

# Report on AEYVE 2005 in Japan

## 1 Introduction

This year I was sent as a volunteer of [SCI Germany](#) to participate in the Asian European Youth Exchange ([AEYVE](#)) that was hosted by [NICE](#) in Japan. The AEYVE is organized by the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service ([CCIVS](#)). The main aims of AEYVE are to strengthen the cooperation between European and Asian workcamp organisations and bringing young multipliers from Asia and Europe together in order to learn about other organisations and building up a network within which we can discuss future projects. The participants are very experienced in the work of their home organisations and are supposed to take an active role within the programme. Since this year the AEYVE main topic was "Cultural Diversity", the participants were supposed to observe and stimulate related processes in the projects they would join. AEYVE 2005 consisted of a preparation meeting, a stay with a host organisation and an evaluation meeting. These three parts of the programme will be described briefly. Additionally I will point out my role in the projects and draw some conclusions on my experience.

## 2 Programme of AEYVE 2005

### 2.1 Preparation in Paris

At the preparation meeting in Paris (22.-25.07.05) we talked about Cultural Diversity and its link to voluntary work. We got to know different methods on stimulating intercultural learning processes and of course, by this, learned a lot about our different backgrounds and organizations.

### 2.2 Stay in Japan

The next 5 weeks (26.07.-01.09.05) I stayed in Japan joining several projects of NICE. In between the projects I was hosted in a shared flat of a NICE volunteer near Tokyo. After my arrival Eiji, who is responsible for incoming volunteers, introduced me to my **schedule** in the office.



DATE	ACTIVITY	PLACE	NICE STAFF
26.07.05	• Introduction of schedule	NICE office	Eiji
28.-31.07.05	• Environmental Workcamp	Tokyo	Miwa
31.07.-01.08.05	• Preworkcamp	Kamakura	Eiji and Oki
03.-18.08.05	• Cultural Workcamp	Hanawa	Visited by Eiji
19.-24.08.05	• Free time	Tokyo/Kyoto	Miwa/---
25.-31.08.05	• Eco-Camp	Gotemba/Mount Fuji	Eiji
31.08.05	• Evaluation	Tokyo	Keisan and Eiji

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Since the orientation meeting for Japanese going abroad was cancelled, I had some time to deal with my jet lag and adjust to the totally different climate and environment.



Then together with Miwa, a new member of NICE staff, I joined the **environmental workcamp “Tokyo-ko”** in a bird park in Tokyo for 3 days. We were a group of 11 people including one camp coordinator and one instructor for the work. The volunteers came from many different countries and most were about 18-20 years old. The work consisted mainly of cutting grass, observing dragon flies and constructing a bamboo sun protection. In our freetime we did an excursion to Japan’s most famous fireworks festival at Sumida River. In the second week the camp would be joined by a group of handicapped Americans. That is why Miwa joined the camp, as she is in charge of these kind of projects.

From the bird park I went directly to the **“pre-workcamp” at Kamakura**, which was a workshop preparing about 25 Japanese volunteers for their summer workcamps. We worked for half a day in the fields of an organic farmer. Then we moved to a youth house where we had the workshops. At first the focus was on breaking the ice and intercultural communication, then experienced volunteers gave reports on their experiences in workcamps. Finally the people going abroad had a special orientation, while the people going to camps in Japan discussed about the ideal workcamp and the workcamp nightmare from the different perspectives of volunteers, the camp leader and local people. During the whole workshop there was ongoing translation from Japanese to English and vice-versa.

My next project was [Hanawa workcamp](#). In this cultural camp the volunteers built 4 teams of 4 people. Each team constructed a huge lantern using bamboo and paper. The shape and design was mostly up to the volunteer teams. Experienced local people supported the work. These lanterns were floated on the river at Hanawa’s town festival at the end of the camp. Aside from the activities, the camp was also aimed at learning more about Japanese Culture. So there were activities like a stay in the home of a local family, wearing traditional clothes, dancing and playing Japanese drums as well as visits to karaoke, festivals and hot springs. The group consisted mainly of 8 Japanese and 8 foreigners. Also we were joined by lots of different people for a short time e.g. volunteers from previous years and also local people.



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After Hanawa I had some **free days** that I used to do some sightseeing and meeting friends from my former camps in Tokyo and around Kyoto.



The last camp I joined was the first week of Fuji Workcamp in Gotemba which was called "**Eco-Camp**". This Eco-Camp was run for the third time by a group of students and this year was the first time 6 foreigners took part. So we were 6 foreigners and 15-35 Japanese people depending on the different days. This group of Japanese consisted of participants, 5-10 supervisors, 1 NICE camp leader and 1 staff member of the National Youth House Gotemba as well as Eiji of NICE office. The Eco-Camp is part of a bigger anti-garbage project and aims at cleaning up Mount Fuji, raising awareness and facilitating the personal development of young Japanese e.g. expression of personal opinions and feelings. There were four different kinds of activity: picking up garbage, farming, forest work and construction work. So each day the group divided to do the different kinds of work.



In addition to this the entire group was divided into 3 so called "families." Each family would serve as a platform to share the impressions of the day. The camp station was based in a large



territory belonging to the National Youth House which housed several different groups. In order to keep in touch with these groups there was a general morning ceremony. First the flag was hoisted while the national hymn was played, then we did some morning exercises and representatives from each group presented their group and sometimes did a performance for everybody. Each morning a different "family" had to present something special of Eco-Camp

In the evening after Eco-Camp I had an **evaluation** while having dinner together with Keisan, NICE's president, and Eiji. There we talked about my experience in Japan.



## 2.3 Evaluation in Paris

On the AEYVE evaluation meeting in Paris (01.09.-04.09.05) we had nearly three days share our different experiences. We tackled the projects we joined, the issue "Cultural Diversity" and personal intercultural experiences. Based on this we came up with some recommendations and developed ideas



for future projects. Finally we worked on our personal plan of action and evaluated AEYVE 2005.

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## 3 My Role in the Projects

In the projects I had different possibilities to contribute ranging from being an “experienced volunteer” to being a “multiplier of intercultural learning activities”. In nearly none of the projects people knew about AEYVE or my “Cultural Diversity mission”.

In the bird park project I tried to **stimulate group interaction** by playing some games as the group seemed to need it. Furthermore I **counselled the camp leader** by listening, sharing my experience and giving some suggestions on how to organize the group life in order to support the camp leader and strengthen the group spirit. The camp leader was happy to get this support. After resolving these issues the workcamp developed pretty well and the group spirit grew.



In the pre-workcamp I was asked to do **workshop units for ice breaking and intercultural communication**. First we did a “room scales exercises” in order to get to know each other better: The group had to arrange themselves in the room according to their names, birth date and place of future summer workcamp, all without speaking. The participants did very well communicating with body language while being absolutely quiet. They seemed to enjoy the exercise.

Then we did “BafaBafa” which is an exercise on intercultural communication: Two isolated village groups exchange members for purpose of investigating the nature of the other group. From these strange experiences the groups try to find out the cultural rules of the other group. Within the debriefing the participants were asked to link this exercise to intercultural communication in workcamps. At first the participants were quite shy about acting, not knowing exactly how to play their roles. Also, presenting their results in front of the other group was difficult for the participants. In the end there were two volunteers doing the presentation and they had everyone’s attention. The last part was done in small groups so that the people felt more secure about speaking up.

Aside from these units I was also responsible for a group doing one of NICE’s usual preparation units on the different expectations of the involved interest groups. In order to make the communication easier I made them draw the results of their group discussion. At first this was strange for them but finally it worked and it resulted in some quite funny drawings that were easy to remember.

After the workshop I got lots of nice remarks and feedback by many participants. They seemed to have enjoyed having made a new experience with non-formal education methods. These types of exercises are apparently very unusual compared to the common education system in Japan.

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In Hanawa workcamp there were lots of cultural activities in the form of festivals and customs. The sphere of invisible cultural differences was not systematically tackled although I tried various time to explain my task to the camp leader. Apparently he was not informed about AEYVE and didn't understand the idea of stimulating intercultural learning by exercises. After several attempts I resigned and was "normal volunteer" just trying to do lots of **conversation about intercultural themes**. This was also interesting but not really satisfying.



In Eco-Camp I contributed as much as I could in terms of **cooking European dishes, introducing games** and being active group member. This was already a lot considering the strict schedule of activities and fix plan of daily menu. So we had a lot fun while doing dances, trust games, playing and cooking. Additionally I interviewed Eiji using the guiding questions of CCIVS on Cultural Diversity.



## 4 Conclusions

After reviewing my activities in AEYVE 2005 I can draw some basic conclusions on my experience and observations. I will focus on workcamp concepts, the camp language and the intercultural learning in workcamps.

First of all I realised that there is a **different focus in workcamps** between SCI Germany and NICE Japan. In Japan voluntary work and contact to local people seems to be the main focus alongside other themes, whereas for SCI Germany, group experience and intercultural learning is the main focus next to the voluntary work and the study-part. Having a different concept and different expectations of workcamps in mind may lead to disappointment joining a camp of the partner organisation if this is the volunteer's main motivator. Also having many changes in the participant number (people just joining for 1-5 days) may be interpreted differently.

The second important point is the **language knowledge** of the involved people. If you aim at getting a deeper exchange you need verbal language. In this case body language communication is not enough. If there is no real common language permanent translators are very important. Being abroad in new circumstances like a workcamp can already foster insecurity in a lot of people. Having no translation and thus not knowing what is going on as well as feeling unable to influence the events can develop the sense insecurity to a feeling of loss of control. This may deepen possible cultural shocks. (By the way, the degree to which people need a sense of control also differs according to culture.) This is another reason for the necessity of constant translations and explanations about what is going on.

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Finally I would like to focus the topic of **intercultural learning** in workcamps. I have observed lots of different ways of facilitating intercultural learning. First of all, in the preparation of volunteers by workshops on intercultural communication. Especially for exchanges between Asia and Europe such preparations are very important. Knowing more about Japanese culture would have helped a lot to understand many situations better. The guide on workcamps in Japan provided by NICE was already a great help. Nevertheless my suggestion for SCI Germany is to include volunteers going to Japan in the preparation for “Southern” Asia or to organize a special orientation for them.

Other ways for cultural exchange in the camps were wearing traditional dresses, playing instruments, joining festivals, cooking, knowing eating rituals, doing homestay, etc. Most of these activities aim at “objective” or “visible” elements of culture. The more “subjective” or “invisible” elements such as communication patterns, personal space, group behaviour were not tackled explicitly. These themes were only discussed in some personal conversation. Typical occasions were differences in taking decisions in the group, showing emotions, handling conflicts, self-determination/ foreign regulation, etc. Mostly people realized that differences in those fields were the reason of conflicts but lots of times they stayed confused, not sure how to handle these differences.

Of course, focussing more on intercultural learning means a tough challenge, a high need for support as well as special methods and openness. But it is worthwhile, because you resolve conflicts in daily camp life and help to understand each other better. There is one crucial point: You need a common understanding of intercultural learning and the acknowledgment of its importance. So the first step must be raising the awareness for cultural differences and making people curious to discover these differences.

All together, I had the chance to get unique insights, experience very special moments, get a bit closer to a new culture far from my own and meet lots of interesting people. I really appreciate the support of NICE staff, volunteers and other people who helped me to get along in Japan without knowing the language. I still have several “aha”-experiences when I get new information about Japan and cultural differences in order to resolve one of the question marks with which I returned home. It is fun to discover all these new fields. I will take this experience with me as one piece of my personal puzzle.

Domo arigato gozaimashita.

Rieke Maas

