

Trägerkonferenz der
Internationalen
Jugendgemeinschafts- und
Jugendsozialdienste

International work camps have been an important field of learning and development for young people for more than 100 years. They support a wide range of local projects and provide new impetus in the project locations. They contribute socially to peace, understanding, cooperation and sustainability and help to overcome nationalism and racism.

Conference of Organizations (Trägerkonferenz) of the International Youth Community and Youth Social Services

The Trägerkonferenz is the common platform of the non-profit work camp organizations in Germany. The individual organizations work supra-regionally and independently or as subdivisions of large youth associations. They are recognized as independent youth welfare organizations. Many of them see their main focus in international youth work and cooperate reliably and continuously with their foreign partners in different international networks. Together, the German work camp organizations help shape national and international youth policy and youth welfare.

The individual organizations have specific profiles and focuses. This makes it easier for young people to identify with the respective organization and its services and motivates them to stay involved beyond the duration of an international work camp. The organizations offer a variety of opportunities, which are also used by the young people as a qualification, e.g. in the pedagogical supervision of work camps and seminars, in the organizational planning and implementation of individual projects and in programmatic cooperation at national and international level.

The Trägerkonferenz supports its members in the content-related, structural and qualitative development of offers. It bundles existing competencies and facilitates a joint dialogue with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and other stakeholders on the design of international youth work and its targeted promotion.

In addition, the Trägerkonferenz makes international work camps better known and their potential visible and facilitates access for interested parties and new target groups.

International work camps

This special format of international youth and volunteer work combines "encounters in groups", "social engagement" and "learning with and from each other". The English-language term "work camp" was coined primarily in U.S. group pedagogy in the post-World War II era and is a testament to the efforts to provide a democratic education for the younger generation in the aftermath of fascism. Despite its ambiguity, the term has become established in international youth work and has survived to this day.

In work camps, a group of young volunteers from different countries live and work together for one to three weeks, usually in a self-organized way. The joint and unpaid work on a non-profit project itself serves as a medium for social and intercultural learning. These include, for example, renovation work or the construction of community service projects such as playgrounds, ecological assignments such as dune and coastal protection or forestry work, social support for vacation programs for children, or a more topic-related engagement - for example, in the context of memorial projects. It is important to note that volunteers do not need to have any previous project-related experience or special manual skills. Cooperation partners are municipalities, associations and initiatives. In this way, work camps also have an impact on the local environment of the respective project location and involve the local population.

Since 1920, thousands of work camps have taken place in Germany alone, under varying historical auspices. Themes and content have always reflected current social developments and conflicts. After the two world wars, the focus was on helping to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, but over the decades, the reappraisal of the (German) past and the Cold War, the awakening of the 68ers and the testing of alternative lifestyles also found their echo, as did current topics: Environmental protection, sustainable living and climate justice, international solidarity, appreciation of diversity, inclusion and gender justice as well as the commitment to an open, socially just and democratic society. Thus, work camps have retained their innovative character and radiate to other fields of national and local youth work.

Work camps have an effect...

... on personal development

Volunteers often experience for the first time creating something with their own hands in a socially meaningful project. They experience craft challenges, develop fun in physical work and are proud of what they have accomplished together.

In this context, work camps provide information about nature and the environment, monument conservation and remembrance culture, health, social and school systems. Volunteers also engage with the socio-political context of their assignment project.

Living in an international, diverse group confronts the volunteers with different and unfamiliar perspectives and attitudes. Own positions and self-evident facts are questioned. In addition, some participants experience themselves differently than they are used to or mirrored in their own social environment. They often receive new and valuable feedback, and usually also appreciation. In this way, work camps support the personal development process and strengthen self-confidence, independence,

teamwork, discussion, conflict and decision-making skills. The acquisition of realistic impressions and knowledge about the host country, experience and exchange with other cultures and the - mostly en passant - strengthening of foreign language skills are further reasons for the attractiveness of work camps. The experience of self-efficacy at work and the diverse opportunities for participation are often experienced as milestones in personal development.

... and on society

Every year, volunteers from all over the world perform over 300,000 hours of community service in Germany alone. This figure alone makes it clear how effective work camps are. Numerous civil society projects are advanced as a result. Many cooperation partners specifically incorporate work camps into longer-term planning or integrate the experience gained from work camps into the learning and educational processes of young people.

Through work camps, local cooperation partners and the local population receive a variety of impulses. For them, the encounter with the international volunteers often means a different and sometimes first-time acquaintance with people from foreign countries. Through the cooperation and the material work results, a work camp radiates positively on the project location, can network local actors and strengthen the active engagement of citizens and the cohesion in a community or an initiative.

At the same time, work camps strengthen solidarity, understanding and cooperation between cultures, societies and social groups and thus promote peace. Learning more about oneself and others means recognizing and putting prejudices into perspective and looking for solutions together. In view of the many challenges (climate crisis, drifting apart of social cohesion, rearmament and not least the Corona pandemic), this will become increasingly important in the coming years. The

The experience of participation and intercultural encounters in work camps creates an openness among volunteers that can have a positive impact on the local social and societal fabric after their return.

What needs to be done? - Challenges and need for action

Strengthen work camp organizations financially in the long term

In the coming years, the potential of international work camps will be of particular importance both for supporting local projects and plans and as a meeting place for young people. This is particularly true in view of increased nationalisms, the drifting apart of Europe and the need for international cooperation. It is therefore essential not only to secure the structure of the work camp organizations at present, but also to strengthen them financially in the long term.

In addition, the Corona pandemic poses existential challenges for work camp organizations. Here, the BMFSFJ's flexible transitional arrangements proved very helpful. The sponsors would like to continue receiving this urgently needed support to overcome the crisis.

Enabling mobility across borders

Participation in an international work camp fails far too often due to the obstacles of issuing visas. We demand that the procedures are simplified and accelerated and that they are basically free of charge. Furthermore, we demand that the work camp organizations are not burdened with obligations to assume incalculable costs.

Promoting climate-conscious travel

Mobility is an essential part of our work. Without personal encounters, the above-mentioned goals cannot be achieved. At a time when ecological awareness is increasing, especially among the younger generation, and climate protection is becoming more of a focus, a contradiction arises when a large proportion of volunteers travel by plane. A sustainable and climate-conscious mobility concept at national and international level for youth exchanges is therefore urgently needed; the Trägerkonferenz is happy to contribute its experience in dialogue with political actors. We expressly support the IJAB initiative to make Green Mobility a central item on the youth policy agenda.

Reduce bureaucracy

Work camp organizations have been facing increasing bureaucratization for years. Increasing demands on administrative and reporting have been compensated only slightly. As a result, the resources tied up for this are not available for the content-related work. Further simplification of administration and funding should be tackled in consultation with the Trägerkonferenz.

Opening access and honoring engagement

International work camps offer a socially important field of learning and development for young people who get involved in society there at the local level.

- Work camp organizations should be supported in communicating information about work camps in schools and training institutions to the target group.
- In order to open up access to work camps for all young people in Germany, it is necessary, among other things, to break down social and language barriers and promote inclusion. This requires a targeted approach to previously underrepresented groups and a preparation and support process geared to individual needs to overcome the barriers. For this, the resources of the work camp organizations must be strengthened and expenses for individual additional needs must be covered.
- Every young person who wants to get involved in work camps should be able to do so. Therefore, suitable and, above all, unbureaucratic release and special leave regulations for trainees, students, pupils and young employees should be created as an important sign of recognition of this commitment. Public institutions and companies in particular should set a good example and give trainees time off to participate in international work camps in Germany or abroad.
- Schools, universities and employers should recognize participation in an international work camp as a valuable (learning) achievement.

The organizations united in the Trägerkonferenz would also like to see the appreciative recognition and financial support in the future, as they are convinced that international work camps will continue to set important socio-political impulses in the next 100 years.

Status: November 2020