

The DWA – an international perspective

One of the world's best systems of social security provision professional development workers

Voluntary service and voluntary work are a global phenomenon. Yet the Development Worker Act (DWA) Act is still unique – even today. In this interview Suzanne Gentges explains how the DWA contributes to German development policy to a large extent and why it is worth making an international comparison.



Suzanne Gentges
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The AKLHÜ and the GIZ (formerly DED) have been German member organisations of the International Forum for Volunteering in Development for many years.

Ms Gentges, you have served as a member of the board of directors of IVCO (International Forum for Volunteering in Development) for four years. During this time you have led the so-called Development Workers group of GIZ. To what extent was the international dimension relevant to your work?

IVCO brings together nearly 30 organisations which are involved in voluntary work or professional service. It is exciting to learn how international voluntary work is undertaken in Australia, France, Canada, or Singapore. So the exchange is, in itself, interesting and enriching.

In addition to this, IVCO works on key volunteering issues and engages in advocacy. We earned the highest political accolade for voluntary work in 2015. In the 2030 Agenda passed in 2015, the United Nations praised voluntary work and named voluntary service agencies as important actors in the implementation of the 17 sustainable development goals. IVCO had lobbied for this – it was a huge success for our advocacy work. As a result of this, we worked on methods of impact measurement, the funding of voluntary work, and the sustainable development goals between 2015 and 2018

If we look at German development service, how does it compare internationally?

In most countries, short-term voluntary service predominates. A professional service with two-year contracts or more is only to be found in a few countries, such as England and France. Capacity-building and the creation of long-term, sustainable partnerships require a professional service. Incidentally, German development service – in other words professional cooperation, as represented by the AKLHÜ – has a good reputation. It is considered to be very efficient, with high standards and sound organisational structures.

Is it true that the DWA is altogether unique?

Yes. Thanks to the DWA, we have one of the world's best systems of social security provision for development

workers. The Act also provides financial support and social security for members of development workers' families. This is another especially significant achievement. However, another important thing is that the Act not only regulates the sending out of development workers, it also protects them. This is one of the strengths of the legal framework in Germany.

How do other service agencies around the world see it?

Their assessments vary, of course. One point is that legislation of this kind also restricts flexibility and the scope for doing things differently. Additionally, some people think that German professionals are too well paid. However one thing which is also recognised is the spirit of service which lies at the heart of the DWA.

Incidentally, it is only in Germany that development service is seen as a professional service distinct from other forms of voluntary service. From an international point of view, volunteering encompasses all forms of social solidarity or active commitment carried out by anyone, regardless of age, level of qualification, or professional experience.

If, to finish with, we consider our anniversary, what can be said from an international perspective?

I think development service has gained a great deal of recognition for the large and efficient contribution it makes to development cooperation. This could sometimes be made even clearer. We should do something about that. And we should engage in dialogue with the other sending agencies around the world, share our experiences, and look more often beyond our own limited horizon.

The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (IVCO) was founded in 1964 in Strasbourg under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Until 2000, Forum was an organisation for European-based agencies. In 2000, membership of Forum was opened up to organisations across the world.

What does Forum do? Information sharing, Research, Networking and Promoting the value and role of international volunteering for development to be recognised and included in national and international development policy.

In 2002, Forum took over responsibility for running an annual meeting of Heads of International Volunteer Co-operation Organisations – now known as IVCO.

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