Volunteering

Collecting rubbish in the city park, leading theatre club for children from elementary school every Friday, tutoring children from socially excluded communities, organizing football matches for teenagers, visiting patients in a hospital, translating articles about human rights violation, renovating a ruin of old castle, organizing conferences about public space, contributing to a collection for flood victims, assisting a girl on a wheelchair, building schools in Africa … all that and more are examples of volunteering.

Volunteering has many faces and many forms how it can be organised. Parallel to that, there are as well many definitions that try to describe it. Some of the definitions are very broad and almost any activity that is beneficial for others can fit in them. Other definitions determine the conditions under which an activity can be considered as volunteering very strictly (like there has to be a written agreement between an organisation and the volunteer).

What are the most common fields of volunteering?

Administrative and supporting tasks;

Helping or working directly with people;

Preparing and supporting voluntary activities;

Managerial and coordination tasks;

Campaigning and lobbying;

The organisation of events.

Why volunteering?
Let us find the answer in the following quotations:

"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." — *Margaret Mead*

"It is one of the beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely help another without helping himself." — *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

"Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in." — *Marjorie Moore*

Volunteering is letting people influence their surroundings, enables them to contribute to tackling the problems they see around themselves (everyone has a different radius in which he/she looks around themselves), gives them an opportunity to gain something may it be new skills, new contacts or the feeling of being useful.

Volunteering and EVS

Council of the European Union distinguished in its resolution regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field between voluntary activities and voluntary service.

Voluntary activities are all kinds of voluntary engagement. They are characterised by the following aspects: open to all, unpaid, undertaken by own free will, educational (non-formal learning aspect) and added social value.

Voluntary service is part of voluntary activities and is characterised by the following additional aspects: fixed period; clear objectives, contents, tasks, structure and framework; appropriate support and legal and social protection.

Already by the name European Voluntary Service (EVS), it is clear in which one of the two our programs belongs to.

What is typical for volunteering within the EVS frame when we compare it to other types of volunteering? EVS is:

Long term

Full time

Happening abroad

Based on a written agreement

With financial support

Open to all (within a given age limit)

History of volunteering

The very beginning of volunteering is connected to the religion. In the European space (as in other parts of the world influenced by medieval European civilisation), volunteering is connected to the Christian faith. In most of the places, the development of volunteering went a similar path — from orphanages and hospitals to today's situation where the variety of areas in which people are engaged in volunteering is immense.

The situation concerning volunteering is very different in various parts of the world. It is noticeably diverse even between countries that have a common cultural background. Volunteerism is strongly influenced by culture, history, politics, social arrangements in the country. Among European countries, we find both: those with a long history of volunteering and a well-developed NGO sector (such as the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom) and those where volunteering still has to fight for its enforcement and recognition (Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Lithuania). It might be handy to reflect upon this in the frame of EVS since the volunteers may come from a place where the culture of volunteering is very different to their EVS receiving organisation/country.

According to a study named "Volunteering in the European Union," there are two important historical milestones in the modern history of volunteering in Europe.

The first is the period of communism, which in countries where communism came to power, stopped the development of the nonprofit sector. NGOs were banned and those that might exist and were nationalised, managed and controlled by the state. This was the case in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and other countries.

The second milestone is the so-called crisis of the welfare state in 80 and 90 years. This milestone has affected the development of volunteering rather positively. At that time NGOs had to take over some of the areas which were previously taken care of by state — eg. The Netherlands and France.

The reality that we see, is the logical consequence of these two milestones. Countries with more developed economies and democratic traditions have a better developed non-profit sector, a more NGOs and a bigger share of its population are involved in voluntary activities.

Recognition of volunteering

Volunteering is not a new phenomenon, but it is rather recently that it is being officially recognised and paid attention to. Around the turn of the millennium strengthened the calls for social recognition of volunteering.

1985 — the UN declared December 5th as the official International Day of Volunteers

2001 — declared the Year of Volunteering by the United Nations and subsequently, some countries and declared its own year of volunteering. (ex. the UK in 2005)

2011 — European Commission launched the European Year of Volunteering

There is still a lot to be done in this field, but based on a growing number of volunteers as well as on the political support for volunteering we can see that the call is successful.

Recognition of volunteering is not only about the big events — it is much more about how is volunteering commonly spoken about. What happens when I say "I am a volunteer" or "I plan to go for a year abroad as a volunteer"? What is the reaction? Do people understand it as something beneficial for me? Do people understand it as beneficial for others or for the society? Do the potential future employers value an experience like that? The number of "YES" answers on these questions is growing. It is also our task in EVS to support it to grow faster. To engage more people and let them understand how enriching volunteering can be.

Resources

Educational, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency (EAC-EA) Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC), VOLUNTEERING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2010 http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1018_en.pdf

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