incredibly rich history given that, for centuries, it was a nexus between East and West; a kind of gateway between the Mediterranean (it is just a few kilometres from the border with Israel) and the cultural and material riches of the far east.

I admit that Amman disappointed me at first. For the first few days, I felt that the city had little to offer. I was wrong. At first glance, it may seem that the capital doesn't contain much worth seeing. It isn't pretty, it's true, but few cities in the world can boast of having been inhabited for more than eight thousand years without interruption, meaning there are gems to be found on every corner: the Roman citadel, the streets of the old medina, the souks, the cafes... and the people, who are friendly and hospitable.

Although they are known as the most unfriendly people in the Middle East, the Jordanians gave me a very warm welcome. Amman can be an extremely frustrating city: the scarcity of public transport, the long, steep hills - the city is built on seven - and the overwhelming traffic really make it an uncomfortable city to live in. Still, I managed to find my place, a new home where I could advance my professional career and where I managed to make friends and meet people with whom I could discover the city. Jordanians love meeting people from elsewhere and are always keen to help you learn about their culture, their customs and their beautiful country. I was lucky to experience it first-hand.

Nonetheless, all that glitters is not gold. Unfortunately, and like many other countries, Jordan has been the victim of Western imperialism and the resulting redistribution

Jordan is the most popular country in the Middle East for tourists. It has good infrastructure and is easy to get around. However, the amount of secrets it conceals is still surprising. Many people will be familiar with Petra, the Dead Sea, the Red Sea, the Roman city of Gerasa and the famous Wadi Rum, but there's a lot more to see that you won't find in the brochures for organised tours.

of land, property and resources. The country is enduring a serious economic recession and the accompanying high unemployment figures, poverty, a shortage of basic resources and high levels of corruption. Moreover, although it is a relatively progressive country, symbols, customs and even laws that violate women's rights are still highly prevalent.

Jordan is the product of an extraordinary mix of cultures and ethnicities. It is rich in minerals and natural resources. It is a country whose boundaries were drawn with a set square, created by force, and is home and shelter to thousands of people.

The work I am doing with Movimiento por la Paz -MPDL- is inspiring and I think it will have significant implications for the future of the organisation in Jordan. The current situation created by the COVID-19 crisis has meant my life in Jordan coming to a standstill and, although it's a shame, I've certainly learned from the five months in which Jordan has been occupying my mind in one way or another.

Undoubtedly, the goals and expectations I had before I went have not been fulfilled. But these can be reshaped, adapted and even improved upon. I have had the opportunity to be directly linked to the creation of projects that will eventually have an impact on the lives of many people in Jordan. And that, to a large extent, is what I wanted from the outset.

I believe that my story revolves above all around the ability to adapt that people can embrace or not in the face of the new challenges that we are presented with. The situation created by the current global health crisis has been tough because it has meant that the hopes and expectations we had when we began this volunteering assignment have gone unfulfilled. What is within our power is deciding what to do with it. What I know for sure is that my story in Jordan is not over and that sooner or later I will return so that I can discover all the mysteries that this wonderful country and its people have to offer.

"I have had the opportunity to be directly linked to the creation of projects that will eventually have an impact on the lives of many people in Jordan"

Anna Coco,
Spain, EU Aid
Volunteer with
Movimiento por
la Paz -MPDL- in
Jordan.

February - July
2020.





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in action
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EU Aid Volunteers: MPDL Deployment of Volunteers for Peace-building and Women's Rights



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