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MODALITIES OF IMPLEMENTING VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES BY NON-FORMAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Volunteering refers to the activities undertaken by individuals who, of their own volition and without financial remuneration, engage in supporting others or the community. It offers benefits not only to those who receive assistance but also to the volunteers, who develop competencies and values such as empathy, responsibility, and communication skills. The importance of volunteering in societal development lies in its ability to promote solidarity, social inclusion, and community cohesion. Additionally, it contributes to fostering a culture of mutual aid, supporting the integration of vulnerable individuals and reducing the risk of social exclusion. Non-formal education plays a crucial role in promoting volunteerism as it provides a flexible framework adapted to the needs of participants, fostering the development of skills necessary for active community engagement. Through interactive and experiential activities, non-formal educational programs stimulate active participation and learning through practice, thus facilitating involvement in volunteer initiatives. Programs like the National Community Action Strategy (SNAC) and the European Voluntary Service (EVS) are exemplary models of best practices. SNAC promotes social inclusion through activities that bring together typical students and those with disabilities, thereby supporting diversity and tolerance. EVS facilitates youth mobility across different countries, encouraging them to engage in volunteer projects that promote active citizenship and intercultural competence development. These initiatives demonstrate how volunteering, supported by non-formal education, can contribute to building a more cohesive and inclusive society.

Key-concepts: *personal and professional development, non-formal education, vulnerable individuals, volunteering.*

MODALITĂȚI DE IMPLEMENTARE A ACTIVITĂȚILOR DE VOLUNTARIAT PRIN PROGRAME DE EDUCAȚIE NEFORMALĂ

Voluntariatul se referă la activitățile întreprinse de persoane care, din proprie voință și fără remunerație financiară, se angajează în sprijinirea altora sau a comunității. Oferă beneficii nu numai celor care primesc asistență, ci și voluntarilor, care dezvoltă competențe și valori precum empatia, responsabilitatea și abilitățile de comunicare. Importanța voluntariatului în dezvoltarea societății constă în capacitatea sa de a promova solidaritatea, incluziunea socială și coeziunea comunității. În plus, contribuie la promovarea unei culturi a ajutorului reciproc, sprijinind integrarea persoanelor vulnerabile și reducând riscul de excluziune socială. Educația non-formală joacă un rol crucial în promovarea voluntariatului, deoarece oferă un cadru flexibil adaptat nevoilor participanților, încurajând dezvoltarea abilităților necesare pentru implicarea activă a comunității. Prin activități interactive și experiențiale, programele educaționale non-formale stimulează participarea activă și învățarea prin practică, facilitând astfel implicarea în inițiative de voluntariat. Programe precum Strategia Națională de Acțiune Comunitară (SNAC) și Serviciul European de Voluntariat (SVE) sunt modele exemplare de bune practici. SNAC promovează incluziunea socială prin activități care reunesc elevii tipici și cei cu dizabilități, susținând astfel diversitatea și toleranța. SEV facilitează mobilitatea tinerilor în diferite țări, încurajându-i să se implice în proiecte de voluntariat care promovează cetățenia activă și dezvoltarea competențelor interculturale. Aceste inițiative demonstrează modul în care voluntariatul, susținut de educația non-formală, poate contribui la construirea unei societăți mai coezive și mai incluzive.

Concepte-cheie: *dezvoltare personală și profesională, educație non-formală, persoane vulnerabile, voluntariat.*

The problem

In recent years, society has faced a series of challenges that, just a decade ago, would have seemed unimaginable. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only altered the lifestyle of citizens worldwide but also reshaped the way individuals relate to one another and the issues they encounter. Similarly, the war in Ukraine, which may superficially appear to be a localized military conflict between two neighboring nations, has had far-reaching negative impacts on a global scale. Both the pandemic and the war have affected

more than just the medical or military dimensions; they carry multiple political, economic, cultural, social, and demographic connotations. Issues such as misinformation, displacement, social isolation, communication barriers, economic losses, restricted access to quality formal education, and, in extreme cases, the complete abandonment of education, along with the exacerbation of intercultural differences, are just a few examples of these widespread consequences [19]. The phrase „Nothing will be the same as before!” may seem cliché, but in the current context, it has never been more relevant.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that a growing number of individuals are increasingly vulnerable to the major global issues society faces [1]. To overcome these obstacles, an increasing number of economic, social, cultural, and educational agents are proposing various support and reintegration programs to assist individuals who are, for varying durations, affected by these challenges. For instance, one way to support vulnerable individuals is by engaging them in educational programs. Primarily, this pertains to formal education programs, structured by accredited institutions (schools), which deliver courses based on an official instructional curriculum, with outcomes validated through recognized competency certificates. The importance of formal education is indisputable, as the qualifications obtained through diplomas enable vulnerable individuals to secure employment, thereby helping them to overcome some of their vulnerabilities [3]. Equally important is non-formal education, which complements formal learning. It encompasses all organized and systematic activities conducted outside the formal educational setting, designed to supplement and facilitate learning for those seeking to improve their skills in a particular domain [7].

The main objectives of non-formal education are as follows [4]:

- Supporting those who wish to develop particular sectors such as commerce, agriculture, services, industry, etc.;
- Assisting the population in better exploiting local or personal resources;
- Literacy initiatives for those facing difficulties;
- Professional advancement or initiation into a new field of activity;
- Health education, leisure activities, etc.

By its nature, non-formal education is more flexible and closely aligned with the needs and interests of its beneficiaries. Thus, through participation in optional educational programs, individuals facing difficulties can either enhance a set of pre-existing skills and competencies or acquire new ones, enabling them to better integrate into the labor market or society. This creates the premises for superior professional and social inclusion of these individuals, which, in turn, will lead to a reduction in issues that they may pose to local communities [15].

Best Practices in Implementing Volunteering for Vulnerable Individuals/Groups

Etymologically, the term „volunteer” originates from the Latin „voluntarius” and the French „volontaire”, referring to an individual who willingly and deliberately engages in an activity for the benefit of another person, a group, or a community, without seeking any form of remuneration. The benefits of such volunteering actions extend not only to the recipients but also to the volunteers themselves. For the former, the gains may include the resolution of issues for which they sought assistance, while for the latter, the benefits are primarily professional and moral. Volunteers can accumulate professional experience, enhance their specialized and interpersonal skills, and develop personality traits such as communication, sociability, self-respect, empathy, concern for the struggles of disadvantaged individuals or groups, community role assumption, and responsibility fulfillment [5].

Mihaela Neacșu [12] argues that volunteering has extraordinary educational value, being „a form of learning through practical action” that can foster competencies in volunteers. She emphasizes that many of today’s volunteering programs, initiated and developed by various non-governmental organizations, rely on the concept of „peer education”. These programs are implemented through educational support provided by young volunteers to their peers, coupled with shared life experiences, allowing all participants to benefit as they learn from one another.

Summarizing the aforementioned points and findings from various specialized studies, [2, p. 13] identify several benefits of volunteering:

- The opportunity to share accumulated experiences for the benefit of others;
- Physical health;
- Psychological and emotional well-being;
- A sense of purpose and utility in life;
- A feeling of belonging to a group or community;
- Enhanced social interaction;
- Reduced loneliness/isolation;
- Enjoyment/fun;
- Support from peers and for those around them;
- Pride/self-esteem;
- Confidence;
- Resilience;
- Leadership skills and opportunities;
- Broadened perspective/awareness;
- New career opportunities;
- The opportunity to express generosity;
- Learning opportunities.

Moreover, the roles of „volunteer” and „beneficiary” are interchangeable, allowing those who have helped at one point to also receive support, and thus everyone gains an understanding of their partners’ feelings while developing the aforementioned personal qualities [9]. This interchangeability enables vulnerable individuals to engage as volunteers in addressing problems that they or other community members face, laying the groundwork for “inclusive volunteering” .As [2] describe, this form of volunteering is open to all individuals, irrespective of age, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, social status, or disability. In other words, inclusive volunteering adapts the „classic” concept of volunteering for everyone. This approach is rooted in the premise that vulnerable individuals are best positioned to understand their own problems, making it natural for them to be the first to seek solutions. Additionally, the benefits experienced by volunteers who themselves face vulnerability can lay the foundation for increased social inclusion [18].

Thus, volunteering is an invaluable tool for supporting vulnerable individuals by allowing them, on the one hand, to benefit from assistance, and on the other, to engage in managing their own problems. This can create conditions for the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals, empowering them to transform from „social beneficiaries” into true „social actors” (Sultana, 2021).

When an individual decides to volunteer, it is essential to consider several questions about the values underlying this initiative [2].

- How will they feel when encountering people in difficult situations (wounded, impoverished, suffering from terminal illnesses, dependent on psychoactive substances, etc.)?
- What motivates them to get involved?
- How much time are they willing to dedicate to this activity?
- In which areas of activity do they feel most comfortable?
- Do they have the necessary skills to volunteer in their chosen field?
- Is there an associative structure where they can collaborate with others who share similar visions to carry out their preferred activities?

Similarly, the host organization that receives and coordinates volunteers must adhere to a series of steps, as outlined by [2, pp. 45-55]:

A. Preparation of the Organization for Volunteer Involvement:

- Creating tools for needs analysis to identify areas where volunteer engagement is necessary;
- Developing the organization’s vision regarding the role and involvement of volunteers;
- Drafting objectives and goals for the volunteer program;
- Establishing policies and procedures for implementing volunteer activities within the organization;
- Defining specific tasks for each volunteer;
- Efficient management of material resources;

- Initiating new projects that can involve volunteers;
- Supporting the personal and professional development of volunteers.

B. Volunteer Recruitment:

- Developing volunteer recruitment strategies;
- Preparing recruitment materials;
- Directing efforts during volunteer recruitment.

C. Volunteer Selection:

- Preparing the host organization to receive new volunteers;
- Conducting interviews and selecting volunteers.

D. Orientation and Training of Volunteers:

- Developing orientation and counseling programs for volunteers, regardless of their field of action;
- Providing support to organization members in working with volunteers;
- Designing initial and ongoing training programs for all volunteers.

E. Volunteer Supervision:

- Direct and indirect supervision of volunteers;
- Evaluating the individual performance of each volunteer.

F. Monitoring Volunteers by Collecting Evidence Regarding Their Work.

G. Volunteer Motivation.

H. Recognition of Volunteer Merits.

I. Continuous and Final Evaluation of Volunteers and Volunteer Programs.

It is evident that working with volunteers is not as simple as it may seem at first glance; any non-governmental organization or public institution has multiple responsibilities, from identifying, selecting, and involving volunteers to evaluating and monitoring their performance. Practically speaking, volunteers have the same rights and obligations as paid employees, except that their involvement is voluntary and intrinsically motivated, with rewards that differ from financial compensation. Nevertheless, the number of individuals willing to volunteer is steadily increasing, and the following paragraphs will analyze several examples and opportunities in this regard [16].

As mentioned in the previous sections, education – through all three of its forms (but particularly formal and non-formal education) – plays a crucial role in motivating individuals to volunteer and in developing the competencies required for benevolent activities. Schools, as integral parts of the community and primary promoters of these two forms of education, can be both beneficiaries and providers of volunteering for their partners. Primarily, in conducting the educational process, schools need significant support from the community, which may include material and financial resources, ensuring quality human resources, and providing advanced knowledge sources, among others. Other challenges faced by schools may include high absenteeism and dropout rates, families' inability to support formal education for their children, insufficient material and technical resources, inadequate counseling and information for parents, and community difficulties in supporting and adequately rewarding those involved in educational efforts. In such conditions, the main objectives of volunteer activities aimed at schools might be: supporting equal educational opportunities for all students involved, providing educational information and counseling to their families, enhancing the institutional development of educational providers, ensuring lifelong learning for harmonious and sustainable student development, and promoting inclusive education for students with special educational needs, etc. Meeting these objectives and addressing the needs of schools through volunteer activities can optimize the instructional-educational process and improve the quality of student training and development [5].

One of the major contemporary challenges for society, which education plays a vital role in addressing, is the inclusion of vulnerable individuals who face one or more disabilities. Without delving deeply into the subject, it should be noted that inclusive education requires schools to adapt to the psycho-individual characteristics of each student, regardless of whether they have disabilities [14]. Such a school eliminates the concept of „special education” and replaces it with that of a „school for all”. Various strategies for including students with special educational needs are known in practice, but their success is significantly influenced,

among other factors, by the community's willingness to accept diversity (of all kinds) as a normal aspect of existence [6].

In this context, one of the main programs proposed by educational authorities for implementing inclusive education is the National Community Action Strategy (SNAC), through which typically developing students and those with various disabilities engage together in activities, enabling them to get to know each other and discover and appreciate the qualities they possess. The main aim of SNAC is to promote and develop volunteer activities in the community, through which students and teachers commit to supporting individuals or groups disadvantaged socially, educationally, etc. The primary operational approach involves creating links between high schools, on one side, and special schools, residential care centers, social housing, day centers, and hospitals on the other, thereby establishing the conditions for diversity, acceptance, and mutual tolerance. The core motivation of SNAC is that, on the one hand, disadvantaged individuals can benefit from voluntary support from other community members, while the latter learn to discover and appreciate all their peers, regardless of the problems they face. Moreover, initiating community actions during schooling is justified by the fact that school inclusion constitutes the first step towards lifelong social inclusion [13].

Another program that enables individuals to support their peers at risk is the European Voluntary Service (EVS), funded by the European Commission [10]. The program supports the transnational mobility of young people aged 18 to 30, encouraging them to volunteer in various fields within organizations in a country other than their residence, usually within the European Union, but other partner countries are also included. EVS aims to enhance social cohesion, solidarity, tolerance, and understanding among young people while promoting active citizenship and non-formal learning. By participation in EVS projects, volunteers can develop foreign language communication skills, personal and professional abilities, intercultural competencies, and empathy, enabling them to take responsibility in helping to solve the problems

A young person who wants to participate in the European Voluntary Service (EVS), it is crucial that they are affiliated with a sending organization accredited by the National Agency in their country of residence and are accepted by a host organization, also accredited, in another EU or partner country. One of these two organizations submits a project to the European Commission, and with the funds obtained, the volunteer's expenses, including transportation, subsistence, and allowances, can be reimbursed. Some of the fields in which volunteering can be conducted through the EVS program include: culture and arts, minorities, rural or urban development, youth information on various topics, health, anti-discrimination, environmental and animal protection, media and communication, equal opportunities for all, social integration, active citizenship, strengthening of the associative sector, administrative measures, delinquency, interfaith dialogue, civil protection, children's rights, the active role of women, development cooperation, disability, education through recreational activities, youth policies, regional cooperation, anti-drug programs, heritage conservation, European information, youth and sports, intercultural dialogue, among others. Activities involving risks for the volunteer, such as providing first aid in medical emergencies or interventions in disaster or conflict zones, are not included. It is important to note that host organizations reserve the right to select volunteers based on objective criteria, while ensuring no form of discrimination is made.

Generally, the duration of a volunteer placement through the EVS ranges from one month to one year, and each person can only apply for such a project once in their lifetime. A young person interested in participating must approach a sending organization that will assist them in identifying their preferred field and a host organization willing to accommodate them. This sending organization will ensure initial training, maintain constant communication with the volunteer and the organization they are volunteering for, assess their performance, and help them reintegrate into the community upon completing the placement. Similarly, the host organization is responsible for appointing a mentor, supporting the volunteer's social integration in the local community by facilitating language learning, contact with other young people, providing accommodation, meals, a financial allowance, and opportunities to carry out the volunteering activities specified in their contracts. At the end of the placement, the volunteer will receive a Youth-Pass certificate, confirming their volunteer status and the skills acquired. In this way, any young person wishing to engage in a volunteer program can be assured of receiving the necessary support to succeed in their endeavors [8].

Beyond the direct benefits that the National Community Action Strategy and the European Voluntary Service can provide to individuals in need, it is essential to emphasize that these programs foster the creation of a supportive environment for the implementation of volunteerism. This supportive framework facilitates the development of positive attitudes towards the inclusion of vulnerable individuals through volunteering, as well as the establishment of procedures that allow various social actors to commit to promoting volunteerism. A supportive environment for inclusive volunteering is grounded in elements such as social inclusion policies, social acceptance, the provision of formal and non-formal education, the creation of a supportive infrastructure, cooperation among key stakeholders, and the provision of financial support for implementing various volunteer programs. Constructing this supportive environment requires the involvement of multiple agents operating both „horizontally” (governmental institutions as well as non-profit associations) and „vertically” (from the local to national or European levels). It is crucial that these agents act in a concerted manner, under the coordination of local or regional volunteer centers [2, pp. 59-60].

According to the authors (*ibid*, p. 61), the main requirements for building a supportive environment for volunteerism aimed at vulnerable individuals include:

- Organizing a favorable context for implementing volunteer actions;
- Supporting governmental and non-governmental organizations interested in sending or receiving volunteers;
- Encouraging volunteerism among as many individuals as possible, including those from vulnerable backgrounds;
- Expanding and diversifying the range of volunteer programs;
- Promoting authentic partnerships between the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

The previous sections have highlighted some of the most important best practices in the field of volunteering, demonstrating that, when well-regulated and supported by appropriate social policies, it can significantly change the lives of both beneficiaries and volunteers. There are numerous volunteering programs applicable in Romania and across the European Union, and personal examples provided by various public figures illustrate that volunteerism is something more people should take into account. The reason these actions are worth promoting is to make people aware that a single person or a small group cannot bring about significant changes, but they can provide a model of best practice to which others can refer, and through the replication and dissemination of these experiences, more people will be engaged, thereby driving the desired change [11].

Conclusion

It is well known that volunteerism plays a significant role in reducing the social exclusion of vulnerable individuals, as voluntary engagement allows for the resolution of some of the problems faced by disadvantaged groups. The effectiveness of these actions increases when the volunteers themselves come from vulnerable backgrounds, as they are better able to empathize with the needs of their peers and can offer appropriate solutions from an “insider” perspective. This lays the foundation for inclusive volunteerism, a modality in which individuals facing difficulties are both volunteers and beneficiaries of the action. Other benefits of volunteerism include improving the physical and psychological well-being of those involved, expanding social networks, enhancing employment prospects and career development opportunities, boosting self-esteem, personal dignity, and the sense of value by demonstrating that, despite their difficulties, individuals can still be of use to the communities they live in. Current practice shows that an increasing number of organizations for vulnerable individuals are involving their beneficiaries in volunteer activities, with a prime example being associations of parents with children with disabilities, who produce various items for sale and use the proceeds to continue developing therapeutic programs [14].

In this way, the groundwork is laid for all community members to understand that they are part of both the problem and the solution, and through their personal contributions, they can help steer things in the desired direction [17].

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