

Cristina Rigman

Gabriella Civico

Volunteering: Promoting Inclusion, Preventing Extremism

2016 is the 20th anniversary of the EVS programme, it is also 21 years since the first Council of Europe All Different All Equal Campaign. Even after a second follow up campaign ten years ago it is still necessary to remind ourselves, and each other, about the necessity to work hard to ensure that the **Freedom to be Different** is a reality for everyone, not just the privileged few. There is an urgent need in the world today for a comprehensive strategy to promote inclusion and prevent extremism of all kinds. The strategy needs to involve civil society, and even more importantly, volunteers. Governments alone cannot bring about a society that so many search for, where the respect for Human Rights, Equality and Dignity underpin all other laws, policies and lifestyle choices.

There is also an urgent need to motivate and mobilise different stakeholders to identify and implement common solutions to the huge challenge of the growth of extremism, across the political spectrum that confronts the world today. A change is needed, and a process for that change needs to be inspired. The different examples presented during the PIPE conference of volunteering initiatives have contributed to this change process. Change is a process that relies on communication, trust and engagement and these are also qualities that are key to successful volunteering, and key to bringing about the true potential of volunteering for promoting inclusion and preventing extremism.

Through volunteering, people can arrive at a point of understanding. By building on that point of understanding the process that is needed in order to achieve respect for others and the freedom to be different can also be developed. Volunteers and their organisations can occupy the space of the extremists, they can be proactive rather than simply reactive and take European values and tools for inclusion to the civic space.

It cannot be denied that the civic space in Europe is shrinking and all civil society is facing challenges to survive to continue to meet their core objectives. Civil Society however is best placed to provide not only a 'counter narrative', to say what we are against, but an 'alternative narrative' to say what we are for.

Extremist groups provide a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, where there was a perhaps an absence, they enable people to feel engaged and part of something - contributing to a **cause**, and these are also major aspects of volunteering. When economic and psychological grievances exist, it is human nature to want to try to counter the perceived causes. Volun-

teering needs to be harnessed in order to provide those people experiencing these challenges with the necessary critical thinking skills in order to understand that extremism is not the only choice as a response and reaction.

Local issues are the main driving force for extremism, and volunteering responds and functions at its best at the local level. Volunteering builds communities, it builds community resilience, it occupies the space where comprehensive strategies to prevention and risk detection can be conceived and implemented.

On 13-14 October 2016 the European Volunteer Center hosted the international conference “Promoting Inclusion, Preventing Extremism” has explored the contribution of volunteerism to promoting inclusion and preventing extremism by showcasing examples of volunteering programs in this area, programs that highlight how volunteering can contribute to the ‘alternative narrative’, to building a world where people can be truly ‘All Different and All Equal’ and where the Freedom to Be Different is fundamental to the way of life¹.

The examples of such volunteering actions included in the PIPE conference and publication are excellent examples of the varied initiatives across Europe on this topic and they served to inspire participants to conclude the following:

We need inclusive societies because:

- We are different, and we need to understand and appreciate our differences and learn how to benefit from them and ensure equality of opportunity.
- The chances to become excluded, or exclusively engaged with only one part of society, can increase in challenging economic times as people focus more on their own priorities.
- Inclusiveness is a prerequisite for peace.
- Through including others, one’s own potential increases, and therefore that of society as a whole.
- It leads to the Freedom to Be Different.

Lack of openness, prejudices & discrimination stems from:

- Fear of the unknown, lack of awareness about the problems of groups and individuals that are wholly or partially excluded from fully participating in all aspects of life of society.
- Failure to communicate in ways that would foster awareness of differences and build a stronger sense of community.
- A lack of common social spaces that are open to, and involve, people from different backgrounds and life experiences.
- Isolation
- Poor education systems that fail to harness formal and non-formal learning potential in order to avoid and combat prejudice and discrimination.

¹ The PIPE publication, including the volunteering programs examples and these conclusions is available in English at the following link: http://www.cev.be/uploads/2016/11/PIPE_publication.pdf

To reach inclusive societies:

- People need to respect differences.
- There needs to be understanding that inclusivity is complex and has a lot of dimensions.
- People should have the opportunity to meet, know and understand 'others' eg. people from different generations, countries, socio-economic backgrounds, language groups, cultures etc.
- Networks of community development that will create crossroads rather than bridges need to be developed and supported - bridges are connecting two separate sides leaving them apart from each other, crossroads are a meeting point, even with roads that are shaped differently.
- Better communication is needed that can reach people through cutting-edge strategies to fight prejudices and discrimination instigated by social media that can foster awareness and a stronger sense of community.

Facilitating inclusive societies through volunteering needs:

- Inclusive policies that are cross-sectoral and properly funded and resourced.
- Promotion of values of mutual respect and inclusivity in all areas of policy and life.
- Active participation of civil society organisations and groups in the processes of inclusion and integration.
- Programmes and interventions in the community that can bring people and groups closer together by 'popping the bubbles' that separate and create barriers.
- Increased opportunities for people to become more included by volunteering themselves.
- Better support for initiatives that engage volunteers in order to promote the inclusion of others.
- Actions that focus on, and enable, the empowerment of individuals to build cohesive communities together.
- Better recognition of the role and impact of volunteers and the supporting infrastructure that is needed, in order to ensure that the full potential of their added value for society can be realised.

Authors

Cristina Rigman is currently the Executive Director of Pro Vobis and President of the European Volunteer Center (CEV). She has been part of Pro Vobis's team for over 10 years, holding various positions. Cristina holds a BA in Political Science and an MA in Public Services Management and Community Development from Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences in Cluj-Napoca. Her professional development combines management activities, organizational development, public policy and advocacy work with research activity on civil society, civic participation, volunteering and social responsibility. Cristina has been studying and conducting research at prestigious institutions

from Europe and the United States. Cristina is accredited as project manager and trainer of trainers, having over 10 years of experience in training delivery and project management.

Contact: cristina@provobis.ro

Further Information: www.provobis.ro/en/

Gabriella Civico is the Director of the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) and initiated the Employee Volunteering European Network (EVEN) in 2013. She is from the UK but has lived for many years in Spain and Portugal and has a degree in Social Policy and Education from Surrey University (UK) and a Masters in Education in E-learning from the University of Hull (UK). Gabriella has volunteered since childhood in a variety of fields including Youth Advocacy, International Development, Disability, Environment, Immigration, Human Rights, Sports etc. She has worked closely with CEV since July 2010 in her role as Project Manager for the EYV2011 Alliance until the end of the project in March 2012 when she became CEV Director.

Contact: gabriella.civico@cev.be

Further Information: www.cev.be

Redaktion

BBE-Newsletter für Engagement und Partizipation in Europa

Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE)

Michaelkirchstr. 17/18

10179 Berlin

Tel.: +49 (0) 30 62980-114

europa-bbe@b-b-e.de

www.b-b-e.de