

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ICYE

Impact Assessment

Human Rights in Diversity

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Executive Summary

This study has been conducted within the framework of the Erasmus+ project *Communicating Human Rights in Diversity*. The aim was to examine the impact of the human rights learner-centred project on the volunteers at a personal, social and cultural level. *International voluntary service* is a structured educational activity (non-formal but intentional) that takes place in another country during a fixed period of time. Learning is done by doing; the study approaches this process by employing the experiential learning theory (developed by Kolb in 1970s). There are different steps involved in coordinating and organising a voluntary service program; these are also key moments for creating impact.

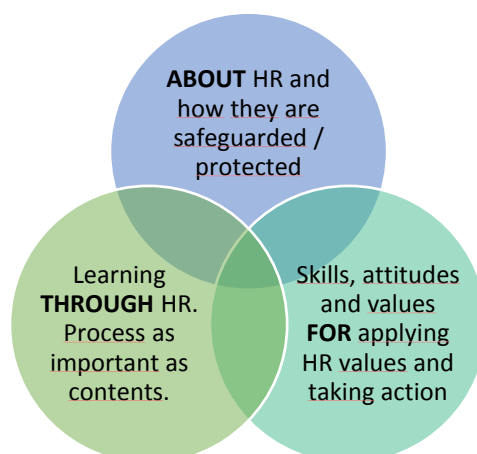
The study explores the experiences of 18 international volunteers. The respondents were interviewed at the end of their service by project multipliers in 16 different countries in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. What impacts of the voluntary service and human rights project can be identified through the narrations of the volunteers? In order to shed light on the matter, the discussion focuses on three main questions: How do the volunteers perceive the impacts of voluntary service? How do they make sense of human rights topics encountered? What are the key aspects for promoting human rights education in the framework of voluntary service?

The idea of competence is entailed in human rights education practices and activities. The aim is to empower learners to contribute to the building and defense of a universal culture of human rights in society. There are three dimensions involved in human rights education illustrated in the figure below. At the intersection of diversity and human rights, there are two questions of particular importance in relation to international volunteers: *agency*¹ and *privilege*². There is often a considerable power distance between international volunteers and beneficiaries. One group is in a position that enables them to travel to another country to engage in voluntary activities, which is out of reach for most beneficiaries – vulnerable groups.

Key findings

The reasons for volunteering abroad were varied but most respondents were driven by a mix of personal and altruistic motivations. The respondents' narratives tend to stress learning and personal growth. Eight respondents (out of 18) made reference to having been at a transition point in their lives, which had influenced their decision to take part in the program. For another eight respondents, the project was an opportunity to learn specifically about human rights. This was mostly described as exploring and learning about the topic, but a few also had some prior experience or interest in working in the field in the future.

It is possible to discern a strong learning orientation in how respondents assess the impacts of volunteering. The idea of exchange and mutual learning was highly valued by the respondents. However, they found it difficult to assess their own "value" for the host project: When asked about their overall contribution to the work of the host project, most were unsure, doubtful or hopeful. This may be because international volunteers are not meant to have the same responsibilities as regular staff members, who are also likely to have a professional background, proficiency and/or level of experience. Nearly all the respondents perceived themselves as bringing in a degree of diversity (being



¹ The ability and intentionally pursued actions to influence one's life.

² A special advantage that is granted (not earned), a privileged status that is exercised for the benefit of the recipient (and to the exclusion or detriment of others) often inadvertently.

from another country and introducing a fresh perspective to local attitudes and practices) and consequently also being able to influence others.

Voluntary service is both about developing competences and putting them to use (either previously or newly acquired skills). In order to effectively transfer skills and knowledge relevant to the volunteering activities, the respondents had to become competent vis-à-vis the environment. Acquiring language skills are perhaps the most common of the hard skills mentioned by the respondents. They are often depicted as a threshold skill - vital to the ability to perform at work – and often set in a wider context of communication and interpersonal skills. Communication and interpersonal skills were perceived as a valuable result in itself, but also as the gateway to another level of achievements - not just to perform tasks but also to perform well and to feel accomplished.

Voluntary work represents opportunities to experiment and to develop new skills. The experience appears to have boosted the life and career skills of the respondents but also fostered values and attitudes that create greater self-awareness and self-confidence. The study employs '21st century skills'³ as a framework for making sense of the learning.

- *Flexibility and adaptability* - one of the most common new abilities mentioned by the respondents and learned through adjusting and adapting to a new social environment.
- *Initiative and self-direction* – ability to take initiative, be more independent and identify learning needs and work towards them are areas that have been greatly strengthened by the voluntary service experience.
- *Productivity and accountability* – abilities linked with the volunteering project and the subsequent tasks.
- *Leadership and responsibility* – in addition to gaining team work skills and other soft skills, the respondents show increased confidence in taking on roles that involve influencing and guiding others as well as an increased awareness of their responsibility as volunteers working with people in vulnerable situations.
- *Social and cross-cultural skills* – new social environment and networks provide respondents with resources and support but also learning opportunities.

The respondents have developed a number of competences through the “exposure” to diversity (one that has gone well beyond nationalities): they are better equipped to understand others in contexts marked by diversity, to communicate their perspective to others, to adapt and navigate in new socio-cultural environments, to see their place in the world and to promote positive relationships between individuals and groups from different backgrounds. The volunteering project opened up opportunities to meet people who are excluded from majority society (e.g. meeting people with disabilities for the first time). Simultaneously, the entire experience of immersion in a new cultural environment offered points of reflection on similarities and differences. Encountering local diversity was also challenging for many: Living among multiple local realities, respondents were confronted by their own stereotypical notions of people and places they had regarded as homogeneous entities or were unsettled by inequalities, such as the gap between the wealthy and poor.

In terms of the human rights learning process and its outcomes, there are considerable differences between the respondents. The most important factors relate to pre-existing competences and how they are further developed (interests, motivation, knowledge and skills of respondents, the human rights dimension of the voluntary service project and the support received). The respondents were at different

³ These are a set of key abilities that are identified as important for today's and tomorrow's society. In the study, we take a close look at the “thinking skills, content knowledge, and social and emotional competencies” that are needed in order to navigate complex life and work environments.

starting points with regard to understanding and dealing with human rights issues encountered as volunteers: from having had no contact with human rights topics prior to the voluntary service to being very familiar with human rights topics either in a professional capacity or through education.

Experiencing human rights situations “first-hand” is a powerful experience and has the potential to initiate deep learning processes. In many instances, the experiences contrast with what the respondent knew before (new information versus previous knowledge constructed on the base of media representations, schooling, cultural norms, etc.). However, in many cases, they appear to have complemented the previous information with an affective dimension to the cognitive body of knowledge (i.e. bringing in the perspective of the people whose human rights were violated). Empathy is learned through interactions with people in difficult life situations, which in turn fosters commitment to human rights.

Fifteen (out of 18) respondents demonstrate a certain level of human rights thinking, some more consistently than others (the respondents still appear to be processing their experiences at the time of the interview). This is not only about knowledge (i.e. human rights violations and ways to protect rights) but also about skills, attitudes and behaviour that enable respondents to take action in defence of human rights in everyday life. A great part of this learning is not set in a human rights context by the respondents themselves. In order to gain insight into how the experiences have shaped human rights thinking, how the respondents understand some key concepts is examined.

- **Equality and inclusion:** Respondents understand ‘equality’ and ‘inclusion’ by examining the values and attitudes that affect the beneficiaries. These discussions are based on a process of becoming aware of their own thinking and knowing about other people’s perspectives. Respondents learn how equality/inequality stems from people in different kinds of social positions – especially for those who experience disadvantage resulting from it.
- **Participation:** Participation of beneficiaries is considered necessary and valuable: the well-being of beneficiaries is created not only as the end result, the outcome of the actions, but also through the process. Many respondents discuss issues affecting the beneficiaries and a great deal of these accounts convey the idea that beneficiaries have less opportunities to make a difference in their own lives due to their circumstances or belonging to a particular group. Both the workplace and society act as a backdrop for these reflections. Several accounts show that the respondents not only reflect on participation but also actively try to engage others in their activities (e.g. including children in the process of making a video about the host project).
- **Agency:** Respondents reflect on their own agency as well as that of the beneficiaries. There are significant differences in the kinds of roles the respondents construct for themselves in relation to the beneficiaries. 17 (out of 18) respondents understand their role and commitment as everyday social responsibility: leading by example and actively engaging in exchange and dialogue. Through voluntary service, several respondents have discovered their own abilities to make a difference.

One of the aims of the study was to identify key components that create positive impacts: What did the human rights component of the project bring to the volunteering experience? This was approached by looking at the interplay of two central learning elements of international voluntary service - intercultural learning and on-the-job learning – together with human rights education. For the most part, voluntary service has not changed respondents’ views on human rights per se, but it has highlighted their importance by way of the interactions and the forming of bonds with people from different backgrounds. Voluntary service is marked by three aspects on which impacts are contingent:

- **Holistic participation** - Learning takes place everywhere through interactions in different volunteering contexts and practices, but the question is how consistent they are with human rights values. The **respondents have been immersed** in the host community and their experiences are not

limited to the contents of the work or host project. The **networks of the respondents** are shaped by their participation in human rights related work: 14 respondents have formed close personal bonds with people in vulnerable positions or those actively working to promote human rights. Some of the **learning takes place through action** contingent on the volunteering role, which usually implies a process of negotiating and creating a role for oneself in the host project.

- **Supported reflection** - Participation solely is not enough for learning. Reflection is needed in order to turn the experiences into knowledge that can be applied in other contexts. At the beginning, the respondents' pre-existing competencies may have played a significant role, but over time, the support and opportunities made available and developed in the program gain more importance. In the interview data, the importance of this support is mostly implicit. Explicit reference to support is made in connection with situations where it has been seen to be missing.
- **Supported contribution to common good** - The volunteering activities are undertaken by one person but the aim is to multiply the learning effect. This is a question of balance of benefits of voluntary service between the respondents and the beneficiaries. The respondents discuss some learning outcomes in the framework of contributions made during the voluntary service, but many others are perceived by them as being more useful in the future, after the service period. The ways of making a difference can be divided into three categories: everyday human rights based practices, influencing others by means of exchange and dialogue, and leadership (mostly as future professionals).

Based on the findings, **the report makes four recommendations** for further development of practices (preparation, training, support, etc.) that enable volunteers to contribute more fully in their host projects and recognise their learning and contributions during their service.

- In the absence of a direct link to human rights, drawing connections between the volunteers' daily engagement, the hands-on work at the host project and the theme of human rights becomes imperative. It can be done by placing emphasis on learning for the volunteers as one of the main goal of international volunteering
- The respondents see themselves as the main beneficiaries of voluntary service. Although this is concurrent with their learning-orientated motivations for volunteering, it clashes at the start of their service with their motivation to contribute and "do good" in the host project and community. This should be addressed in volunteer preparation.
- Many volunteers do not feel they have contributed significantly to the work of the host project. This could be addressed by giving more structured feedback and developing assessment tools that enable volunteers and host project supervisors to discuss challenges and evaluate performance.
- The volunteer can be supported in a variety of ways. Role models or supervisors should be in place and prepared to support volunteers through their service period. Ongoing support by mentors or multipliers is central to creating links between theory and practice and their actions should be planned in advance and used to support volunteers' learning and foster commitment to human rights. Issues of power and privileges should be given greater attention in volunteer training.

Conclusions

This study explored respondents' perceptions and experiences of voluntary service. The impacts of volunteering are experienced to be strongest on an individual level: evidenced by new competences and personal growth. Voluntary service is regarded as creating greater well-being for international volunteers themselves and potentially for others as well. The idea of mutual learning is entailed in the accounts on

encountering diversity. The volunteer's role is understood in terms of planting seeds of change through exchange and dialogue during the voluntary service, but particularly after the actual service period.

Through the process of voluntary service, volunteers become more aware and gain a better understanding of what creates well-being or what acts as its obstacle. The experience has been particularly significant for fifteen (out of 18) respondents who feel empowered by the discovery of how they can make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Encounters with people in vulnerable situations play a key role: these create an understanding of human rights at a grassroots level and a more personal level relationship with human rights. The relationship between the volunteer and the beneficiaries has shaped human rights learning.

The findings of the study illustrate how three central aspects of voluntary service act together to create impacts through the volunteers' learning (holistic, experiential and supported learning). The sum of experiences is capable of empowering the volunteers not only as individuals but also as citizens and community members. The respondents' role in the well-being of others is learned through concrete experiences of making a positive difference. An important factor appears to be the ways in which the volunteer interacts with human rights topics. The *Communicating Human Rights in Diversity* project entailed additional support for reflection: this support is mostly implicit in respondents' accounts but evidenced in the concepts applied by the respondents to make sense of the experience, a greater awareness of human rights topics in everyday contexts and an increased commitment to human rights.