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Being volunteer inclusive

Report on experience about work with young people with fewer opportunities in project “Competent in Volunteering, Competent in Life”

Introduction

This article provides a short report on a study raised in CIVCIL (Competent in Volunteering Competent in Life) Project supported by Erasmus+, carried out from March 2015 till February 2017. In this project 75 young volunteers from the age of 15 to 30 with various disabilities or disadvantages were involved into volunteering in different organizations in three countries – Slovakia, Croatia and Romania. For the purposes of this project, vulnerable youth were defined as young people aged 15-30 who, through a combination of their circumstances, stage of development and various limitations, are at risk of not achieving active participation in their communities/society. In this study we are providing you with motivations, benefits, and difficulties in inclusive volunteering as well as with some recommendations of volunteer coordinators who have been managing young volunteers with fewer opportunities in this project.

The actual involvement into volunteering was scheduled and happened from October 2015 till November 2017. Most of the volunteers were long term and regular volunteers, some of them were involved only in short-term activities. They were volunteering for minimum 40 up to maximum 250 hours. The average number of hours a volunteer was involved in volunteer activities during the project run was 100 hours. The list of disadvantages they are facing is identified in the table below. In some cases, there were more difficulties related to one volunteer – e.g. young people with disabilities often also suffered unemployment.

Type of disadvantage	Number of young volunteers in the project
Unemployed people:	21
People living in economically/socially weak conditions:	14
Individuals with any disability:	12
Orphans living in foster homes:	7
Semi orphans:	6
People with medical issues:	5
Individuals with intellectual disabilities:	4
Young people under 18 living without parents who live abroad:	4
Migrants/asylum seekers:	2

Young volunteers in project were involved in various types of volunteer activities. Most of them volunteered in social and health care – in hospitals and the social organizations with children and people with special needs, day care centres for seniors. They were organizing or assisting with activities for beneficiaries there, many of them were leading or assisting with workshops for kids and youth or volunteered in the volunteer centres and various NGOs where they helped with administrative work. Few of them were working in fundraising and organization of cultural/public events or assisting with manual work. Most volunteers were in the direct contact with beneficiaries.

At the end of the project, we have asked all involved volunteers to fill up our questionnaires which were focused on their motivations towards volunteering but also challenges and successes as well as recommendations for other young people from vulnerable groups. In the end, we have studied 75 replies from all three countries and bring a short analysis from the project implementation. Before reading the analysis, we must emphasize these young people have a lot of differences:

- different age (there were people in the age of 15 – 30 involved);
- different types of challenges depending on the period of life they are currently in (high schools/university students facing different issues than graduates);
- various kinds of disadvantages;
- different volunteer activities implemented in various environments and cultures as well.

Experience of volunteers

Motivation of disadvantaged young people for volunteering

Young people in the project identified five most common reason for their volunteer involvement. Almost half of them (36) said they want to help other people which some volunteers confirmed with expressions of seeing and feeling the impact of their volunteer action on someone else's life. Second most identified motivator for young people from vulnerable groups (22 volunteers) was their interest in the cause, beneficiaries or organization activities, and mission. They volunteered because they either know the organizations (they used to be beneficiaries) or they have an interest in the field and activities organizations provide with. The third most important reason for volunteering was getting new skills and competencies for their studies and future career. They see they can use these skills later within the labour market. Such a motivation was identified by 20 volunteers. Ten volunteers confirmed that social interactions were reasons why they started to volunteer. They wanted to meet new people, make friends or get to know someone in the similar situation. Eight volunteers expressed they wanted to feel useful – here we feel the need to emphasize that most the graduates from vulnerable youth were unemployed. Six volunteers were invited or inspired for volunteering by other people – most frequently by their friends and peers in school. One volunteer openly wrote she wanted to be involved in the community and seen as a part of it

– that is something we have identified as an expression of a desire for a volunteer inclusion. In general, most the young volunteers from vulnerable groups identified the same motivations for volunteering that are common for all volunteers – helping others, interest in the topic, and/or getting new skills and social contacts.

To illustrate these statements, you can find some quotes from the volunteers below:

“My primary motivation was to be socially engaged in community life, help people in need as much as I can and move things forward. I also wanted to meet new interesting people and gain some new experiences.”

“I am looking for a job already for a long time without any success. I like to make pictures; I like people. I would like to improve in that. That is why I came with an idea to find an organization that is working with people where I could offer my skills as a photographer. It helps me to improve in photography, and at the same time I can be among people, and I can get some practice I lack.”

“There was a workshop on volunteering held at our school, and it seemed to be very simple to donate one hour of my time a week to somebody or something useful. My decision was quick because more students decided to do the same.”

“I liked the organization – their mission and activities. However, I was also motivated by the fact that my sister was volunteering for this organization and I wanted to show others that also people with health issues can be useful.”

Benefits of volunteering

After 75 vulnerable volunteers had gained their volunteering experience, we have asked them what they liked about volunteering. Thirty-three of them confirmed that what they liked about volunteering were the interactions with others – either staff, other volunteers or beneficiaries. For 27 of them being able to help and have an impact on lives of other people have been the something what they appreciated a lot. Feeling useful as one of the best feelings proclaimed seven volunteers. Eighteen volunteers said they liked the skills gained and learning experience volunteering brought to their lives. Seventeen volunteers declared the interest in activities or beneficiaries – activities they were doing were important for them. As you can see, more volunteers identified combinations of more things which they have enjoyed while volunteering. In some categories, there are differences between proclaimed motivations and real outcomes, e.g. interactions were the most identified benefits of volunteering.

What did you like about volunteering?

Interactions	33
Possibility to help others/see impact	27
Gaining skills/learning experience	18
Doing activities, they like and are good in it, self-realization	17
Feeling useful	7
Other	6

Difficulties and Challenges of Volunteering

Most of the young volunteers from vulnerable groups did not mention any problems in connection to their disadvantage or disability. In around half of the questionnaires, we could see that they even did not realize they were part of a particular project or they are from some vulnerable group. Most of the difficulties young people identified were communications and situation issues with beneficiaries. To be more specific, they stated they were not always sure about the way they should talk to people in stressful situations, how to handle some difficult situations and how to deal with attitudes and behaviours of beneficiaries of the organization they were volunteering for. Twenty-five young teenage volunteers from Romania were volunteering in the same place, in the hospital where they have supported small kids. For half of them, it was hard to communicate with children in such a situation – they stated they have seen them sad, crying, and depressed and often felt helpless. On the other hand, they also said that thanks to these situations, they have improved or gained the communication skills. Some of them stated that they could handle such situations thanks to the support from the coordinator, mentor or other staff. Volunteers who were students or employed reported that they encountered difficulties with time management. Six Romanian students also said they experienced the lack of materials – e.g. toys for kids.

Only five from all volunteers identified communication problems with coordinator/staff. One volunteer said there was high demand from the side of coordinator, but it was all solved and explained later. Only two volunteers with disabilities stated that they had some issues with their mobility and barriers, but they have been helped by staff, volunteers, and/or their relatives.

One volunteer identified a concern with regular activities and early mornings and one was complaining about other volunteers not fulfilling their duties.

In general, we can say that only a few out of 75 volunteers identified problems regarding their disadvantages. Most of the volunteers mentioned difficulties which are typical for all volunteers volunteering in demanding environments or situations.

Key messages from vulnerable volunteers to vulnerable youth

After the project, we asked young vulnerable volunteers to provide other young people from vulnerable groups with recommendations towards volunteering as well as their testimonies. We have chosen some of the inspirations:

“I would recommend all the long-term unemployed friends to volunteer. It will make you feel useful, and you will gain new skills and knowledge.”

“Volunteering gives you an opportunity to change people’s lives, including your own. It provides you with the satisfaction of playing a role in someone else’s life, helping people who may not be able to help themselves. Volunteering is a way of giving back to your community while developing essential social skills, and gaining valuable work experience all at the same time. But how can I get a job if all they want is experience, you ask? That’s where volunteering comes in. If you’re looking for work, volunteering is a good way to gain experience and references for your future life.”

“At the beginning, my responsibilities in volunteering seemed too difficult for me. However, the training and supervisions helped me not only to be a better volunteer but meant a lot also for my life as such. The story of a boy I was helping with homework made me take off the rose-coloured glasses through which I was looking at the world. My life is not an easy one, but I have learned there are people whose life is much more complicated than mine.”

Experiences of Volunteer Coordinators

Seventy-five young volunteers involved in the project were coordinated by 20 volunteer coordinators. One coordinator was in Romania, eight in Slovakia and eleven in Croatia. Before the end of our project, we were asking them about challenges in volunteer management of vulnerable youth and the benefits of involving vulnerable groups for the organization where these volunteers were involved. We were asking them about their lessons learned and recommendations for volunteer coordinators to successfully manage young volunteers from vulnerable groups.

Barriers/difficulties in volunteer management

In most cases, volunteer coordinators proclaimed they did not face any particular difficulties in volunteer management. Five volunteer organizations had to solve more logistic issues than usually. Three out of these five encounter problems with barriers and mobility issues. In Romania, another issue was identified as young volunteers living in rural areas in Romania had problems with the transportation – they experienced difficulties to return home after their volunteer involvement. Two volunteer coordinators managing youth with a physical disability said they encountered a problem with physical barriers related to wheelchair users. One organization was not ready at the beginning to provide a special software or computer for a volunteer with visual impairment.

Benefits for organizations

Volunteer coordinators also identified the benefits of involvement of young volunteers from vulnerable groups for the organizations.

Most of them said that involvement of volunteers had increased the quality of services organizations provide as well as the number of activities. This is, in fact, typical for all volunteers, not only for vulnerable ones. It was stated that they brought new ideas, energy, and changed the atmosphere in the organization or even improved the employee relationships and satisfaction. Organizations also benefited from the knowledge, skills, and experience with various vulnerable groups. To some extent they also perceived a more positive image as organizations working with volunteers from vulnerable groups.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Volunteer coordinators from all three countries concluded their experience with vulnerable groups with their lessons learned from the work with vulnerable volunteers and suggestions for volunteer coordinators who might be willing to manage these volunteers as well. They came up with advice that can be divided into five categories:

We are all equal - we are on the way to inclusion.

The involvement of volunteers with disadvantages caused a change of attitudes of volunteers, beneficiaries, and employees of organizations to these groups of people. It confirmed that volunteering is one of the ways how to reach the social inclusion:

“Volunteering has developed deserved feeling of equality and importance in our beneficiaries. It also improved the image of themselves and others.”

“We have learned that they can contribute to the organization to the same extent as other members. We have noticed they become more open for cooperation and accepted by others.”

“When the tasks and abilities are evident from the beginning, disadvantaged volunteers as the rest of our volunteers, their work is efficient and appreciated in the same way.”

“Just give them some time to get to know you and your organization and treat them with respect like all the other volunteers.”

“We recommend all the other volunteer coordinators not to make any differences between volunteers whether they are disadvantaged or not – also a person with a disability can have a great performance if he/she sees sense in what he/she is doing.”

Patience, support, suitable activities, and proper communication – these are the bases of the good cooperation.

Patience, respect, empathy, tolerance, enough time, appropriate environment and communication – these are the conditions disadvantaged young people need from volunteer coordinators for satisfactory performance of volunteer tasks.

“All you need is to be patient. And if you give them enough space and time and support they require, they can perform great”.

“If you provide them with the healthy and stable environment, good mentors with a lot of patience and a lot of practical examples they will learn and improve beyond expected.”

“We learned to be patient and to give the opportunity to everyone to develop its potential.”

“It is necessary to be patient and sometimes repeatedly explain the task or your request related to volunteering activity. You need to communicate with them as with an equal partner.”

“They require empathy, patience, and bear in mind that sometimes you need to repeat even the necessary information.”

“Talking about unemployed young people, they do not have any working habits, and there is a need to adapt volunteer activities to this fact.”

“If we give them enough time, these volunteers become a benefit for the organization, they can identify with it, and that can be mutually beneficial.”

Young volunteers from vulnerable groups need to be appreciated.

Our appreciation conditions the growth of young people – they need to feel important and needed. Crucial is also the length of their volunteering experience. Feedback and acknowledgment are important for volunteer management in general, and it seems that it is even more important when you work with vulnerable young volunteers. The statements of volunteer coordinators only emphasized it:

“I could see how they grow and build trust in themselves if they are valued.”

“They are unbelievably thankful for every acknowledgment, so we were focusing on it in our coordination.”

“Make sure each volunteer is valued and is encouraged to perform for an extended period.”

“Disadvantaged volunteers are usually more thankful for the volunteer opportunity. Make them feel accepted, and they will volunteer with joy and enthusiasm. It is important to take care of motivation of a volunteer, his/her belief about the value he/she creates for the others.”

Young volunteers need to feel our trust and willingness to ask responsibility from them.

A Clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities and the trust showed to volunteers leads to expected results. According to volunteer coordinators, this is valid also for young volunteers from disadvantaged groups:

“Giving confidence to volunteers is the most important thing.”

“Disadvantage does not mean inability. Volunteers with difficulties usually show more enthusiasm to get involved into activities and to learn new things. They appreciate the opportunity for action more and are thankful and loyal. With such an attitude, they can perform for 100 %.”



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