

Lejla Šehić Relić

Inclusive volunteering in Croatia

Challenging the tradition of volunteering

Volunteering in Croatia has a long tradition that can be related to the concept of solidarity, a significant value from our past, although it has been exercised in different ways than it is understood today. The fact that our society went through many political and social turbulences that brought the sense of insecurity in peoples' lives made people rely on help of others and institutions, and at the same time created the culture of givers and receivers and influenced the general perception of who can volunteer. Traditionally only the wealthier, the more capable, and more fortunate ones could help the poorer and those less fortunate. So, we needed to challenge existing social architecture on who can volunteer and show that there is right for every person to volunteer freely and easily, regardless of their social and/or economical background or ability.

During 2011, the Croatian Network of Volunteer Centres¹ implemented the project that introduced the concept of inclusive volunteering as an innovative tool for social inclusion. This was an opportunity to explore the meaning of inclusivity in the context of volunteering. The work has brought us valuable insights of the impact of active engagement for those who in the context of citizenship have never had an opportunity to be anything else but the beneficiaries. One of them said: "I would not have found this much self-respect if I did not take the step into the adventure of volunteering". One of the important results we created was a favourable legal environment to acknowledge inclusive volunteering as one of the major principals in Croatian Law on volunteerism².

With this insight and experience, in 2013 we have started supporting and facilitating the placement of volunteers with disabilities into meaningful volunteering positions in the hosting non-profit organizations. Through volunteering, people with disabilities that were often socially disadvantaged and marginalized had an opportunity to restore their social life and gain some new skills. There are over 500 000 persons with disabilities in Croatia which makes 11,9% of the whole population³, half of them in their active working age, with limited

¹ <http://www.volontiram.info/>

² <http://www.zakon.hr/z/258/Zakon-o-volonterstvu>

³ Report on people with disabilities, Croatian institute for public Health 2015

employment possibilities, lower income, and less involvement in social life. The absence from work and inability to ensure the minimum of everyday life needs produces feeling of powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, social isolation, affects personal identity and integrity; withdrawal from social contacts and decrease of self-confidence. Poverty and social exclusion are more than just a lack of employment or inadequate resources, although these factors can play a role in prolonging or intensifying the situation. They are about dynamic processes which marginalize and exclude people from normal participation in economic, social and cultural life, acknowledging that people's situations are not static but change over time. We hoped that volunteer engagement could play an important milestone in their social inclusion. After three months of volunteering one of our volunteers, Goran, said "I feel like I have built a better me!" and I honestly believe he did. The senses of usefulness and belonging were crucial to increased self-confidence and it created feeling of respectful life.

Irena, young woman with mild visual impairment, is engaged in the association that helps deaf blind people in their everyday activities, helping them to remain included in community life. With her own example, Irena inspires and shows, that even very difficult, sensor disability should not be a reason for isolation and loneliness and that with a little help from others it is possible to have active social life. Because of her own difficulties, she could genuinely connect with their reality and their dreams.

How inclusive are our organizations?

The survey that we have implemented back in 2011 on 109 representatives of non-profit organizations has pointed that the majority of Croatian non-profit organization recognized the great potential of inclusive volunteering but at the same time, most of them did not realize the importance of investing in inclusive volunteer programmes that had their specific. Many of our civil society organizations have declared inclusiveness as their organizational value, but when it came to putting it in practice they were challenged with lack of capacities to respond on the inclusive volunteer program's needs; educated staff, suitable volunteer position and, in many cases, relevant additional support for volunteers. Soon, we realized that volunteer centres have to invest more in motivation, education and mentorship in order to bring a new prospective of inclusive programmes for organizations, while exploring the potential of inclusive volunteering. Through the educational process members of non-profit organizations gained knowledge and skills necessary for setting up efficient volunteer programmes following the basic principles of adequate volunteer management cycle.

Non-profit organizations and their employees developed and implemented voluntary-based work programmes that have increased management capacities for volunteer programmes, particularly for inclusion of persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups as volunteers in organizational work. More than that, having persons with disabilities as volunteers, organizations increased their human capacities and for many of them this was a learning experience of embracing diversities and mutual understanding. Involving volunteers with

disabilities in organisations enhanced and contributed to: quantity, quality and innovation of organisational services/activities; development of staff and the whole organisation; promotion of possibilities and advantages of persons with disabilities as volunteers and/or employees; promotion of good practice related to the engagement of persons with disabilities in organisations; introducing wider society and potential employers among non-profit sector on the rights, issues and needs of persons with disabilities; the organization's reputation in the community. Moreover, organizations created a diverse, open and inclusive organisational culture, reducing prejudices toward people with disabilities. Organisations became more sensitive to people's needs and preferences resulting in development of corresponding services as well as attentive and welcoming working atmosphere. For many times our volunteer coordinators expressed their gratitude for being a part of this process: "To be honest, I don't know which one of us gained more from our cooperation. Matea, our volunteer, exercised skills that will be useful to her in the labour market one day, and I feel privileged to have the opportunity to be a part of her story. The most rewarding thing is that we have created a chance for the individuals that society sometimes ignores. We broke some prejudices, spread out the positive vibrations and created more positive future, step by step." says Tijana, volunteer coordinator from Split.

Whatever we do it is never for nothing

At the end, what did we do for our society? Working all this years on community projects which explored hundreds of ways and methods to involve people and make communities better and more prosper, working on inclusive volunteering helped me realize that in many cases we don't need that much. If we provide a safe and welcoming environment, which is the least we can do, and make people feel dignified, we did a lot for the sake of social integration and human capital.

In the time we live in, it is very important to encourage people to challenge stereotypes, fight discrimination and change existing perception of what those who have been treated as passive receivers can do for themselves and community as a whole.

Author

Lejla Šehić Relić (born 1971) founder and managing director of Regional Volunteer Centre Osijek, civil society leader and activist since 2003, expert for the development of volunteerism and civil society organisations, mentor for the implementation of quality insurance system for non-profit organizations, trainer and consultant for organizational development and development of quality volunteer programs in non-profit organizations. Lejla holds university degree in public administration. For the past 10 years she has been active in the development of Croatian volunteer centre network and public policy in favour to civil society and volunteerism in Croatia. In the period 2012-2014 Lejla was president of the Croatian National

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